

ACTIVITIES OF THE E-LEARNING COURSES INTEGRATOR (PRACTICAL EXAMPLES)

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We want to share our experience in providing e-learning courses at the University of Warsaw - especially the role of an integrator. E-learning courses at the University of Warsaw have been prepared and conducted following the 'E-learning Decalogue' (the didactical model elaborated at COME UW). According to this model two people are required to run a course: a *teacher* (who is an expert in the field) and an *integrator* (whose role is to form social groups from the course participants). The integrator has similar tasks in some other models described in the literature.

We will use our courses to present the tasks which are taken up by the integrator in order to form social groups of the course participants and to increase the effectiveness of students' work. Our observations have been made from the both perspectives: 1) e-teacher's, who worked with integrators, and 2) the integrators', who cooperated with several different teachers. Our experience shows, that the integrator's duties, in the natural way, extend to include some of the tasks normally performed by the teacher and hence an integrator becomes also a sort of a *teaching assistant*.

2. THE THIRD ONE

Dynamic changes that take place in the modern world require constant improvement of qualifications. Education which lasts whole life requires combining professional work with studying. Technological development allowed universities to overcome social, geographical and temporal barriers in having access to academic education.

Experience in educating gained by the University of Warsaw, by stationary method as well as through the Internet, allowed to observe advantages and disadvantages of these two forms and recognize differences between them in practice. It resulted in establishing a pattern of online didactics which describes how, by using new, generally available technologies we can increase the quality of education (Wieczorkowska, 2004). That pattern became the basis for creating a 'Decalogue of online education' (Wieczorkowska, Madey, 2007).

The Decalogue recommends to apply a hybrid teaching pattern ('be blended!') that uses strong elements of the two teaching methods: stationary and online. According to the Decalogue, the level of difficulties in teaching should be individualized which is easier thanks to the technology. The technology also allows for the usage of multimedia (audio and video materials, for example recording lectures), automatization of marking education effects, monitoring educational process (for example evaluation surveys, questionnaires, analysis of students' activity). At the same time the abilities of e-educational platform constitute a trap: it is easy to place on it too much studying material for students, far too much than it would be covered during stationary classes. An important element of effective online classes that emphasize also the 'Decalogue' is building a social group ('At least two people who have an influence on each other' (Kenrick and others, 1999, p.648)) of classes participants, not concentrating on using more and more advanced educational methods. In traditional method of studying it is the unity of place, time and action that makes it easier to build relations among all actors of educational process. Whereas simply asynchronous interaction in the web does not favour the natural creation of social group - such a process has to be stimulated by a person conducting. However, when there is a big amount of educational material, a lecturer (a factual specialist in the field) cannot be involved in integration at a sufficient level. The solution of such problem lies in passing his duties to *an integrator* - an assistant who understands the nature of communication through the Internet.

3. ACTIVITIES OF AN INTEGRATOR

3.1. Create a community

When trying to create a social group of participants of online classes, an integrator applies appropriate mechanisms which require from him to have abilities allowing to use those mechanisms effectively. A key feature of a group structure is communication which in e-learning, on account of mentioned above lack of 'physical osculation' (lack of place time and action unity), is often limited to a written form (discussion forums, e-mails, chat). It is usually the integrator who initiates 'dialogue' during an online course. It can be done in two ways: by writing on social forums or by sending to each participant a welcoming e-mail. It can be foreseen with a big possibility that students, when answering to such e-mail, will use the same communication canal. It definitely indicates the advantage of forum. It allows integrator to gather participants in one place of e-educational platform and it favours making contact (also 'student-student' one) contributing to a group building. The integrator creates a pattern of an information flow (a communication network - during online classes we experience a centralized communication network which is characterized by the fact that information is distributed among all participants of e-society and it does not have to 'go through' any particular person (Kendrick and others, 1999)) during online classes. Firstly, he clarifies to participant the purpose of available forums: content-related (a place where students ask questions concerning the content of a course, materials, etc.), technical (a place where students raise problems on functioning of e-platform), discussion (a place for discussions being elements of the learning process) and social (a place of exchange of thoughts, ideas on different topics) ones; is actively involved on these forums, presents them as a preferable communication canal. That idea is presented in the statement of an integrator from 'Psychology of Motivation' course (University of Warsaw, 2005):

'We are going to meet on different forums but you may also write e-mails to [...]. However the advantage of a question asked on a forum is the fact that other students may benefit from the answer to such question as it often happens that a few people have problems with the same thing. That is why I advise you to use forums....'

Secondly, the integrator personalizes contact (he uses electronic mail) when:

- communication on forum may endanger self-evaluation of a course participant, for example a person does not obtain positive grades or it seems that the level of classes is too high;
- he observes that a participant needs individual motivation for the further work, for example such person, after a few attempts to solve a task, fails to continue studying;
- he observes that a student does not participate in classes actively, for example a person does not solve tasks, does not open educational materials, does not take part in discussions.

An example of a direct contact is a letter sent to a student by an integrator of 'Programming in Java language for non-IT specialists' (University of Warsaw, 2006):

'Ann, I have observed that you had not done tasks from the last two topic modules, although so far you had been working regularly. Have you had any technical problems with functioning of the platform? How can I help you? I am looking forward to hearing from you. Kind regards.'

At the University of Warsaw we accepted a rule that an integrator in communicating with participants, at the beginning of classes set the form of addressing to each other (by the first names or by 'Sir'/'Madam'). Please note the neutral content of the e-mail - the integrator does not blame the student for her situation, he believes in her good will, offers his help but at the same time he obligates her to answer him.

Clear definition of roles of all participants involved in online classes favours making contact. As far as duties of a teacher and students are defined by educational process (both stationary and online) the scope of integrator's activities has no reference in traditional way of teaching. That is why it is important to make students aware at the very beginning who is he, as it was done by an integrator on postgraduate e-studies studies 'Psychology of attitude and behaviour changes' (University of Warsaw, 2006/2007)

'During our e-studies, I will be so called integrator. Who is he? If you look through an article on COME didactic model it is....' a person who helps student in solving problems connected with: for example performing particular tasks.' In other words an integrator = a kindred spirit of a student ☺. I hope I will cope with this duty. I am waiting for your comments. I think that you will soon experience this common saying 'fear makes cowards of us all' in practice and those who are afraid of working on the platform will become more confident.'

3.2. Merit help

The main task of an integrator is to create a community from classes participants. At the same time he performs many other activities that are not for building a social group, although they sometimes help to achieve it. It requires from a person having such role to know not only how to create and maintain e-community but also have abilities to: be a leader, communicate easily in writing, encourage people to work, think in a creative or analytical way or solve conflict situations. Technical skills are also necessary: able to work on e-platform and software used during classes (Salmon, 2004).

A person who fulfills the requirements may, in a perfect way, realize duties connected with the role of an integrator. However, it often happens that apart from those skills, such person should be equipped with a professional knowledge on the course (at least at the same level as expected from a graduate of a course), what is proved by our experience. For example, during a course 'Mathematics for Specialists in the arts' (University of Warsaw 2007/2008) a fast merit reaction of an integrator in a situation of students confusion while solving the first test allowed to avoid their discouragement for the further work and make them believe in their abilities.

Student A:

'Coming back to the seventh task, it is more difficult because the diagram is not precise, I cannot present the function with a help of the program [...]. Unless I went to the wrong direction.'

Student B:

'I have solved in the test seven questions. One is left - the seventh - it is the most difficult, I am still thinking how to solve it. I have done all the previous questions without bigger help...'

Integrator:

'Now it is time for the seventh question - indicated as the most difficult. I will show you the way I would start solving it. The beginning point is the clue of the following content: we are looking for a rational function which means a quotient of polynomials (nobody asked what is a polynomial - so that means your knowledge is sufficient to solve this task!). Now experiments and deliberations alternately [...]. I am convinced that all of you are able to do such reasoning but you still don't know that it is necessary to do it. Why am I so sure of that? Because nobody complained on the second question which, in my opinion, is the most difficult of all.'

Student A:

'I managed to solve the seventh question. The given hint appeared to be very helpful!'

Student C:

'I took advantage of the clues, they were very helpful.'

Student D:

'I am also very grateful for the clues concerning the seventh question. They were very useful and made me look in a different way at that task. It was not easy, but I succeed.'

The integrator, although he could pass the problems with the question to the e-teacher, decided to provide students with the substantial support on his own and at the same time he took advantage of the possibility for building e-community. It proves how important for his effective efforts is professional knowledge.

The integrator does not provide ready-made solutions to students. He gives only, as in the earlier example, hint (not an answer) or he sends students back to the appropriate fragments of the course materials. This way he can stimulate students to the thinking and cause that they remember what they where learnt better.

Student

'I am sure that I gave the correct term but the reply wasn't scored.'

Integrator

'I have tested it, you committed the small lingual mistake. We must care so that you remember names for different psychological mechanisms in the appropriate form, I am suggesting you: go back to the Zimbardo textbook to page 483 ("Social Psychology" UW, 2006).'

3.3. Transmit opinions

Replenishment for a person of an integrator, a requirement for the factual preparation allows him to be not only a community worker but also an active participant of e-learning process. The scope of his factual activities is limited by the competencies - integrator is not an expert, he may help students in many different ways. At the same time, as a friend (it is important when an integrator set the limits of his 'friendship' - made relations do not oblige to maintain contact after the course is finished, students should know that from the very beginning. In other case some people may expect to keep in touch with an integrator as it is seen in the following e-mail: '[...] I hope I can write to you and disturb you a bit. I think I can ☺ [...]' a fragment of an e-mail sent to an integrator after finishing of e-classes, 2006) of the students, he presents the information resulting from his contact with the students to the teacher. It concerns problems and difficulties in mastering the

content of the course by the participants as well as contains both positive and negative opinions about the conducting person or material covered during the course. It happens that students do not present important opinions on the generally available forums because they are afraid that there will be negative reactions from others (when they praise the person conducting the course) or the teacher (when they criticize his/her work), the evidence for such situations are fragments of e-mails received by an integrator of a course. Because identifying a person is quite possible, we do not disclose the name of a course.

Situation 1

Student:

'I made myself familiar with the content of the material [...] How outrageous!!! The language is so hermetic [...] I think the author exaggerated'

(An author of the lecture was the teacher conducting a course).

Integrator's reaction: he asked student which fragments and terms are the most difficult; he offered help. Together with the person conducting he analyzed the content of a lecture whether it does not require linguistic modifications.

Situation 2

Student:

'Yesterday I read on a forum a polemic between a student and our Teacher [...] I was surprised by the lack of kindness and attempt to motivate that student [...] Please keep this letter secret.'

Integrator's reaction: he signaled to the teacher that the tone of his statements may be seen as negative (unfriendly towards the students). He did not disclose the name of the author. He encouraged the student-observer to read that text once again and to pay attention not only to the personal predispositions of the 'actors' (teacher-student) but also to the situational context of that polemic.

Situation 3

Student:

'I don't want our Professor or the group to think that I am playing up to somebody that is why I decided to send my reflections to you. I am impressed by the book which is being finished by the Professor [...] The auto reflection supported by his own life makes that man and his knowledge real [...] If you think it is a good idea to present my e-mail to the Professor, please do it [...].'

Integrator's reaction: he presented the opinion of the student to the professor. In his answer, the professor asked the integrator to thank student for his complimentary comment.

It is important to formulate return message in such a way so that it does not contain comments or opinions which may endanger self-evaluation of a receiver, regardless who is he - a teacher or a student. According to that rule, an integrator in the first situation did not write that a student was the only person having problems with understanding the text of a lecture but he offered him help. Similarly, when passing students' opinions to the person conducting a course (both in the first and the second situation), he did not make it in such a way so that it could indicate the lack of teacher's competencies to teach through the Internet.

Although e-students avoid to put their opinion on the forum, they more often exceed the border of culture of statements than in a direct contact because the opinions are formulated in an aggressive or demanding manner. In such situation fast and skilful reaction of an integrator prevents from conflicts, solves them or tone down their results. From the very beginning of a course, an integrator should be an example of a culture in what he says and conducts a dialogue in a clear and objective manner.

Student:

'I would like to express my indignation! We were forced to participate in this farce. Having been informed about the necessity of 'studying' six lectures and 'passing' an exam I decided to make an attempt. [...] I would like to thank the person who forgot to inform us about it [...] I expect the time to do it to be extended by at least one week.'

Integrator:

'I am afraid that you directed your indignation towards a wrong person and get excited without any reason. Other students were present during the classes. Why you had not been informed - I do not know [...]. I do not have any objections against the additional time for you to fulfill the given tasks, but I would preferred to be asked for that in a kind way. The test will be open for the latecomers since now so you may now take them. Regards!:-)'

(‘Contexts of the contemporary education’, University of Warsaw 2008)

In her answer, the integrator signaled to the student that without ‘violent words’ they can reach a compromise. A smiling icon put at the end of the message has an important role. It not only informs the student but also others that the integrator still has a positive attitude and is ready to help. The way in which the student continued the dialogue shows that the integrator reached his aim which means that negative emotions were neutralized or changed into the positive ones.

Answer of the indignant student:

'I am really sorry! My indignation was addressed to the wrong person. If there are few people who did not to fulfill the task, then it is our fault. I am really grateful for the opportunity to complete the test.'

(‘Contexts of the contemporary education’, University of Warsaw 2008)

An essential condition to reach success in educational process is to use language which is understandable for everybody participating in a course. Every subject uses its own language. In case there is a new branch studied, crossing over a terminological threshold constitutes one of the most difficult elements that requires time and basis of knowledge. That is why during the introductory phase of studying a new subject students have biggest problem with it. Obviously, it is a teacher conducting a course who explains in course materials the meaning of particular terms but when there are problems (for example on a context-related forum) with understanding those definitions it should make an integrator act. Why? With a big possibility, an expert trying to explain difficult for student terminology will use appropriate scientific language which, as a result, will create another communication barrier. Contrary to him, a statements made by an integrator may be less formal, diversified with anecdotes, stories that will support the process of remembering. A choice of appropriate anecdotes or stories or examples is possible only when an integrator understands specific language of a particular science field. Introducing, during a course, humorous elements (anecdotes, funny stories) is not limited only to the fact that it supports the factual part but also has a role in creating e-community.

4. CONCLUDING REMARK

The examples presented in this article show that an integrator has an important role during an e-course. The effectiveness of the educational process depends largely on his devotion and skills. That is why such a person should not be chosen by accident. The purpose of the efforts he makes is to, first of all, build e-community from the course participants. The knowledge on a subject he posses helps him to be involved when there are substantial issues, which as a result also helps to build a group. Our experience proves that people who graduated internet courses are the best integrators (provided they are equipped with the skills described above). Firstly, they have the knowledge on the particular subject which helps them to provide students with the ‘first aid’ of a factual nature. Secondly they understand the nature of communication through the Internet. There is a big possibility they will foresee reaction of students (because they used to be students too). They knew students’ language and style of theirs behaviors which also helps them and e-teacher to succeed in common educational process.

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