Social Media Avatars as New Technological Identity in Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

In the world of increasing technological development and social media revolution students are expected to be extremely motivated. However, a great number of them remain unmotivated, especially in the distance learning process. We conducted a survey at ICT College, Belgrade involving 265 students aged 19-22 regarding student motivation. Our goal was to make distance learning more motivating for students. Being aware and excluding the indisputable social, financial or psychological reasons for decreasing motivation of students in the learning process, our survey revealed that a means of communication itself can influence motivation. We started from the premise that digital life is part of everyday life and that students enjoy it. Therefore, we wanted to exploit the fact that almost all students are social media users. The survey revealed that students suggested Instagram should be used in both learning and distance learning processes. Another interesting conclusion is that students like avatars and suggest that all students should create their avatars and then gather to communicate in a virtual world together with their teachers, which would make lessons and communication much more fun and effective. Finally, according to the surveyed students' suggestions, we suggest creation of completely new technological identity – social media avatars as the next generation of distance learning trainees.

Keywords: distance learning, social media, avatar, technological identity

Introduction

Technology is radically and visibly changing our lifestyles, ways of thinking and behavior in all aspects of our lives. In that sense, it is very important to be aware of new technology features and use them in the best way to improve any life process. So far technology has changed many business processes, medicine, engineering, learning etc. and most people think the change is for the better.

The learning process itself has considerably changed as well with the implementation of new technology features. However, despite the fact that distance learning (DL) is one of the main results of the Internet revolution, the learning process itself remains quite demanding. It raises a number of issues. One of the main issues which arises at most university courses and classes is a lack of student motivation.

The issue of student motivation has existed for decades. Today, with DL it is even more difficult to keep motivation high and have enthusiastic and motivated students who complete courses successfully with good final grades.

Nowadays, as many teachers were born in the 'pre-digital world', they cannot adapt successfully to technological or social media changes. Students, as 'digital natives', are always one step ahead of their teachers. However, the only solution to successful classroom or digital learning is to follow student activities despite difficulties they cause for the teacher.

We conducted a survey at ICT College, Belgrade which involved 265 students in order to learn their opinion and expectations from the DL process as well as their suggestions for increasing motivation for the learning process. This paper presents their ideas merged into a single suggestion on how to improve student motivation for learning, more specifically distance learning.

Distance Education

Distance education is a method of education where students can study at a place and in the time of their choice without direct face-to-face contact between student-teacher and student-student. Technology is its essential component [1].

With the progress in communication technologies interaction in DL education has radically changed. DL has evolved from being static and print-based in the beginning to using different media such as radio, television and satellite to the current phase marked by predominant use of multimedia and the Internet. The Internet has various advantages over other distance learning media due to its global access, consistent interface, low connection costs and easy updating of content [2]. Communication between teacher and student as well as among students is more equal in the latest, so-called third generation distance education [1].

A great number of studies which compare learner outcomes as measured by final grades or final evaluations between students in conventional classrooms and those enrolled in DL classes have shown that DL courses are as effective as traditional courses. However, these studies do not pinpoint factors that contribute to student learning, student satisfaction or student retention in DL courses [2].

Despite its numerous advantages Web-based education raises a great number of issues as well. Being savvy with web technology is essential for both students and instructors. Social isolation and the lack of non-verbal cues are potential drawbacks for students involved in DL while the ability to assess student learning from a distance poses a challenge for instructors [2]. Furthermore, DL requires different pedagogy and skills from those of the conventional classroom and instructors often do not have formal training in the related DL field [3]. Colleges and universities implementing DL programs have to face a significant number of challenges as well, such as a

threat of dehumanizing and alienation of students, loss of social and critical thinking skills, possible risk of reducing DL to solving budget problems or a way of reducing the number of teachers. They should instead regard DL as a chance for increasing a number of students who access their courses and minimizing a chance for a course to be cancelled due to low enrollment [4]. According to some authors, the blended learning, i.e. the integration of online and offline teaching models is a way to address the issues of DL [5].

Student Motivation Problem

The issue of student motivation has been present in the learning process for decades. Nowadays, when DL is a very common method of teaching, it is even more difficult to motivate students. The number of unmotivated students is rising. In the world of increasing technological opportunities and social media revolution students are expected to be extremely motivated. However, a great number of them remain unmotivated.

In 2019 Carnegie Mellon University published the results of a study revealing why a disproportionate number of college students today are not as motivated as they need to be [6]. The study showed that the main reasons are as follows:

1. Students see little value in the course or its content.
2. Students do not believe that their efforts will improve their performance.
3. Students are demotivated by the structure and allocation of rewards.
4. Students do not perceive the classroom climate as supportive.
5. Students have other priorities which compete for their time and attention.
6. Individual students may suffer from physical, mental or other personal problems that affect motivation.

Our paper represents the extension of the research and contribution to the study of the means to improve student motivation. Bearing that in mind, we conducted a survey at ICT College, Belgrade, involving 265 students in order to find out what would make them more motivated for the learning process. Our initial premise was that digital life is an essential part of everyday life and that students enjoy it.

Our initial question which triggered all the other questions was: 'How would you improve student motivation in the DL process?' 96% of the students answered: 'By using social media in the learning process'. The other questions which arose from this one are shown below.

Results and Discussion

The survey involved 265 students aged 19-22 years who are attending ICT College, Belgrade and it was conducted in the spring of 2019. The results are shown below.

To the question: 'Do you have any Social media account?' 97% students answered: 'Yes' and only 3% answered: 'No', Fig.1.

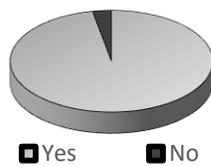**Do you have any social media account?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Fig.1. Percentage of students with social media accounts

To the question: 'Which social network do you have an account with?' 93% of the students answered they use Facebook, and 72% use Instagram, Fig. 2.
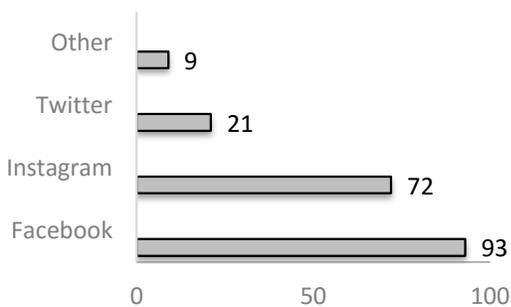

Fig.2. Accounts with social networks

Surprisingly, despite the fact that most of the students have both Facebook and Instagram account, 92% of all analyzed students suggested the use of Instagram in the learning process.
Instagram is less functional than Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, and the scope of its features is limited. It cannot compete with YouTube as a library of video content as YouTube has a much richer repository. Nevertheless, Instagram is becoming increasingly popular among students and graduates. Teenagers find Instagram particularly fun to use due to the friendly UX and the ability to cross-post their content to different groups and other social media platforms.

We grouped the students' answers according to their suggestions on how Instagram should be used in the learning process:

1. Teachers should make an **account and profile for the course** and use it for all kinds of announcements as well as teaching materials.
   The course account should also be used for posting previous final exam tests as well as short midterm tests so that students can practice more.

The course account can be used for faster information feed or for students to ask teachers questions since e-mail correspondence is 'too slow'.

Interesting students' works or papers could be posted there.

Students could create and suggest some topics on their own.

2. **Online discussions** should be used since they are less stressful than real ones and even introverted students will express their opinion online. Instagram platform is all about liking, sharing, and commenting and it has an impressive engagement rate. Therefore, it should be used for participation in virtual discussions. Furthermore, learning in a group is easier.

3. Posting **photos** connected with a certain lesson could make it more interesting. Students could post photos connected with the subject, which could be rewarded with some points calculated into their final score.

   Photos could contain a question and a 'comment' could contain an answer. Other students could 'vote' or like some answers which could be calculated into their final score.

4. Teachers and students should post '**Instagram story**' or go '**Live stream**' including some major definitions which are important for the final exam. Teachers could do online training video clips. Stories could also contain some short questions with offered answers for students who have seen the story. Teachers could go through 'comments' to see the feedback.

5. Instagram could be used **as student support**. If students have a long learning way ahead, they could be encouraged to create an Instagram account in order to share the results of every learning goal they accomplish. Thus, every long DL process could be divided by asking students to upload a photo when each of them has completed a certain task.

6. **Having fun**. All students love participating in various creative projects and having fun. Using Instagram can be very friendly, inspiring and creative.

Interestingly, 95% of the students suggested that teachers should tell students to make their avatar profiles.

Avatars have been defined by Peterson [7] as 'online manifestations of self in a virtual world, and are designed to enhance interaction in a virtual space'. Deuchar & Nodder [8] extend the definition adding that avatars allow 'the user to take on a visible persona' within a virtual world giving them 'the opportunity to engage in surreal and imaginary experiences that transcend the actual world in which they live' [8]. While using avatars in virtual environments for social networking and entertainment purposes is now well-established, their use in educational contexts is still in its early stage of development [9], with applications being limited to early simulation games and activities and specialist uses mainly in science and mathematics. However, researchers such as Zan R. and Di Martino [10] and Woolgar [11] in their discussion on online object-oriented environments claim that such environments have the potential to enhance social interaction and support connectedness, particularly among those individuals who may have difficulty facilitating communication on a face-to-face basis.

Our students suggested that all students should create their avatars and then gather to communicate in a virtual world which they explore together with their teacher. This makes lessons, role play and communication much more fun and effective.

Conclusion

The issue of student motivation has been present for decades in the learning process. Nowadays, when DL is a very common method of teaching, it is even more difficult to motivate students and the number of unmotivated students is increasing.

We conducted a survey at ICT College, Belgrade involving 265 students aged 19-22 regarding student motivation. Our goal was to make DL more motivating for students. We started from the premise that digital life is part of everyday life and that students enjoy it. Therefore, we wanted to exploit the fact that almost all students are social media users.

The survey revealed that students suggested Instagram should be used in both learning and distance learning processes. Another interesting conclusion is that students like avatars and suggest that all students should create their avatars and then gather to communicate in a virtual world together with their teachers, which would make lessons and communication much more fun and effective.

Thus, being aware and excluding the indisputable social, financial or psychological reasons for decreasing motivation of students in the learning process, our survey revealed that a means of communication itself can influence motivation. Lectures should incorporate means of communication young people use in their everyday life and students will readily accept them. Consequently, Instagram with its massive young audience appears to be an unavoidable social media platform suggested by students.

So, finally, according to students' suggestions, we suggest a creation of a completely new technological identity – social media avatars, as a next generation of distance learning trainees.

The future of DL as well as traditional learning will definitely depend on the ability of teachers to adapt to changes caused by technological revolution and make the same everyday habits as students despite the fact that they are being changed dramatically due to technological advancement.

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