

## BASIC CONSIDERATIONS ON SHIFTING TO VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT(S) AND CULTURE(S). A CASESTUDY

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***Abstract:** The 2020 pandemic situation has mind-blowingly changed approaches and strategies at all levels of education. Both learning and teaching have suffered fundamental changes in their structure and processes. However, short time was given for accepting and adjusting to new ways of being, learning, teaching and finally, collaborating. The aim of this paper is to open new roads of research during these challenging but resourceful times. This preliminary research is focused on analysing the background our language department has with online teaching and how educators could adapt their practices in order to cope with the present situation. The ecological approach of language learning has given the necessary tools to broaden the discussion around concepts such as 'learning communities', 'collaborative approaches', 'critical thinking' and 'learning environments'.*

***Keywords:** environment, ecological approach, online practice, language learning, learning culture.*

### **Introduction**

The current situation caused by the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic has severely shaken the personal, economic and social strata of our existence. Education, and we refer especially to formal education in this paper, has abruptly stopped its course of being and functioning. The most common governmental measure these days was closing all educational structures, from nursery schools to universities. However, learning, teaching and, we would like to add, reflective dimensions of the two main processes could not be put to a halt.

This paper has been born out of our very short experience with teaching and learning in a new environment caused by this shift from a

face-to-face learning environment to a virtual one. The questions we are incessantly asking ourselves are in terms of means of communication with students, qualitative aspect of the educational phenomenon, types of feedback and impact, larger consequences, such as the social and philosophical ones. In consequence, the goal of this first stage of a longer study is to underline our process of re-learning and adaptation of context and resources to a new way of seeing the world, in general, and in the language classroom more specifically.

### **Material and method**

The ecological framework is applied to assess the traditional teaching system and provide new insights on new tools and process that could be used while using the online environment. Although the interconnectedness between students, their teachers, resources of all types and processes has been previously discussed, the present status of the situation forces everybody to re-assess the quality of the educational network. Moreover, different criteria should emerge in order to cope with the new elements.

The profile of our students represents important data for this discussion. The students who attend language classes are studying different specializations of Life Sciences such as agriculture, horticulture, forestry, food engineering, veterinary medicine, biotechnologies or rural management. The language curriculum in our university requires the study of one language (at student's choice: English, French or German) in the 1st year and, depending on the faculty, in other years too. The level of language students come with is highly heterogeneous, from beginner to advanced, which implies a lot of effort for the teachers to create and 'perform' their weekly courses.

The ecological pedagogy of language learning and the enactive approach (Maturana, H. 1996, 1997 & Varela, F, 1996) provide us with some relevant concepts to analyse the teaching situation. H. Maturana and F. Varela define cognition as an *embodied action* that is, for one thing, the cognition depends on various types of experiences provided by our body at a sensory and motor level; for another thing these abilities are deeply rooted in a biological, psychological and cultural context. It is useful to clarify that teaching and learning are not in a cause-effect relationship. In other words, learning is not an automatic consequence of teaching. We cannot control or confirm that an outstanding didactic performance could lead to efficient learning on the part of the student. Learning is an

individual process due to every student; nobody can learn for another person.

To a broader extent, education is only the result of the structural coupling between the human being and his environment. The medium involves transformations or alterations – like perception or information – that trigger changes determined by each various subject structure accordingly. Learning, that is structural changes of a subject, is the result of his interaction with the elements of his environment. In our case, namely in higher education, it is more relevant that students are active members of several contexts of life, they have been actors in various life experiences, and thus the interactions between them and the language content taught at the university are full of learning opportunities. Nevertheless, the student remains the main performer of the transformation of the received knowledge.

### **1. Classroom vs. Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)**

One of the distinctions that requires questioning before shifting to online practice is the type of context where learning takes place in formal education and the network of relationships previously designed. Context related, course planning takes into consideration students' profile (age, level of language, field of work/study, interests), material resources, teacher's profile, time and rhythm of the language courses, attendance and degree of presence at the course. During traditional courses, namely in a classroom, we normally make use of online tools. In addition, students use them too in order to fix knowledge or self-assess their progress. Nevertheless, there has not been serious awareness of this ongoing movement from face-to-face teaching to partial or total online learning and of its impact on the learning process. Especially when language learning is targeted, nowadays there are infinite opportunities of online learning which we cannot entirely grasp, trace its origins or assess separately from formal learning.

The main issue here is what the VLE brings differently in our approach and how can we use this effectively thus providing qualitative both learning and teaching? Tony Bates in his 2015 book *Teaching in a Digital Age* draws a list of limitations of the classroom design model for online learning. For him, it is of utmost importance to “look at the design that makes the most of the educational affordances of new technologies”. Students studying online are in a different learning environment than students in the classroom, therefore the design needs to take into account the specific needs that emerge from this particularity of the context.

Online interaction with our students in the last 3 weeks has revealed supplementary information to different levels. First of all, the need of connecting with the teachers and the other peers has visibly increased. Every online course has consequently changed its original beginning accordingly: more time to greeting the students and checking how they are. Fortunately, being a language course, we can easily exploit this moment of interconnection asking them to speak in the foreign language, making observations on their vocabulary or correcting errors if necessary. It is important to underline that the language practical courses have small groups of students (maximum 20), the average attendance being up to 15 students per group.

Second of all, we noticed a more acute need to have all the documents used in the course, some of them even before the beginning of the course. In the absence of other written support, having access to teachers' working material has motivated students to be more responsible and assure themselves that they have the handouts before the beginning of the course.

Third of all, once they were announced that they will be involved in online practice only, students also showed a particular form of need of connection with the teacher. His/her presence at the classroom/office/university has been replaced with online accessibility. However, we do feel further new and more rigorous rules are needed in terms of the teacher's accessibility and/or availability.

The purpose of the practitioners' endeavours is to give meaning and create the necessary tools and strategies in order to facilitate teaching as a continuum. Bates (2016) describes this continuum from face-to-face teaching (without technology) moving to blended teaching (with classroom aids, flipping or hybrid delivery) and reaching fully online (remote teaching using all technology). During this period, synchronous and asynchronous approaches help both teachers and students to gradually adjust their learning and teaching habits.

## **2. A New Teaching Culture**

It is already clear that we cannot transfer classroom teaching to online teaching by preserving the same teaching patterns and strategies. At this stage, we are more in blended learning, which can mean a number of things, but in general, means a combination of face-to-face teaching and a significant use of online learning. However, the most important thing to remember in online learning is primarily a mode of delivery, a way of

delivering education to learners, NOT a particular method of teaching. Online learning can support a wide range of teaching methods. (Bates, 2016: 6)

Three major principles have guided our experience so far during the online language classes. The first one is a very accurate supervision of the learning activity. This aspect is particularly important as we would like to avoid the risk of overloading students. That is the reason why one of the first steps was providing a weekly structure. The synchronous class takes one hour and a half every week while the individual learning may be up to 3 hours a week for the language course. Students learn in chunks of less than one hour when they study online. Consequently, the assignments have been conceived to match a certain amount of time every week, and we also take into account that students have other courses too. The total amount of time required for all courses should not be more than 30-40 h per week.

Monitoring learning activity requires specific and appropriate tools. Technology and IT professionals have become a wanted resource during this crisis period. Although some virtual platforms are quite handy and ready to be used, as part of a public institution, teachers should be supported by the academic managers and offered proper training and access to the most suitable online tools. What we consider very important is underlying individual initiatives useful and effective in the broader context of a public approach.

The second principle on which blended learning should rely upon regards the parameters in which the movement from information to topic or problem-based activities takes place. More than ever, as practitioners, we have to focus on skills development and knowledge management. Content delivery is outdated and has become irrelevant when students have access to enormous quantities of information. Another consequence of this shift is the transformation of the teacher's position. New responsibilities are assumed at this level, primarily of monitoring, facilitation, regulation or tutoring. Bates (2016:34) reminds us the basic needs of students' learning for qualifications: clearly-defined learning goals, a clear timetable of learning, based on a well-structured organisation of the curriculum, appropriate and easy-to-manage learning workloads adapted to students' conditions, regular teacher communication and presence, a social environment that contributes to the knowledge and experiences of other students, a skilled teacher and motivated peers to provide encouragement and support. Blended learning makes it more obvious that collaborative activities support both teachers and students in

their common approach of language learning. It is not about each one's expertise but the group's expertise and practice in different language projects in order to evolve so that all members can benefit.

The third principle, which oriented the design of new language activities, concerns assessment. As we have been forced to quickly change the teaching approach, we consider that continuous formative assessment should become our main preoccupation and not preparing students for a final exam in languages. Collecting both oral and written proofs of language activity has already helped us to design some criteria for continuous evaluations, as well as ways to provide personalised feedback. What we have particularly encouraged in our blended activities was peer feedback and peer-assessment. The result was translated into a better cohesion of the learning group and a higher degree of trust in peer evaluation. However, some further research should be done in this direction such as guiding students to participate in the design of the evaluation criteria, for example.

### 3. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to show how we could start thinking of an intermediary approach from face-to-face language learning to blended learning and even fully online learning if conditions require it. Small steps have been taken in order to draw some basic guidelines adapted to our students in a Life Science university. As practitioners, we have collaborated on a triangulation based on the following key processes: *rethink*, *adapt* and *redesign*. Bates (2016: 2017) discusses the steps of the *learning design*:

- setting clear learning goals for the course ;
- organising the learning into manageable amounts of time for the students;
- ensuring continuous assessment and feedback throughout the courses.

In addition, the main goal is not to give more work to the teacher but to facilitate its transfer to the students. Much of the work of finding, analysing, selecting, comparing content, development of skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, mediation and negotiations should move to student's responsibility. What online learning can change for teachers or instructors is to make them switch from the position of controlling learning and students where you are responsible of creating, delivering and evaluating content to a more 'guide-on-the-side' role,

where your students can develop higher levels skills through practice and collaboration with their peers.

To sum up, current situation has launched us in a turmoil of new experiences to which we have managed to develop on-the-spot coping strategies and to be in touch with our students. Further research is to be continued in order to take both blended and fully online learning and teaching to a more professional level, yet appropriated and specific for each context. Online learning is a professional activity, with evidence-based best practices. You need to be aware of these best practices if you want to succeed in your online teaching. There are certain conditions where online learning is likely to function and others where it will be more difficult and/or inefficient. Practitioners need to choose the appropriate and most suitable mix of face-to-face and online learning. There are numerous different approaches and technologies that can be used in online practice. However, the best choices depend on our specific context and special attention must be given to these choices and their impact on the learning process.

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