

ONLINE COMMUNICATION COURSES: THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE AREA OF COMMUNICATION EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

E-learning as a form of distance education has become one of the essential movements in all levels of education. Almost all of the higher education institutions in Turkey as well as the rest of the world have been trying to offer e-learning opportunities for their students and the staff.

Anadolu University in Turkey has a web portal, which is called Anadolu University Internet Supported Education System, which serves to support academicians' classes via the online system. The academicians generally give their courses in traditional way but they have begun to use this online system to support their courses. Computer and computer-supported technologies are new issues in the instructional communication field. When we look at the course list for the 2008 spring semester on the portal, we see 8 (eight) communication courses, which are given by Communication Sciences Faculty teachers. If we want to develop and deliver successful e-learning programs we should need to know teachers' behaviours and attitudes before developing an e-learning system. The aim of this research is to find out the academicians' teaching method when they use the online support system.

Keywords: Online communication education; Online learning; e-transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system (Rogers, 1995). According to Rogers, diffusion is a special type of communication, in that the messages are concerned with new ideas. Communication is a process of sharing information to reach a mutual understanding. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) expressed the idea that communication is a two way process of convergence, rather than a one way, linear act in which one individual seeks to transfer a message to another. Rogers (1995) explained the four main elements in the diffusion of innovations. The four main elements are the innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system.

1. The innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. If the idea seems new to the individual it is an innovation.

2. A communication channel is the means by which messages get from one individual to another. Communication channels may be identified as two main paths. These paths are mass media and interpersonal channels. Mass media channels are enabling a source of one or a few individuals to reach an audience of many such as television, radio, newspaper and etc. Interpersonal channels involve a face-to-face exchange between two or more individuals.
3. Time is a third element in the diffusion process. The three time factors are:
 - (a) innovation- decision process
 - (b) relative time with which an innovation is adopted by an individual or group
 - (c) innovation's rate of adoption
4. A social system is described as a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal. The members of a social system may be individuals, informal groups, organizations, and/or subsystems.

Rogers (1995) expressed five generic innovation characteristics that influence adoption of innovations:

- a. Relative advantage of the new technology with respect to existing technology
- b. Compatibility with existing technology
- c. The complexity of understanding the technology
- d. Trialability of the new technology
- e. The observability of the benefits of the new technology

“Innovations in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have an important effect on the development of globalization and influence all areas of economic and social life, all segments of the society and deeply affect how public services are delivered, businesses function, and citizens lead their daily lives. The Lisbon Strategy which aims to make the European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010 is one of the most comprehensive examples of the efforts to adapt to this change.

Turkey has become a party to the e-Europe+ Initiative, which has been designed for EU candidate countries in 2001. The “e-transformation Turkey Project” that was included in the 58th and 59th Government Urgent Action Plan was launched in 2003 and hence all individual studies being carried out in our country have been gathered under an umbrella project and accelerated. The e-transformation Turkey Project aims to carry out the process of transformation into an information society in a harmonious and integrated structure all over the society with all citizens, enterprises and public segments (<http://www.bilgitoplumu.gov.tr/eng/default.asp>),”.

Anadolu University, like other leading distance teaching universities, wants to make e-transformation to improve its distance and formal educational system.

For many years various types of courses and programs have been developed and delivered for the distance learners around the world. In Turkey, Anadolu University has been doing distance education for more than twenty years. The university, now, has more than 1.150.000 distance students in its system. In this system, the university has been using mainly a basic text-based system to deliver information. In addition to the text-based system, the university has been using television and radio programs (sometimes live, basically from the stored video and sound) to support the information basically given by the texts. The university has begun to use web supported information delivery systems to help the learners better understand the contents.

Also, for more than eight years (started in 2000); the university has had some fully online degree programs for distance students. These online degree programs are about business management, tourism, teacher training, and information management.

To meet student demand for online enrollment, course delivery, guidance and support, the Open Education Faculty and Computer-Based Learning Centre at Anadolu University are developing an e-Learning Portal for all of the previously standalone e-books, e-television programmes, e-exams, e-practice, e-tutoring, e-audiobooks and e-support systems. The target of e-transforming 90% of the course content is well on the way to being achieved, and 211 e-books have been produced for 2724 units and 1176 e-television programmes have been provided for 85 courses. The increasing use of e-books, e-administration, email, telephone, online FAQs and e-tutoring by course moderators is reducing the need for student attendance at the OEF centers. In 2005, about 200,000 or 20% of the students were able to access these Internet-based services, and since the Portal's launch in May 2005, 348,444 learners have logged on over eight million times and on occasion there can be about 10,000 learners accessing it simultaneously (C.Lacthem et al., 2006). Nowadays those numbers given above are increasing daily and the university is trying to the e-transformation process.

The university is planning to open new online degree programs in the near future. In this context, also, web-supported/based formal and online communication in education may be becoming a hot topic due to a big demand on and off campus in Anadolu University and Turkey.

THE STUDY

The transmittal of cultural knowledge can be accomplished in online learning environments as faculty provide the necessary background information for these practical cultural discussion (Sprague, 1999). For more than eight years Anadolu University has been using LMS (Learning Management System) to support formal education on campus. "A Learning Management System (LMS) is a set of software tools designed to manage user learning interventions. LMSs go far beyond conventional training records management and reporting. The value-add for LMSs is the extensive range of complementary functionality they offer. Learner self-service (e.g. self-registration on instructor-led training), training workflow (e.g. user notification, manager approval, waitlist management), the provision of on-line learning (e.g. [Computer-Based Training](#), read & understand), on-line assessment, management of [continuous professional education](#) (CPE), [collaborative learning](#) (e.g. application sharing, discussion threads), and training resource management (e.g. instructors, facilities, equipment), are some of the additional dimensions to leading Learning Management Systems (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_management_system)". Some academicians in Anadolu University have been supporting their classes by a learning management system named WebCT but next year the university will be using another LMS called Blackboard.

METHOD

The aim of this research is to find out the academicians teaching and facilitating methods when they use the online learning support system. Qualitative research method was used for this study due to small number of population. Also, Qualitative research involves an in-depth understanding of [human behavior](#) and the [reasons](#) that govern human behavior (<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Qualitative+study>).

PARTICIPANTS

When we look at the WebCT service in Anadolu University we may see the list of academicians who are using this technology to support their classes. For this study, the researcher interviewed five academicians out of sixty-one who are supporting actively their classes with technology from Communication Science Faculty in Anadolu University.

PROCEDURES

Data was collected in April and May, 2008. The interview took 30 to 90 minutes to complete and record digitally.

INSTRUMENT

For this research the participants were asked eight open-ended interview questions. The questions are:

1. Why do you use internet technologies, in other words distance learning media in your classes? And how long you have been using those technologies?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the internet technologies in learning and teaching?
3. Have you tried out this method in your courses from beginning to end? Can you try this method in a complete course?
4. Did you receive any instructional design and/or technical supports while you were developing your program?
5. Can the internet technologies be used in all stage of learning?
6. How effective is this method in order to achieve the learning objectives? Is it necessary to support this with any other methods?
7. Using the theory of diffusion of innovation, and assuming that this method is an innovation, how will it be diffused? What are your opinions on this issue?
8. How effective is this method for learning and are the students ready for this method?

FINDINGS

1. Why do you use internet technologies, in other words distance learning media in your classes? And how long you have been using those technologies?

The reported length of time of the technology use for the courses changes from academicians to academicians according to their experiences with technology. One of the teachers has been using this method for ten years and the other one is just a new user. One of the reasons for the usage of the technology in the classes is to collect the course notes and materials. The second reason is to communicate with the students and encourage the students to communicate with each other. The other reason is to encourage the students to learn the technology and adopt themselves to new methods and technologies. The fourth reason is to relieve the students' physical workload such as carrying all the materials to the schools and copying the course notes, and etc. The fifth one is to focus students' attention on the content and increase participation of the students in the course and discussions. The sixth reason is to reduce bureaucracy which teachers and students are faced with all the time.

The meaning of bureaucracy is here that giving the course notes to the students all the time and makes copy those notes. Also, follow the students' attendance to the classes. The seventh reason is to exhibit the students' projects and homework on the portal. The last reason is to do research on this method about the effects of the technologies on learning and teaching.

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the internet technologies in learning and teaching?

Advantages of the technology usage:

- a. The quality of the picture (video) that can be used in the cinema and television courses.
- b. Increased motivation of the students.
- c. Unlimited discussion and reference opportunities for both the students and teachers.
- d. Increased research opportunities for academicians and material usage by both the students and teachers.
- e. Developed computer-using skills of the students.
- f. Placement of related links to the course page and connecting the course with other courses at the same time.
- g. Ease of updating internet course.

Disadvantages of the technology usage:

- a. Minimum and/or non-technical support affects the academicians' motivations.
- b. Connection problems on and off-campus.
- c. WebCT (Learning Management System) has some Turkish character problems, and does not offer RSS 2.0 (Really Simple Syndication) feedback to the users.
- d. WebCT education needed by students before taking technology supported and enhanced courses.
- e. Available and continuous instructional design support needed for teachers, developers and academicians who prepare internet-based and/or supported courses.

3. Have you tried out this method in your courses from beginning to end? Can you try this method in a complete course?

One of the academicians had tried a totally online method in one of his classes but not in Turkey and Anadolu University. He had implemented this method when he was teaching in Australia two years ago. He and other academicians expressed that they could try this method when they felt ready themselves. All of them think that they will be giving totally online courses in the near future.

4. Did you receive any instructional design and/or technical supports while you were developing your program?

They all agree that there is technical support, but not enough because they cannot get technical support whenever they need it. Instructional design support which consists of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation was not used by the academicians during the teaching period, meaning that there was no instructional design support at all. They are not getting any outside instructional design help.

They do not actually know how to design systematically their courses but they know that there are some instructional designers in the university but they did not think of asking any advices from the designers before. Instructional Design (ID) or Instructional Systems Design (ISD) Models are visual or verbal representations of the instructional design process that are used to guide and complete design in many training and educational settings (Seels & Glasgow, 1998). The ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) model defined and explained by Seels and Glasgow in 1998.

5. Can the internet technologies be used in all stage of learning?

Most of the academicians said that totally online education has some defects that traditional education does not have. For instance, an academician argued that during face-to-face session in a traditional class, teacher senses the student's feelings whenever he/she looks at the faces of the students. Teachers feel immediately when the students are bored, get tired or etc., and the teacher may change the subject to get rid of these problems in normal, traditional classes, but on the other hand, it is impossible to make these changes in an online classes, therefore most of the academicians are not agree to give all online courses. This idea is parallel to Bejerano's opinion on online classrooms. Bejerano (2008) expressed that the online classroom limits the number of techniques and strategies that teachers use to educate and students use to learn. Teachers and students need equal or better access to tools, training, and teaching and learning methods for online education to be comparable to the face to face learning experience. Mostly all the academicians agree that maybe in the future, when the technology gives us an opportunity to feel ourselves like in traditional class settings, we may begin to use this method in all stage of learning and teaching.

6. How effective is this method in order to achieve the learning objectives? Is it necessary to support this with any other methods?

Most of the academicians are agreed that this method is not enough right now and needs external (face to face) support in order to achieve the learning objectives but, if they can use the web 2.0 tools that some of them agree that the online method can carry them out to their learning objectives which means that the web 2.0 tools gives them many new opportunities in online environments. One of the academicians argued that this method is enough to achieve learning objectives in face to face education but is not enough for distance learning due to the face to face support session in which the teacher can see his/her students. According to this teacher it is impossible to see or meet with the students in a distance learning system.

7. Using the theory of diffusion of innovation, and assuming that this method is an innovation, how will it be diffused? What are your opinions on this issue?

One of academicians expressed that this method will be diffused like cellular phones. At first there were few cellular phone users but now almost all the people have this mobile technology and use it. The other diffusion aspect is implementation of online learning. When people see that the implementation method is working well, they will begin to use it. They all agreed that organizational support is necessary for the diffusion and they also all agreed that diffusion needs both technical and instructional design supports. One of the academicians believed that the method needs to be marketed especially in our country, Turkey.

The other academician considered diffusers of innovation to be the champion teachers who were the first user of all the new things. In addition to all diffusion thoughts all of the academicians agreed that this method would be diffused first in academic settings, business environments, and among the projects designers.

8. How effective is this method for learning and are the students ready for this method?

All academicians agreed that this method was very effective on students' learning and also the method enlarges the teacher's points of view. Some of the academicians declared that this method could be more effective on masters' and PhDs courses. According to the academicians, the students are ready for this online method but they need to be educated on these new technologies.

CONCLUSION

While late adopters want to conduct research and learn more about the problems and solutions offered by such developments, early adopters are eager to depose brick-and-mortar schools to create a new direction in virtual space (Vanhorn et al., 2008). This study reveals academicians teaching methods when they use the online support system. It also asks questions about the students' readiness for e-learning. This research is just a beginning to learn about and understand the communications that major academicians engage in, the teaching methods they are comfortable with, and the computer skills they have. According to these findings, the academicians in Communication Studies seem to be ready for online delivered education. As expected, the academicians' confidences in their use of computers are quite high. According to academicians, the students seem to be ready for this online method but they need to be educated on these new technologies. Rogers' theory of the diffusion of innovation provides a useful framework for examining e-learning strategies for academicians. This research certainly can be expanded to all academicians to get better opinion about their thoughts and aptitudes toward technology enhanced and/or e-learning.

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