

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL FACTORS ON E-LEARNING**Nino Tarkhnishvili****Tbilisi State University, I. Chavchavadze Ave #1, Tbilisi, Georgia 0179*****Abstract***

The paper discusses the effects of social factors on online education and the importance of social interaction throughout the learning process. It looks at the emergence of e-learning in the field of education through different stages of its development up to the present time and examines the benefits and effectiveness of e-learning since it has many advocates and followers all over the world. At the same time the paper aims to find out the challenges students might face while participating in an online course as this type of learning is still often skeptically looked upon and on some occasions considered inferior to the traditional learning. The paper focuses on the role of social factors in this respect and aims to found out how much influence they can have on conducting the learning process successfully and how can these factors encourage or hinder a success of an online course. In doing so, it looks at a survey and opinions of various authors. The paper also involves a short survey of students' opinions about the biggest challenges and difficulties they have had to overcome as online learners and reflects on the impact of social factors in connection with the issue.

Key words: e-learning, social interaction, online community, challenges.

Transferring information and sharing knowledge have always been the key factors in building and developing communities. However, it was done in a different way at a different stage throughout the history. In the beginning information traveled rather slowly and obviously not very effectively as it was available to only the privileged and well-educated. With the introduction of movable type printing in China and then in Europe by Gutenberg information became more available locally as well as across distances, which strongly supported changes in various fields including education.

Nowadays, technological advances have brought about a new wave of changes to the world of education and the world in general. With the help of technology and mobile media it has become possible to access or share information, get knowledge or degrees. As Alvin Toffler writes in his book *The Third Wave*, 'The emergence of various high technologies, global communications networks...and the rise of the Internet'[1] are the key characteristics of the present time, so called 'information age.' Interestingly, William Rankin refers to it as 'the third information age' (after agriculture-based civilization and the industrial age) and predicts that it 'will reshape the education.' [2] Admittedly, the changes are noticeable the biggest being the emergence of new type of education, E-learning.

The name, E-learning first appeared in 1999, when it was used during a seminar in Los Angeles. It was meant to define a way of learning supported by technology, the internet and all electronic media sources. However, the history of distance education, as a method of learning, obviously goes back to a much earlier period. It was in 1840s when Isaac Pitman, a teacher in a private school taught shorthand through corresponding - he sent materials and tasks to his students via email. However, nowadays the

two terms, e-learning and distance learning, are used synonymously together with other alternatives, e.g. online-learning.

In the beginning e-learning was mainly focused on transferring knowledge. It provided delivery of the information and material which previously seemed difficult to access. It offered a variety of learning opportunities to distance students and allowed them to progress at their own pace from any place and any time convenient for them. However, new systems, which were developed later based on Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), encouraged the shared development of knowledge. This shifted the focus to interactive learning and collaboration and therefore made social interaction an essential part of online education. Rather than simply obtaining and sending information it became more important to build up and develop knowledge cooperatively through negotiations and sharing, considering the background and previous educational experience of the course participants.

It is believed that the social component of e-learning can greatly define the learning outcome – it can foster or hinder a successful completion of the course depending on how well it is handled. In his study ‘Five Roles I Play in Online Courses’, Scot Headley says that ‘the key to successful teaching and learning is relationships’.[3] I believe that this is true not only about online courses but the face-to-face environment as well. A favorable environment, encouraging teachers, positive feedback or even praise together with supportive group mates and shared interests or aims have always been incentive for most students. On the other hand, a lack of support and motivation, bullying, irrelevant or negative feedback, too much challenge, etc. have usually acted as an obstacle. However, online environment can be regarded as a double challenge in this respect. The distance, lack of visual aid, time difference and no face-to-face interaction are the major constraints that make it harder to create bonds and build a community online.

Interestingly, according to a survey by Berge and Muilenburg, (2005) ‘social interactions are second from the top in a list of the eight greatest barriers to online learning.’[4] Other major barriers mentioned in the survey are: Administrative/instructor issues, academic skills, technical skills, learner motivation, etc. Accordingly, it is obvious that the success of an online course is directly connected with social factors and their effects on the learning process. The survey is based on students’ opinions, which, I think, makes it particularly interesting and notable as examining and considering learners’ viewpoint can help to make significant improvements to the input and performance of online courses. As a consequence, this could ‘lead to a more effective and enjoyable educational experience - one that students would want to repeat.’[4] I find this aspect very important since e-learning is still often skeptically looked upon and on some occasions students tend to drop out in the middle of the course or feel reluctant to take another one. Based on my own experience as an online learner as well as e-moderator, I can say that the reasons for such an attitude can be various and directly connected with the constraints to online education.

In order to identify specific reasons for the students’ reluctance, I decided to find out what appeared to be the biggest challenge for them in online learning. I questioned 35 Georgian students aged 23-30 who have recently participated in an online language course. This was the sole experience of learning online for all of them and they all shared the same, traditional face-to-face educational background. The students were asked one question: What do you consider to be the biggest challenge in an online

course? They had to choose among three options: 1.dealing with the material 2.dealing with online tools 3.the lack of synchronous interaction. Each of the options represents a different major component of e-learning - input material, technical and social, respectively.

Table 1

What do you consider to be the biggest challenge in an online course?	1.Dealing with the material	2.Dealing with online tools (e.g. wiki)	3. Lack of synchronous interaction	4.Other
	5 students 14%	14 students 40%	11 students 31%	4 students 11%

As it is seen in the table, for the majority of the participants (40%) technical problems appeared to be the most challenging, which is not surprising considering the fact that they had no previous experience of dealing with online tools. Quite a large number of the students (31%) voted for the social factor as they lacked synchronous interaction during the course. Only 5 students (14%) said that they found the input material the most challenging part of the course. Finally, 4 students (11%) gave their own different answers: Two of them named the feeling of isolation as the most disturbing factor for them, one participant said the feedback they got was not sufficient and one regarded the lack of visual aid as the biggest challenge. Considering that the feeling of isolation and the need for more feedback from the e-moderator or other participants belong to social factors, the survey has obviously confirmed that social factors can have a considerable impact on e-learning.

The results clearly show that a learning process should involve much more than merely accessing information and gaining knowledge if it is supposed to be a positive learning experience. Students need to develop not only their knowledge but also relationships with other participants. They need to feel involved and become a part of the community who tries to pursue a mutual goal. The fact that the students felt inconvenient because of the sense of isolation or the lack of synchronous interaction emphasizes the necessity to foster interactivity and interaction among participants. Consequently, it leads to the conclusion that social factors of an online course should be handled with as much care as the material development or delivery. As Rovai (2002) argues, 'task-driven interactions may not be enough to foster a positive sense of community among participants and a supportive environment for socio-emotional interactions is critical for promoting a sense of community.'[5] Additionally, according to Wenger (2009), 'members learn by participating in activities and socially interacting with other members of their community.'[6]

On the whole, social factor can obviously have significant effects on the development and successful completion of an online course. On the one hand, it can be a barrier to e-learning but, on the other hand, overcoming this barrier can greatly support forming a friendly and close-knit community.

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There is 1 table in the article

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