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**ONLINE EDUCATION & ROLE OF COMMUNICATION**

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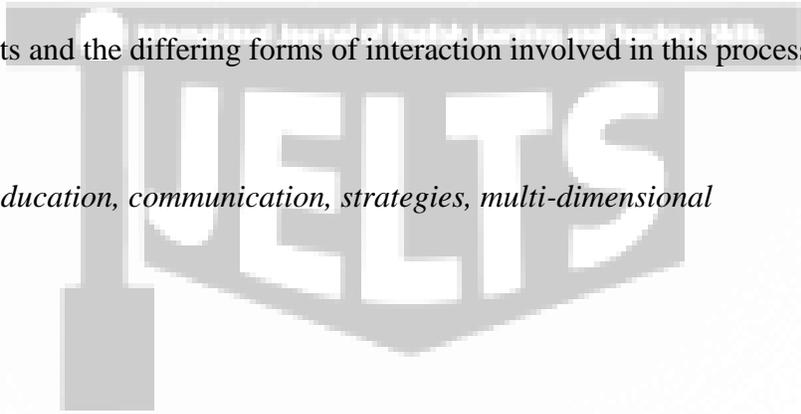
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**Abstract**

Online education requires an instructional design approach for leading the educational transformation. This is characterized by advanced flexibility, learner autonomy and extensive use of digital technologies to enhance learning outcomes. The main feature of such methodology is the physical distance between teaching staff, peers and educational institutions. Various technological tools are used to bridge this distance and improve communication and interaction. This study attempts to review the literature in the field, with the aim of highlighting strategies for enhancing communication and interaction in online learning environments. The study explores the multi-dimensional aspects of communication in online learning environments and the differing forms of interaction involved in this process.

**Keywords:** *Online education, communication, strategies, multi-dimensional*



## **Introduction**

While effectively communicating with the students in our online classes aids in the retention of our students, as educators, we should want to do more than just retain our students. We should provide them with a sense of community while enrolled in online classes to avoid the sense of isolation that some online students experience. The goal of online communications is the same as the goal in face-to-face communications: to bond; to share information; to be heard, and to be understood. Fostering a sense of community in online classes will make the learning experience more meaningful for online students and help them stay connected during the life of the course. Learning Management Systems (LMS) have built-in tools to assist in communicating with our online students, but there are also many other technology tools to help us bridge the gap between us and our online students.

**“For most online students, their primary contact with an institution is through their communication with faculty” Betts (2009).**

The above quote emphasizes why it is important that online instructors learn to communicate with their students in ways that will support and enhance their learning experience. One of our primary goals as an online teacher should be to foster a sense of community within our online class. When and how we communicate with our students helps us foster a sense of community in our class which helps our students feel connected to us and their classmates. As an online teacher, we are expected to communicate with our students in a timely and effective manner.

Whether we are new to teaching online or a veteran online teacher, finding the best methods for communicating with our students should be our number one priority.

### **Why is Effective Communication required in Online Classes?**

When we are communicating with students whether in a face-to-face (F2F) class or an online class, we are communicating to give information or get information to gain understanding and build relationships. Communicating with students in an online environment requires a little more thought and planning than communicating with students in an (F2F) environment due to the absence of body language in the online environment. In an (F2F) class, we have the benefit of using body language and facial expression to help us communicate and get our message across to our student. When communicating in an online class, since we are limited to using text and/or images to help us get our point across, we do not have the benefit of using body language to help us communicate to our students. Awareness of limitations to communication capabilities within online environments will help us determine how to develop timely and relevant communications and how to effectively communication with our online students. To determine what would be considered timely and relevant communication in our online class, we first need to decide why and what we need to communicate to students.

### **Methods that can be used to communicate more effectively in Online Environments**

Hranstinski suggests that “Social support is desirable as a way to foster knowledge work and collaborative learning; it provides an environment where communication is encouraged; e.g., anecdotes and personal experiences encourage trust, which foster receptive and creative learning environment”

(2008). The ways we communicate with online students should mirror the diversity of our students. There are many synchronous tools available to help increase the effectiveness of our communications with students. We can start by using the communication tools included in our LMS to get a quick start in communicating with students, but our class becomes more interesting with more innovative communication methods. Wardlow (2014) wrote that “communicating with your students is now possible “24/7-anytime, anywhere.” Technologies like email, texts, websites, electronic portfolios, online surveys and video chat applications like Skype and Google Hangout have made communication between teacher and students more timely, efficient, productive, and satisfying for both parties.” Some of the methods that I have explored using to communicate with my students are:

- Google Hangouts – <https://plus.google.com/hangouts> is a messaging, video, and voice application. With the messaging feature, you can have a private conversation with one of your students, a small group, or you can talk to all of your students at once. Using the video feature, you can turn your conversation into a video chat.
- GoToMeeting – [www.gotomeeting.com](http://www.gotomeeting.com) is video conferencing software that allows users to collaborate in real time. You can use GoToMeeting to host study sessions. You can use the whiteboard to share your screen or illustrate learning concepts. Students can use computer audio or their phones to connect to the meeting. GoToMeeting also allows you to record the session viewing at a later date.

The online tools mentioned above comprise the communication methods I use to increase the effectiveness of my communication with online students. There are so many other synchronous tools that you can use with your students. When you are making a communication plan in advance, be creative and think outside the box to find your communication tools.

### **Have a Communication Plan in Advance**

Planning how, when and why we will communicate with our online students in advance is a great way to ensure that we are able to provide our students with meaningful, timely, and consistent communications. It would be useful if we wrote out our communication plan and kept it handy for future use, that way we will always know what our communication plan is for different situations. Our communication plan should include:

- Methods we will use to communicate with our online students as it is important that we decide how we will contact our students so that when the time comes, it will be easy for us to choose the right method to contact them. It is also equally important for us to tell our students which methods we plan to use to contact them so that they know where to look for our communication.
- How often we will communicate with our students. For routine communications such as announcements, we need to plan in advance how often we will post announcements for our class. Will it be bi-weekly, weekly, or once a day? It's up to us and upon institutional activities how often we want to make class announcements, the best way is to be consistent, maintaining

same process for students' convenience.

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- How do we want our students to communicate with us? The process that we are going to select should be made clear to the students and they should have clear understanding of the communication process along with technical knowledge of the platform that is going to be used by them. They should have prior practice and if needed the teacher should take demo class to make the communication process easier and glitch free.
  
- Which communications method will we use for the different types of communications to our students? I like to use weekly announcements for general announcements to the whole class to comment on how the past week's assignments went or to clarify a learning concept. My students know that they can find general class announcements on the announcements page. I use email or messages if I want to send my students a personal communication and video or voice messaging to provide personal and sometimes group communications to my students. I use my class grade center to provide my students with timely feedback on their course progress. My students know that I may use any of these communication methods because I tell them in advance and remind them throughout the course of my class. I would also prefer personal communication (Whatsapp) so that students can address their problem and we can sort it out together.
  
- How will my student and I communicate in emergency systems if the regular communication methods are not available? I always give my student several ways to

contact me and I like to have more than one way to contact them. I let my students know at the beginning of class about a planned Hierarchy of contact:

- *Messages* – I like to use the Google Meet Chat function because it provides a permanent record of communications within the class. I have my students use this when they need to ask personal or general questions related to class topic.
- *Email* – I have my students use email if they need to contact me fairly quickly because I check my email every day.
- *Text* – I have my students text me if it's an emergency. I always have my phone handy.
- *Phone Call* – I have my students call if it is an emergency that must be addressed quickly.

We need to determine beforehand what type of plan we have to pursue for effective communication in Online Class.

### **The difference between face-to-face learning and online learning**

Over the last few years, digital media has improved the teaching and learning experiences and has

become a common practice for university students and lecturers. The use of e-learning and of digital media for teaching and learning has grown rapidly in just a few years. The online teaching and learning environments are unbound and dynamic, using evolving information and communication

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technologies, asynchronous communication and real-time information. Online learning environments involve a variety of educational practices and are often characterized by student-centered, active learning techniques compared to traditional face-to-face offline classes.

### **The benefits of online learning**

There are a large number of studies that consider statistically significant positive effects for student learning outcomes in the online format, as opposed to conventional face-to-face format. Some of the positive learning outcomes include improved learning as measured by test scores, student engagement with the course material, enhanced understanding of learning and the online environment, a stronger sense of community among students and reduced withdrawal or failure.

Online learning often appeals to a large number of students, as it offers versatility in participation, accessibility and convenience. Furthermore, online learning will continue to be an integral part of higher education with all its benefits.

#### □ **Convenience**

It cites the convenience attribute as the prime value of online learning. Students are in circumstances where they choose the convenience of online learning over the face time provided by the brick and mortar classrooms. The ease of online learning enables direct

communication between teachers and peers in the cyber class.

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□ **Participation**

Ease of participation is an aspect of the appeal of virtual classrooms. One of the many versatile aspects of cyber learning is the willingness of the students to participate in a mixed learning environment, either asynchronously or synchronously. Online education can take several forms, from blogs to mailing lists to courses management systems such as Blackboard. By being equipped with all those forms of communication, students are given the easier route of communication with either the teacher or other students in the class. For communication purposes, the playing field is set, and everyone in the class can participate.

□ **Cost-effectiveness for the university**

Universities now understand the benefits of holding online classes, as the student population continues to grow. Combined with lower online student withdrawal rates, universities found that online learning is very cost-effective and efficient in many ways before online learning came to be possible.

**The problems of online learning**

To date, online learning seems to have lots of benefits for everyone involved. While online learning is having a positive impact, problems need to be brought to light. Such drawbacks will prove to be considerable obstacles if fully understood, expected and planned. Students described feeling isolated from their teachers, from the content of the course and from their classmates. Students face technical problems and also communication gap as well as misunderstanding part of their online education.

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### **The effect of online learning on communication**

Online learning can include communication mediated by a computer. According to study, shy students appear to be more interested in online settings than in conventional settings. In Web- based learning, it is necessary to build opportunities for interactions and communication between students and their teachers. Similarly, active students could make the most of online forums, which might offer opportunities to engage fellow students and professors with deeper dialogue and insightful questions as a technique. Asking questions is a way of getting deeper into the subject and making the topic more comprehensible. Additionally, students should take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with other online students to avoid burn-out or lack of interest while learning online, use motivation and support to remain motivated. Efficiency and efficiency of communication in online learning are an important aspect to overcoming the constraints of online communication.

Student attendance does not seem to decrease when online lectures are given, and whether they experience lectures live or online does not seem to affect the student achievement. Studies identified four factors related to student satisfaction in online education, including interaction and

communication between students and faculty; time spent on task; active and engaged learning; and cooperation between classmates. Another research correlated the expectations of students about a sense of community and instructor presence in online courses



with asynchronous audio feedback. They compared their findings based on receiving text-based feedback rather than audio input from the students.

### **The effect of student engagement on the online learning environment**

There are several affective factors related to student engagement which include attitude, personality, motivation, effort, and self-confidence. In online courses the level of interaction within the course parameters was positively associated with the grades of the students. Through evaluating the level of student interest and taking into account these affective factors, teachers will organize lessons and events more effectively that will enable students to participate more actively in their learning and course work. Measuring student engagement levels helps instructors to adapt their instructional practices in response to changes in the motivation, participation and attitude of students toward their course and educational pursuits

### **Methodology**

This study is a quantitative research study through semi-structured survey which was conducted online due to the pandemic of the Covid-19 which resulted in having lockdown and everyone have to stay at home; instead of distributing physical copies to the students inside the campus. A descriptive research design is applied by using the semi-structured online survey for the purpose of collecting data on the effect of online learning on communication.

### **Data collection**

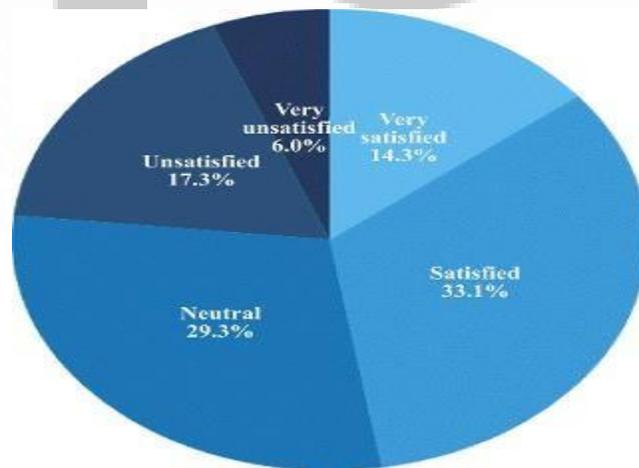
A sample of 133 students is used, and it is safe to say that they can be representative of the whole

population selected. Simple random sampling method is applied as the sampling technique for the study because it is the most straight-forward and convenient method. As mentioned before, the instrument of data collection is an online survey. Regarding the sampling technique, the research used probabilistic sampling; given that positivism is concerned with reducing bias as much as possible, probability-based sampling approach was deemed the most appropriate. This avoids sampling bias or selectively recruiting participants. Moreover, the specific sampling technique used was simple random sampling which means in every item of the population has equal probability of being chosen.

### **Analysis, results and discussion**

The data will be presented in pie charts, figures and tables. Also, this section will discuss the analyzed data and whether or not the data agrees with our research questions.

### **Figures**



*Figure 1*

“How satisfied are you with taking your courses online?”

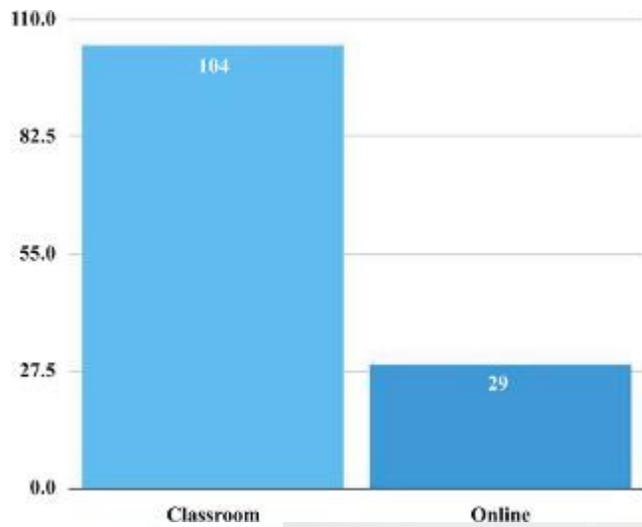


Figure 2

“Which do you Prefer taking, classroom or online classes?”

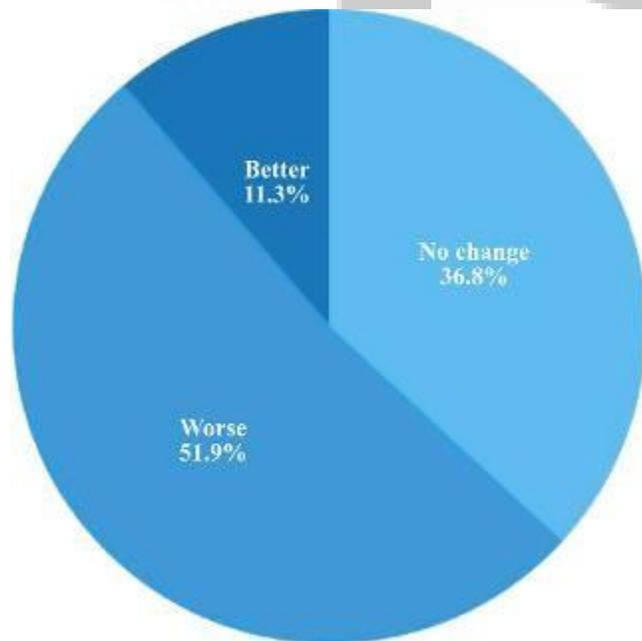


Figure 3

“How has your understanding of the material being taught changed when it shifted from a classroom course to an online course?”

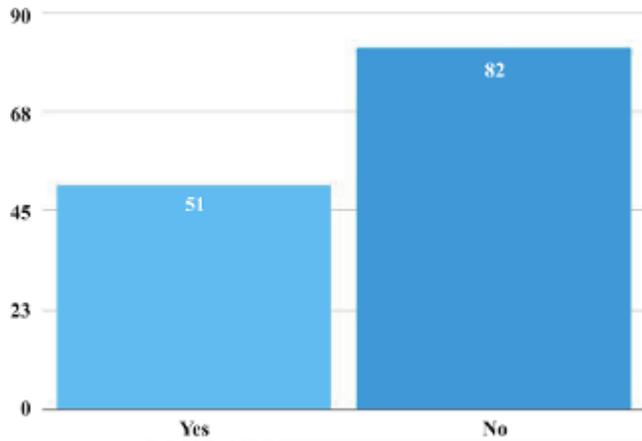


Figure 4

“Has taking classes online encouraged your desire to participate more?”

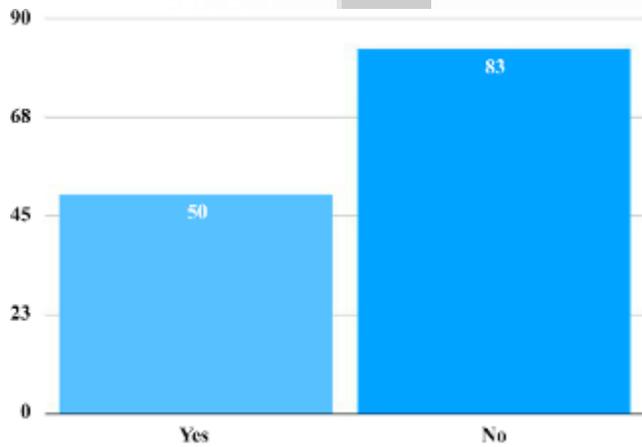


Figure 5

“According to your experience, do you think your productivity as a student has increased?”

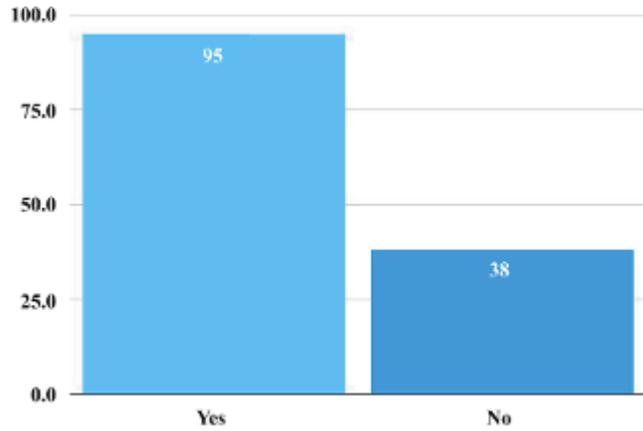


Figure 6

“Do you think your instructors are being cooperative and more understanding of the hardships we are currently facing as students?”

### **Discussion of survey results**

To begin with, while some students were satisfied with taking their courses online, there are students who are more comfortable in face-to-face communication. The majority prefers taking their classes in a classroom instead.

Second, majority of students agree that online learning have a negative impact on communication between teachers and students and the majority agree that interacting with their teachers have become harder as well.

Third, the majority of the students feel their productivity has not increased while taking their courses online and their understanding of the material has been difficult.

Lastly, a large number of students feel more isolated now that they are taking their classes online.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, the study aimed to explore whether online learning has an effect on communication between instructors and students in a negative way, if online learning affects students' productivity levels as well as to evaluate and suggest ways of improving effective communication between instructors and students in online courses. The data was collected by using an online survey which was distributed to a random sample of 133 students as mentioned in the results above, the analyzed data and the information received from the students all agree with the questions of the study. The majority still prefer classroom classes over online classes due to the many problems they face when taking online classes, some of which include: their lack of motivation and understanding of the material, the decrease in communication levels between the students and their instructors, and their increased feeling of isolation caused by online classes. This study found that online learning indeed has a negative impact on communication and its effectiveness between instructors and students.

### **Recommendations**

In Web-based learning, it is necessary to build opportunities for interactions and communication between students and their instructors. Asking questions is a way of moving deeper into the subject and

going deeper makes the subject more comprehensible. It is best if teachers communicate with their students and vice versa in a more informal way like through WhatsApp groups, Messenger calls, private video call meetings and so on.

Teachers should encourage students to participate and study more by providing incentives, at the end of the day every student wants to gain good grades and without the motivation for it is hard to achieve, this can be fulfilled by giving extra marks through short quizzes.

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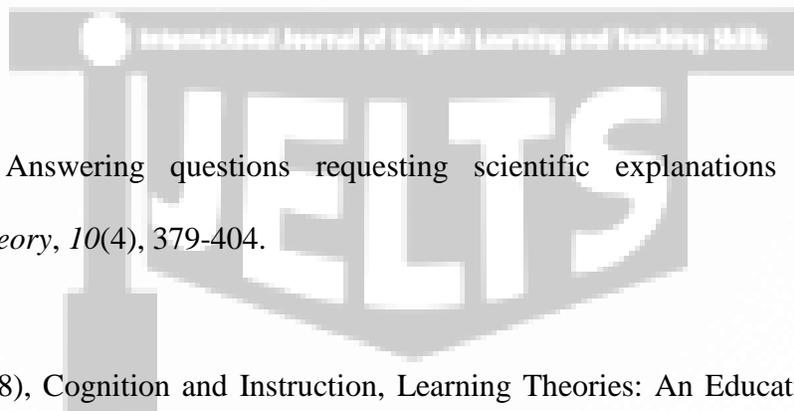
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