

## THE QUALITY OF COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK IN THE ONLINE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Ecaterina Sarah FRĂSINEANU<sup>1</sup>, Vali ILIE<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the data of a synchronous action-research, focused on empirical methodology, resulted from the analysis of the concrete situation of the use of the Google classroom platform by students, who prepare to be teachers, as full-time education students. In the context of the transition to the online education, in the second part of the 2019 academic year, the platform was evaluated by students for the components: announcements, adequacy to the course, seminar, to the assessment, according to various criteria. Thus, the value of the approach undertaken by us consists in raising awareness and following some indicators, their impact in the field of communication and feedback in training.*

*Students positively appreciate the characteristics of new environments and forms of instruction. The focus on the forms of communication and feedback indicated that the nonverbal and para-verbal modalities remain underutilized. We can talk about a superficial level of communication and an intensification of feedback or a change in their level. As a result, we must not neglect the deficient aspects reported by students, observed by us, which requires a justified choice or the combination of the online education with the face-to-face education, in its modernized version, focused on the student.*

*The response that students to full-time education were willing to offer and the central trend of their appreciations, after experiencing the use of the online platform, indicated that, although they have adapted to the requirement to use the training platform, they encounter difficulties that must be taken into account.*

**Key words:** *Online university education; Quality; Communication; Feedback; Google classroom platform.*

### **1. Possibilities offered by the online education**

In addition to face-to-face, regular, full time education, in a complementary way, we have the online education, distance education. As an intermediate form, the blended learning system (the combination of face-to-face and online meetings) is seen as an intersection solution, where, the teacher-student communication is stimulated through technology (Ekwunife-Orakwue, Teng, 2014).

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<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, PhD, Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania, e-mail address: sarah.frasineanu@yahoo.com, corresponding author

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor, PhD, Teacher Training Department, University of Craiova, Romania, e-mail address: brainstorming71@yahoo.com

It is considered that “An eLearning system (distance learning or virtual education) consists of a planned teaching-learning experience, organized by an institution that, immediately provides materials in a sequential and logical order to be assimilated by students in their own way, without forcing the agents of the activity to co-presence or synchronicity” (Istrate, 2000, p. 25– our translation).

The online education process is based on: courses/written support with summary or smart point interventions; online seminars, where, topics from courses are debated or applications are made, starting from them, by the analysis of the way in which, the tasks, homework, tests were solved; conducting assessments of some topics, tests; communication about the opinions of both partners (teachers and students), about the activity carried out.

The main means of online communication are: e-mail, Instant Messaging, Forum, Blog, Social Networks, Voice over Internet Protocol, Video Telephony, education platforms. These are just some of the ways that have been developed so far. The evolution of new technologies, such as virtual reality, will certainly bring new ways.

Ceobanu (2016) showed that online learning is more suitable for young people and adults, because they are able to motivate and self-regulate.

## **2. The need for quality, communication and feedback in education**

According to the National Vocational Qualifications Framework (2019), the quality is the level of satisfaction offered by the efficacy of the educational offer from the instruction field and professional training, reached by achieving the required standards and some excellent results that are required and to which contribute the participants in the learning process and dother interested factors. A service, a product may become appropriate to its purpose, as well as to the needs of the beneficiaries. The instruction quality assessment refers to identifying the extent to which, the instruction offer meets the quality requirements specified by standards and indicators, to the degree of achieving the activity by its goals, and also depends on the satisfaction or the appreciation of beneficiaries.

The quality standards for digital education (2020), designed in the programmatic documents of the European Commission, bring to the fore the need of applying the organizational competence, information management (including combating the misinformation), through the digital competence itself. The digital competence consists in the confident and critical use of the entire range of information and communication technologies for information, communication and problem solving in all areas of life, being necessary for both categories of actors involved in teaching: teachers and students.

By its very meaning, the communication means exchanging messages, accompanied by feedback, and its application in education is closely related to the perspective we adhere to: the information theory, constructivism, behaviourism, semiotics (Cochinescu, 2008, cited by Ilie, 2015, p. 289).

The didactic communication can be either face to face or online. The online communication and information through the Internet have a number of strengths,

such as: the speed and efficiency of access to knowledge by relating to the most various types of contents; the information security through the principled connection to a multitude of sources; management of the information space, by obvious decrease of the costs; elimination of spatial determinations, the receiver being able to get the information from any possible place, with the condition of having the appropriate technical instruments; rapid interpellation, in real time, of the actors interested in the specific contents; exploitation of several types of learning environments (written text, sound background, imaging supports, static and dynamic sequences, virtual spatial-temporal structures, etc.); informational correlation, by involving various sources in generating or maintaining ideas, theses, opinions.

The communication skill is formed, practiced, adapted. In the online didactic communication, the main communication conditions, usually existing, remain valid: the connection to the partner and to the context; active engagement in communication and its support by appropriate relationships and empathy; varied realization; use of feedback.

Munteanu and Cuslii (2015, p. 426– our translation), considered that “the implementation of distance teaching involves a radical change in the way of teaching - not only the transfer of materials in the online environment, but also the rethinking/change of the approach to the learning process in such a way as to be functional”. The solutions are diverse, referring mainly to the adequacy of communication (increasing its flexibility, its interactivity).

Regarding the students' wishes, it is showed (Păunescu and others, 2011, p. 65) that the students' discourse is one focused on a better communication and involvement of the university in their own development. More than information, students need training, guidance, counselling.

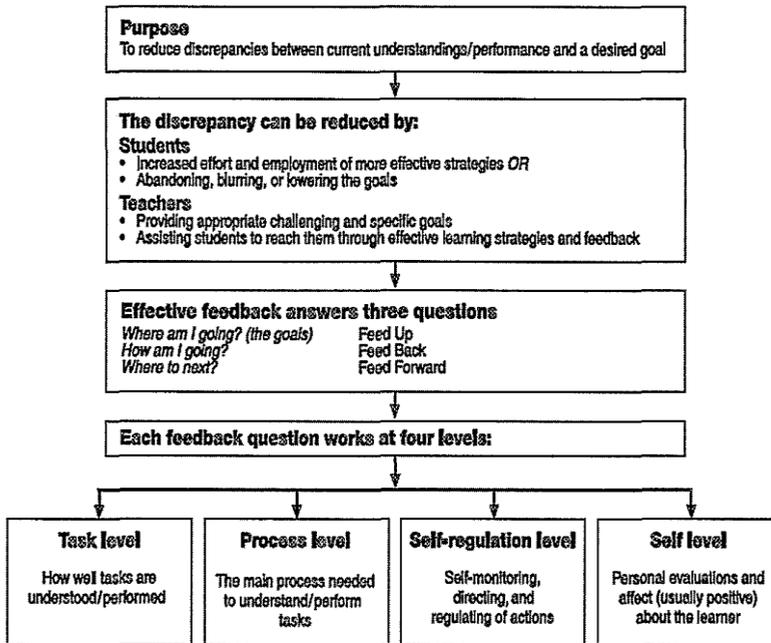
### **3. Clarifications on the notion and the feedback process**

One of the most well-known definitions of feedback is that, it represents the phenomenon by which, the receiver of a certain message will retransmit the information processed by him to the original sender (Corbalan, Kester, Van Merriënboer, 2008, pp. 733-756). The feedback is a tool used permanently, regardless of the field, both in personal and professional life. Also called retroaction, reverse retroaction, reverse connection, circular causality, closed causal chain, it is performed at the level of different systems (biological, human and technical), in order to maintain their stability and balance against the external influences. According to these specifications, the feedback is a reaction to maintain balance.

In education, the feedback used for teaching, in didactic communication is neutral, and in the assessment, it becomes appreciative. Giving feedback means giving others an efficient response, in order to communicate to them exactly what bothers us, how it affects us or what we want them to do. We must achieve this goal without harming the other person, counteracting the appearance of the defence effect, by referring to the concrete behaviour. The feedback is not a psychological analysis into the attitudes, motivations, abilities that underlie the other's behaviour. The feedback reaction must avoid criticism or praise, its wording must indicate, in an

objective and real way, an adequate, constructive reaction, capitalizing on the informational correlation.

Hattie and Timperley (2017) explained the strong impact that the feedback has on the academic learning and assessment, finding that it is used positively or negatively for regulation. A progressive, interesting model to remember (Figure no. 1) starts from Purpose, which leads to Adjustment (from teachers and students), through the Effectiveness of feedback in the Feed Up, Feedback, Feed Forward modes and reaches the Task, Process, Self-adjustment, Self independence levels.



**Figure 1. A model of feedback to enhance learning (Hattie and Timperley, 2017, p. 87)**

The role of feedback is multiple: it can re-balance, it can maintain a good mood or it can change the behaviour. The feedback allows the other person to receive a response about how she/he acted. Consequently, the feedback is constructive when it relates to the action itself, when it is descriptive.

According to Elena Joița (2003), the types of feedback are: insufficient or optimal or redundant; direct or indirect; simultaneous or subsequent or previous; verbal or nonverbal or para-verbal; positive (agreement) or negative (disagreement); limited (closed) or free (open). In our opinion, from the types of feedback mentioned above, useful in the face-to-face or online teaching activity are: the optimal, direct, simultaneous, verbal (because it is explicit), positive, free. In the online feedback, the modern means can be used, through: email, audio-video, screencasts, recycling written comments.

The conditions for an efficient feedback are also important in the online education. Giving an advice, making a survey or criticizing the behaviour is rarely efficient, because these situations should take place against the background of a friendly socio-affective climate. That is why the conditions for a genuine feedback are:

- keeping calm, positive, objective attitude;
- providing feedback immediately when the action/behaviour occurred or as close as possible to that moment - to eliminate some distortions and to avoid forgetting certain aspects;
- ensuring the availability to be listened to or to provide feedback, so that, the person who offers/receives to have time to channel his/her effort in this respect;
- socio-emotional security. The personal feedback contributes to forming the self-esteem, therefore a person is more receptive to it, when it is issued privately and not in public;
- providing feedback is done in our own name and from our point of view, in a custom way, without generalizations;
- if the feedback is unclear, that answer will be detailed by the clarification questions.

Referring to teachers, (Ahea and others, 2016, p. 38) showed that the „Most of lecturers are still continuing with the tradition form of feedback”. The mentioned authors confirm that providing positive feedback and choosing the moment accordingly are important.

When studying the information activity of students, other authors (Tănase, Ciacu, 2013), showed that when accessing the Facebook pages of universities, students prefer to provide simplistic, limited, closed feedback.

Besides the teacher, the student's colleagues play an important role, because the modern communication is multivariate, encouraging such flows. A meta-analysis by Huisman and others (2019) showed that the peer formative feedback of colleagues helps students to achieve better learning outcomes, especially in the development of competences to express themselves in a written manner.

#### **4. An example of a training platform - the Google classroom platform**

The Google classroom platform can be used in teaching for its main advantages (University of Craiova, 2020): time saving, ease/facilitation of training, teaching collaboration. The institutional features include: unlimited Gmail storage, anti-spam protection, built-in calendars, unlimited storage for creating, storing, and distributing documents using Google Drive (text, .pdf, or .doc files, .ppt presentations, spreadsheets, forms, videos, pictures). In the essence, the platform is structured on four components, which we considered in our ascertaining research.

## **5. Using the Google classroom platform. The axes of an empirical research**

At the end of the second semester, academic year 2019-2020, in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, at the University of Craiova, we conducted an empirical research on the impact of using the Google classroom platform in the training of future teachers. The main hypothesis advanced: the regular students in full-time education can adapt to the online training, if the quality communication and feedback are used. The secondary hypothesis: we assume the existence of certain advantages and disadvantages, from the perspective of students. The balance of elections leans more towards advantages. Having a descriptive and prescriptive epistemological character, the psycho-pedagogical disciplines are easily suitable for the online form of education.

The main research methodology included the Questionnaire-Based Survey, by valuing an assessment grid. Auxiliary recourse was made to the Focus-group and to the observation/self-observation of the behaviour. The subjects of the empirical research were students to full-time education, who accessed the platform for an academic semester, to participate in courses, seminars, evaluations in psycho-pedagogical disciplines. There were 103 participants: 58 first year students at the faculties of Letters and Sciences, the undergraduate cycle and 45 third year students at the faculties of Sciences, Computer Sciences, Mechanics, Electrical Engineering, Master's degree. The sample of 103 students was a natural one and included, for the most part, Romanian students and five foreign students from the Republic of Moldova and Serbia.

The 103 students accepted the invitation to enroll in the online education and participated in activities. After the end of the training activities, the number of the students who responded to the request to answer the questionnaire sent to all was 67 students, which means 60.57% of the total number of participating students. The request was to give a feedback on the online education, and the number of responses received confirms what Eraut (2006, p. 118) claimed, drawing the attention to the fact that we need more feedback on feedback.

Making a decreasing sampling, from the respondents group we randomly selected students to participate in two focus groups. According to the focus group methodology, we worked with small groups of students (ten participants from first year, twelve participants from third year) to discuss how they perceived the implementation of online education in the psycho-pedagogical disciplines.

## **6. Results obtained**

**6.1.** By applying the assessment grid, our goal was to develop and verify a series of criteria to identify the value/quality of online communication and feedback through the platform, in the training of students. The synthetic results obtained are presented in Table no. 1. In valuing the proposed features: 5 meant very much; 4– much; 3 – average; 2 – little, and 1– means very little and not at all. The overall rating for the Google classroom platform interface used for announcements, organizational communication was 3.9, so the rating is rather "much". The students

tend to check only the latest announcements, and their questions are sometimes redundant. Also, if there are questions in particular, from the two sources (joint communication in the classroom, individual communication) they choose to resort to the communication in private, losing from sight the common announcements.

**Table 1. Assessment of the Google classroom application (app.) by students**

Crt. No.	Features	The video app. used in the course - Google meet	Google classroom app. used at seminars-accessing classroom	App. used for assessment - continuous and final
1.	It was easy to access	4.4	4.2	3.8
2.	It was free, no cost generated	4.8	4.8	4.8
3.	It was safe in terms of internet browsing	4.7	4.9	4.6
4.	It respected the confidentiality of the student's data, as a user	4.9	4.9	4.6
5.	It allowed the personalization of the answer offered by the teacher to the student	3.5	4.8	4.0
6.	It facilitated the discussion of some topics with colleagues	4.0	4.1	3.9
7.	It helped in organizing the learning activity, by keeping the documents in the same place	3.0	4.2	4.3
8.	It facilitated teacher-student communication	4.0	4.6	4.2
9.	It allowed the questions to be solved within a predetermined time	2.7	4.3	4.2
10.	It is structured simply	4.5	4.5	4.0
11.	It uses templates, reuses, capitalizing on previous experiences	3.3	4.1	3.9
12.	It allows quick, real-time exchange of ideas	4.6	4.1	4.3
13.	It allows obtaining feedback from the teacher, knowing the result by the student	2.0	3.8	4.5
14.	It has flexibility in terms of the device used for connection	4.7	4.2	4.4
15.	It is accessible anywhere/anytime	4.2	3.8	4.2
16.	It is a motivating way	3.1	3.8	4.0
17.	It is creative	3.9	4.0	4.2
18.	It respects the student's own learning pace	4.3	4.1	4.4
19.	It is fun	3.5	4.0	3.8
20.	Avoid paper consumption	4.5	4.0	3.9
21.	It is useful	4.1	4.2	4.6

As indicated by the scores presented, in general, students appreciate the usefulness of platform as "much"- for the course and seminar and almost "very much" - for assessment. The lower scores assigned for some qualities proposed for assessment indicated that: the platform was difficult to access by some students (aspect directly proportional to the lack of digital skills, the insufficient practice in the use of communication technology). Also, the platform does not fully allow the personalization of the response provided by the teacher to the student (true when the number of students is high and the effort of teachers can not cover the need for feedback). The students insisted on this requirement, showing that they need more feedback, in order to better solve the tasks.

The debates with colleagues were conducted at a medium level. For students, the configuration of the platform and the way of working did not help them much in organizing the learning activity, by keeping the documents in the same place, because they did not access the settings and the possibilities of organizing the documents. This aspect correlates with the organized or disorganized learning style, with the possession of informational management competences.

For the feature of accessibility anywhere/anytime, it was found that it is faster, stable, the access from the tablet/laptop, rather than from the smartphone. There are material limitations students have complained about (the lack of means, smartphones, Internet connection), that makes the accessibility to be average. Due to its algorithmic character, focused on solving tasks, required learning effort, the lack of real interactions, this way is considered by students as average motivating, creative, fun. Even if, in most cases, the editing of seminar or assessment documents was used, there were students who preferred the handwriting of papers, especially in exams. Their products were scanned, photographed and then sent to the teacher. The motivation was related to the previous style/preference, to the need to design, to the speed with which they could perform the task, in relation to the means of transmission used. Because the formulated ideas were elaborated in working variants, not directly, paper is consumed.

But, the most frequently reported issues referred to difficulties in understanding how the platform works, especially in terms of how to complete the topics and transmit them to the teacher, the feeling of insecurity they had related to the exchange of messages with the other participants, especially with the teacher, the correctness of the solutions.

**6.2.** The two organized focus groups allowed us to record a series of comments, proposals, criticisms, additions from students: about the positive aspects, which determine them to consider the platform as appropriate, about the difficulties encountered, and about the possibility of continuing its use in the future.

The synthesized positive aspects: they are attracted to technology, they relate themselves to the use of online education as a challenge to meet, the platform facilitates information, encourages the expression of opinions, they benefit from a pleasant, secure climate, because they are in their own environment/home, the application configuration is organized, efficient.

The negative aspects or the difficulties encountered were related to the fact that the distance communication technology requires a lot of visual perception, concentration of attention, and, in terms of the effort required, the topics they receive are in a large amount, they work more than eight hours a day, which adversely affects the well-being, health, leading to overwork, tiredness. To the key question related to the possibility and usefulness of the platform in the case of psycho-pedagogical disciplines in the future, the students' answers confirmed that they are willing to continue using it. The partial acceptances indicated to us not to be used exclusively, it is efficient in the higher education and only for certain theoretical disciplines, from the socio-human domain, if the teachers will communicate clearly, they will give them an optimal feedback.

### **7. The advantages-disadvantages ratio in the online activities. Comments following the observation of students' behaviour. Solutions**

Our observations focused on the forms of communication and feedback, at verbal, nonverbal, para-verbal level.

#### **7.1. The communication and verbal feedback**

**7.1.1. The oral communication and feedback.** Communicating with a large number of students in video conference is difficult, if you want to achieve an authentic, multidirectional, efficient exchange of messages. In the online education, the teacher must be more actively involved in his role as moderator, because the organization of communication does not happen naturally, as in the face-to-face meetings, which benefit from nonverbal exchanges. Therefore, there is a need for order, clarity in communication. Explaining the technical rules is important to counteract the appearance of the background noises microphones effect/overlaps, when the students participate at the same time, making their views known.

Various reasons of students such as the need for socialization, the relatively new nature of audio-video communication, the responsibility of assuming the role of student, the accessibility of communication have contributed to a sustained participation of students, even when they declared there were other additional tasks (e.g. job tasks). This participation is a gladdening aspect.

**7.1.2. The written communication and feedback:** The negative tendency of students to copy, to take from others, was prevented by the way of formulating tasks and by checking for plagiarism. The students consider as a benefit to visualize their tasks/work (the accomplished one or scheduled one). Another beneficial element is the individualization of feedback, by transmitting private comments from teacher to student or vice versa, in a particular way.

The written communication is preserved, and the teachers can post common or individualized instructions, common or differentiated tasks. Insufficiently accomplished is the sharing of messages with the other classmates. The students access the public comments (of the teacher and other colleagues), but the comments of colleagues were the source of some contagions, ambiguities, distortions of

meanings, redundancies. Interesting and different from the classical assessments, this possibility of the student to retract the written document appears. If the students are unsure and withdraw homework or, moreover, improve it, it will be sent back to the teacher, but before the deadline.

The large amount of information, the volume, the difficulty of the tasks, the existence of deadlines require more concern from the students in information management and quality to ensure the rhythmicity of access, the compliance with the deadlines, rigorous analysis of messages, requirements, decanting the essentials in relation to the details, the use of other information and content resources, the systematization, organization, labelling of the documents, the application of adjustments, completions requested by the teacher. The written communication, which is objective, can be preserved, is the most frequently used form, especially in assessment. It goes through transformations, compared to the one in the classic format, face to face. In the online conditions, it is necessary to carefully check its quality, the focus on quality, not quantity, and the identification of the main mistakes at the level of students imposes several conditions that would ensure quality: the spelling and careful correction of the messages, because the errors diminish the credibility of the message, the competence of the sender; the rational use of the expressiveness offered with the help of word processing; assuming the relevance, responsibility, honesty and authenticity in adding the profile, in attitudes, beliefs, ideas formulated, in the comments made; expressing in an elegant, polite manner, favourable to a good interrelationship, accessing, using, transmitting secure websites, non-virus documents, as they protect the personal and communication partners' information; observance of some conventions, norms, of the formal elaboration frameworks, of some moments of time, schedule in the exchange of messages, for the delimitation of the professional life from the personal life.

**7.2. The nonverbal and para-verbal communication and feedback** are neglected in the online education; they remain in the background. The distributive of attention is different in the case of the audio-video mode, it is lower than in the face-to-face manner. Nonverbally, the communication is focused only on the mimicry, but the other elements – the gestures, posture, outfit are insufficiently captured. We also add the fact that we cannot talk about proxemics, because the teachers and students are clearly spatially separated. The existence of audio-video means affects/distorts or does not maximize some para-verbal characteristics of the teacher or students: the pronunciation/accent, voice intensity, volume, pitch, diction, rhythm, pauses. The students really feel the social isolation, the strong formal character of the interactions. Therefore, the communication loses its expressiveness, partially.

## **8. Conclusions and proposals**

The empirical study carried out confirmed to us that the students in full-time education can adapt to the online training. This adaptation is progressive, it involves training, exercise, tolerance of uncertainties, capitalization of advantages, acceptance of certain limits, prevention/improvement of the unsuccessful aspects.

The students' proposals indicated solutions related to the use of an efficient communication, sustained feedback, from both parties: the teacher and his students.

The remote communication is much more neutral, blurry than the face-to-face communication. The written or video feedback does not have the same (assertive) power as the face-to-face feedback. But, by diminishing the limitations of time and space, more students participate in the didactic activity and increase the degree of solving the topics/seminar tasks. The students benefit from the evaluative feedback, know their grades for the topics or final evaluations, receive individualized comments about them, can consult the evaluation grids.

We consider that, beyond the analysis made, the good practices in the field of communication and feedback have effects on improving the quality of the higher education, extending to other aspects: the motivational status, social manifestation, intellectual development of students, perspectives of professional integration, etc. Monitoring the quality of the training remains a desideratum, achieved by the following processes: a) planning and effective achievement of the expected learning outcomes; b) monitoring the results; c) internal evaluation of the results; 4) external evaluation of the results; d) the continuous improvement of the education outcomes.

Having a descriptive and prescriptive character, the psycho-pedagogical disciplines are suitable for the online education, more than the practical disciplines, but we must not neglect the difficulties found, the contextualizations reported, therefore, a combination of the classical and online education could be the key to success. In the future and to complete the presented approach, it is necessary a mirror perspective of the teachers and students, because the effectiveness of the communication or feedback, the continuous development of digital skills refers to both actors and requires practice, they being absolutely necessary skills in academia.

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