

FROM TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION TO COMMUNICATION IN THE VIRTUAL SPACE

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Abstract

The study aims to address the issue of communication based on a twofold analysis, encompassing face-to-face and virtual communication, the latter being mediated by the new communication technologies. The general framework of the current digital society, as well as the specific context of the Coronavirus pandemic have imposed the implementation of new technologies in the teaching process; daily routine activities are now taking place not only directly, but also exclusively online or in the blended learning mode.

We intend to outline this evolution, mainly focusing on the current situation, which we shall analyze taking into consideration the possibilities of the Romanian schools to meet the demands of online activities, as they are facing the specific challenges of this type of communication. The review of recent studies and reports allows us to diagnose the ways of setting up online communication and interaction at the level of the pre-university education system, and based on our own teaching experience, we shall be able to perform a critical analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of online communication in the academic environment, more specifically within the pre-service teacher training programme.

Key words: *Traditional classroom communication; Online communication; Virtual learning environment.*

1. Introduction

Human communication is one of the fundamental forms of human interaction, taking place between an individual and those around him/her, through symbols and generalised social meanings, seeking to achieve either stability or behavioral change at the individual or group level. Admittedly, we cannot envisage the efficient development of any activity outside human communication (Păun, 1982, p. 151).

The act of communication can be rightly considered a process of transmitting information, ideas and feelings (attitudes, opinions) from one individual to another, from one individual to a social group and from one group to another (Haineş, 1998, p. 8).

The term "communication" originates in the Latin "communis", which means "to share", "to be in a relationship", and began to be used in our country starting from the fourteenth century, when it was closer to the meaning of "to share", "to

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share with several people". From the sixteenth century onwards, the term is associated with a new meaning: "to transmit", due to the advent of the post office and of the road system. Later, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the emergence and development of modern means of communication (train, car, plane, telegraph, telephone, radio, cinema, television), "communication" came to mean, in fact, "transmission", i.e. "dissemination" (Drăgan, 1996, p. 8).

There has been a host of definitions of communication, depending on the scope of the different scientific disciplines, on the theoretical models adopted and on the methodological approaches.

Thus, in the Romanian explanatory dictionary - *DEX* (1996), the entry "to communicate" reads as: "to make known, to give news, to inform, to say", "to get in touch, in contact with...", "to talk to...", "to be in touch with..., to lead to...".

The *World Book Dictionary* (1993, p. 420) defines "communication" as:

- Delivery of information or news orally or in writing;
- Letter, message, information or news;
- A means of passing from one to another; a link;
- The act of transmitting; transfer.

According to the *Dicționar de pedagogie (Dictionary of Pedagogy)* (Schaub, Zenke, 2001, p. 43), "communication" is "the social process of understanding people based on the transmission of information, through language, facial expressions, gestures or other signaling and technical systems."

"Communication" is also defined from a sociological perspective. Thus, the *Dicționar de sociologie (Dictionary of Sociology)* defines "communication" as a "process of sending a message to a receiver and transmitting it in a coded manner using a channel" (1993, p. 124).

For Escarpit, "communicating does not only mean sending and receiving, but participating, on all levels, to an infinite of various exchanges that overlap and interfere with one another" (1980, p. 128).

Other scholars, notably, Anzieu and Martin, define "communication" as "the set of physical and psychological processes, through which the operation of relating to one or more people is performed, in order to achieve certain objectives." (1973, p. 76).

Communication therefore presupposes the establishment of a relationship, due to which the communicator finds the other in his/her inner self, just as s/he, the communicator, can be found in the other. Each one of us will always be completed with the part which s/he has taken over, even unconsciously, at the moment of communication with our peers.

To communicate means "to be with ...", "to share (with others)", "to achieve communion of thought, feeling, action" (Cucoș, 1998, p. 223). This meaning presupposes the consideration of certain aspects (Cucoș, 1998, pp. 223-224):

- The human dimension, as a whole, is intrinsic to the informative dimension, which, if received and correctly codified, becomes communication;
- Communicating means much more than mastering words; we can speak without communicating, and "share" with others without uttering a word;

- The absence of any communicative intention does not cancel communication. Indecision, anxiety, indifference, helplessness, etc. can be transmitted to the hearers, having no intention to do so.

2. From traditional to virtual communication

Communicative competence, in the traditional model, involves a combination of knowledge, abilities/skills and various personality traits. As a rule, it is reduced to the simple transfer of information from the teacher to the students, who would return it to the teacher through various means of feedback.

The knowledge society and the rapid evolution of science and technology have forced both categories of actors in the teaching and learning process to timely adapt to the demands and standards of the labour market. Thus, more and more teachers and students began to use different social networks, e-learning or home schooling, reaching a kind of hybridisation of the way information is transmitted and of the training and development of skills, abilities, attitudes, skills and competences. The virtual classroom (stemming from the Latin "virtus", meaning "power", "force"), has become a cyberspace increasingly sought after and explored by both students and teachers. The digitisation of information and of the education system requires specific technical communication skills for teachers and students alike.

The report of the *Commonwealth of Learning*, coordinated by Farrel (2001, in Cucoş, 2018), sums up the main trends of virtual education, as follows:

1. Extending the opportunities for achieving virtual education. More and more education institutions of initial, basic or continuous training are developing complementary, auxiliary or independent structures that belong to the virtual sphere.

2. The conversion of information and communication networks and technologies into entities for educational purposes. The design of these structures incorporates and explicitly shows educational features so as to maximise the formative value. We can rightly say that a whole industry of devices, programs and digital structures has been developing.

3. Inventing and promoting new pedagogical toolkits that support or are delivered through virtual education networks. These toolkits show a high degree of transferability, becoming functional in different cultural contexts and converting multiple curriculum content.

4. The development of a new pedagogical culture for supporting and advising those who are trained in virtual or online networks. The procedural and methodological advantage, of psycho-pedagogical nature, is resized to map the new realities.

5. Development, testing and implementation of new organisational and learning management models under the impact of the new technologies. The organisational structures are revamped or replaced by new entities specialised in the management of virtually delivered knowledge.

6. Quality assurance and control by issuing clear formulas for accreditation, monitoring and validation of virtual training courses and pathways. Quality is a

dimension that cannot be overlooked. Legislative, deontological and teaching norms come to axiologically guide the new formulas for implementing education.

The virtual educational environment is mainly featured by the following (Ceobanu, 2016, pp. 25-27):

- It is an information space specially designed for this purpose;
- It is a social space;
- It is based on representations of educational objects;
- Students - as users of these spaces - play an active role;
- It is not limited to distance learning;
- It integrates various tools;
- It overlaps with the physical environment.

Online (virtual) communication is a relatively recent form of communication, which emerged as a consequence of the development of information technology in the general context of a society where the need for prompt, fast, effective interaction has led to the development and improvement of communication methods that reduce the distance between people, are less time consuming and involve lower costs.

According to the *Dicționar praxiologic de pedagogie (Praxiological Dictionary of Pedagogy)* (Bocoș, coord., 2016), communication represents either oral or written information, and educational communication, as a form of interpersonal communication, is "a set of interpersonal processes involving educational agents directly involved in educational approaches and in which interpersonal exchanges of messages, meanings, decisions, value judgments, emotional states and influences related to educational processes are made, with the help of components/elements of their own communicative repertoires, in virtual/online environments, through information and communication systems", electronic media that allow for the achievement of virtual classroom communication, being made up of, according to the same author, electronic books (e-books) and other materials in electronic format, e-mail, instant messaging, educational platforms (Learning Management System), forums, videoconferencing, social networks, etc.

As per the definition of "virtual communication", this is a specific form of communication, mediated by technical means. Below, we summarize some of its characteristics (see Șchiopoiu-Burlea, 2007):

- It is an interactive process, mediated by information technology, based on which a relationship is established between the sender (of the message) and the receiver (its recipient) in a relatively short time, even if the message is not sent directly to the recipient;
- It is a complex process, determined by the diversity of competence profiles of the members of the virtual group, by the instability and little delimitation of the roles of these members;
- It is a limited process, which represents a paradox, determined by the lack of expressiveness of the message in the absence of face-to-face communication;
- When performed in a group, virtual communication is based on cooperation, collaboration between its members.

We can also mention some important roles of virtual communication, as they emerge from the extensive research conducted on this topic (Äkkinen, 2005):

- It facilitates the exchange of information;
- It allows for obtaining/offering emotional support;
- It offers the possibility of establishing friendships;
- It is an opportunity to relax;
- It allows for the expression of common interests and hobbies;
- It facilitates the practice of digital skills.

The use of new information technologies in education has a rich history and manifests itself in several forms (Michel, 1999, in Cucos, 2018):

- computer-assisted education and learning have been an established practice for several decades now;
- electronic courses and teaching programmes can be stored on the web or on CDs;
- flexible self-training and self-learning pathways, adapted to individual, personal interests;
- distance learning modes;
- open and flexible training that emphasises the diversity of access routes for the development of knowledge or skills of individual learners or groups;
- multimedia-assisted training;
- training and/or asynchronous learning by relativising the training structures to the available timeframe of the actors involved;
- interactive training that emphasises the collective process of learning and training;
- cooperative training, based on the interactions between different groups of trainees, trainers, tutors;
- educational databases, designed as tools for capitalisation, educational resources, mostly digital in nature;
- education platforms and international dissemination systems (for example, the European EUROPACE system);
- virtual universities, supported by traditional universities or having gained autonomy.

A number of positive and negative aspects of several instances (stages) of education virtualisation can be highlighted, as it can be seen in Table 1 below (Cucos, 2018):

Table 1. Virtualisation– advantages and disadvantages

Stages	Strengths	Weaknesses
Traditional education system	Pedagogical monitoring and supervision is mandatory	There are no teaching pathways explicitly adapted to students Motivation is achieved through coercion Individual work

Distance learning	The student's work is done at his/her home place	Supervision is not mandatory Motivation is extrinsic due to the relatively high costs Individual work There is no adaptation to the student's needs
Computer-assisted learning	The student's work is done in his/her natural environment Activities are adapted to the student	Supervision is not mandatory Motivation is generated by costs Individual work It is dependent on technology
E-learning	Aiming at the maximum individualisation of the formative pathway The student's work is done at his/her usual place Adapting the content to the student Teamwork	It is dependent on state-of-the-art technology

3. Advantages and disadvantages of online (virtual) communication

Like any form of communication, online communication has advantages and limitations, as well as risks. We mention some of the advantages of virtual communication, on account of group work (Dragusha, 2012):

- Less time consuming and increased productivity;
- Expanding marketing opportunities;
- Accessing a wider base of people with skills and talents;
- Lower costs;
- Increased satisfaction with the activity performed;
- Organisational flexibility;
- Innovation;
- Increased effort and performance;

We can add other advantages of online communication to the list (<http://www.bangthetable.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-online-communication-2/>) such as:

- Flexibility (it can be accessed 24 hours a day and from anywhere, if there is an Internet connection);
- It allows for the manifestation of people who are more reserved in case of direct, face-to-face communication;
- Unlike face-to-face discussions, online communication event can be stored and retrieved later;
- It encourages reflection;
- It offers the possibility of being exposed to real-life purpose experiences;
- It offers numerous and different possibilities of manifestation: the expression of short questions or comments, but also of some detailed reflections;

- It allows for the establishment of virtual communities, which provide support to their members;
- It is a suitable environment for moments of suspense, surprise, because we cannot always anticipate to which direction the discussion is going, it enhances incidental learning.

One of the scholars mentioned above (Dragusha, 2012) also identifies the disadvantages of virtual group communication:

- Faulty communication;
- Lack of competence for some of the group members;
- Feeling of isolation experienced by some of the group members;
- Lack of commitment;
- Inefficiency of collaboration;
- Lack of visibility of the group project/product;
- Logistics-related difficulties;
- Lack of transparency of the group's activity;
- Risk of conflicts due to intercultural differences, communication breakdowns, etc.

We fully round the list of disadvantages of virtual communication with other examples (<http://www.bangthetable.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-online-communication-2/>):

- In the absence of direct contact between those who communicate and, therefore, in the absence of the nonverbal elements of communication, it is possible that misunderstandings may occur;
- There is a risk of information overload, an extremely large volume being difficult to track, which can cause stress to participants;
- Discussions may be interrupted or blocked by those who deviate from the topic or subject;
- Sometimes there may be delays in receiving/giving an answer, communication breakdowns being likely to occur;
- It takes longer than the direct verbal exchange, and unanswered questions might be left behind;
- Some people prefer to study individually, isolating themselves and not participating in the discussions.

4. Critical analysis of the possibility of online learning and communication in the Romanian education system during the pandemic period

In the general context generated by the pandemic, the entire Romanian education system had to quickly find solutions for carrying out the teaching activities online. Very recent studies have compiled statistics on the main difficulties and problems that teachers, students and their parents have been facing.

Thus, according to a study conducted by a team of specialists in May 2020 (Botnariuc, Cucos, Glava *et al.*), following the measures imposed by the Ministry, based on the reality of the massive infection of the population (including the school

population) with the new Coronavirus, the Romanian schools were forced to switch exclusively to online communication. Under the circumstances, a series of logistical, pedagogical, technical and content-related hindrances in different fields and subjects inevitably appeared.

To support remote learning activities, teachers and students have used several specific means, the most common of which are: basic/already known applications for asynchronous group communication, such as Whatsapp, Facebook, Messenger, etc., phone calls/SMS/channel communication with each student; use of open educational resources and digital content, such as information and illustration sites, online libraries, simulations, educational software, virtual labs, virtual museums, Digitaliada, LearningApps; specialised e-learning platforms - Moodle, Google Classroom, Edmodo, Easyclass etc., applications for synchronous group communication via video/video conferencing, such as Webex, Zoom, Meet, Teams, Skype. To these are added online tools and applications for learning activities (e.g. Kahoot, Padlet, Bubbl.us, Dotstorming, Wordwall, etc.), as well as the eTwinning platform for complex collaborative projects.

The authors of the afore mentioned study (2020, p. 10) put forward a list of teaching and learning activities, which are rather limited due to the difficulties related to online communication:

- Personalised support for students with special learning needs;
- Authentic communication (genuinely human relationships);
- Monitoring the pace of learning;
- Feedback for prompt correction or confirmation of knowledge acquisition;
- Explanations for understanding concepts, relationships, phenomena;
- Individual counseling.

The main difficulties encountered in carrying out distance activities, mentioned by the authors, run as follows (Botnariuc, Cucos, Glava *et al.* 2020, p. 12):

- Lack of digital skills;
- Technical difficulties (platforms to be installed, not working);
- Limited Internet access;
- Lack of an adequate PC;
- Lack of educational content (digital resources) in the field;
- Lack of appropriate tools for the teaching-learning-assessment of the subject;
- Lack of tools for classroom management, feedback and evaluation;
- Lack of pedagogical support for carrying out learning activities that are sufficiently effective and/or attractive to all students;
- Lack of time for understanding and proper use of tools and digital resources;
- Lack of motivation;
- Limitations due to the specificities of the subject (learning activities in the subject(s) that I teach cannot be easily translated into distance learning activities).

More difficulties in carrying out online teaching activities could be listed - teachers also complain about (see Botnariuc, Cucuș, Glava *et al.*, 2020, p.43):

- In general, parents cannot provide the necessary support;
- In the current situation, students can no longer be motivated to learn;
- Students are assigned more homework than usual;
- Too many applications and platforms confuse students;
- Students like to learn using digital tools and resources;
- Students manage, to a large extent, to work independently;
- Students do not follow the established rules;
- Students may not be paying attention to the lesson;
- Students may not be actively involved in the class;
- The prolonged period of suspension of face-to-face courses will have irreversible effects (e.g. the impossibility of bridging the gaps caused by keeping behind the existing lesson planning).

In what follows, we shall highlight the main aspects of the learning activities, and, implicitly, of communication in the online version in the academic environment, especially in the field of pre-service teacher training; the conclusions and comments are based on our personal experience gained in the interaction with the pre-service teachers in this period.

We shall use the SWOT analysis to capture positive and negative aspects, alongside opportunities and threats (Table 2).

Table 2. SWOT analysis of online communication in the academic environment

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -access from different locations; - exploitation of the advantages offered by the new information technologies, of the internet; - the possibility to provide written feedback for students' performance in relation to the tasks/assignments, collectively and, especially, individually; -easy provision of course materials, documentary materials; - the possibility to monitor the pace and degree of accomplishment of the proposed tasks; -performing formative assessment throughout the process, as well as summative assessment; - the possibility to keep up with one's own work/learning pace; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -it largely depends on the Internet connection; -the emotional dimension of communication is affected; -the role of nonverbal communication is diminished or even cancelled; -vertical communication (teacher-student) prevails to the detriment of horizontal communication (student-student); -difficulty in providing direct, immediate feedback; -teacher-student interaction cannot always be achieved in real time; -class/group interaction is scarce or even non-existent; -difficulty in or even impossibility to capitalise on cooperation in performing tasks in real time.

- facilitation of self-assessment, self-regulation of one's own activity, task performance;
- encouraging the development of an individual work style, of autonomous learning;
- stimulation of self-educational concerns of the students/Master's students;
- allowing for the practice of digital skills.

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attendance by certain categories of students who generally experience difficulty in participating in direct activities; -can be a suitable way for students who show poor management of stress or emotions, the computer/phone screen can act as an effective "shield" in this case; - the possibility to go through the documentary materials, the course materials, etc. to solve the proposed tasks depending on the time availability of each student. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the lack of direct visual contact between the interlocutors can affect the quality and efficiency of communication; -emphasising the informative dimension of the training of pre-service teachers to the detriment of the formative one, of the training of the competences necessary for a teacher; - the simulation of some training/educational situations cannot replace the practice in real-life conditions; -communication between students, difficult to achieve during the activity, can affect the exchange of ideas, opinions; the students are unlikely to use the group as a reference in evaluating the results of their own activity; -in the case of home task assignments or exams that do not take place in real time, there is a risk of plagiarism, or of the task being performed by persons other than the students; -the message may be distorted, depending on the communication channel chosen.

5. Conclusions

The current period poses challenges to the education systems, in which equitable access to (quality) education seems to prevail as a priority direction for improvement (Schleicher, 2020). The findings of this research point out to the fact that the Romanian education system has several vulnerabilities, and the suspension of classes seems to make things even worse.

As it could be observed from our analysis, online communication has a number of advantages, benefits, features, which recommend it as a useful alternative in various educational, training and learning situations. Obviously, as in any situation, there is the other side of the coin, namely, a series of shortcomings, limitations, which, depending on the perspective, i.e. the angle from which the analysis is performed, can be significant.

We consider that, in the case of online communication, the written form of communication is better achieved than it could be done in the situation of direct, face-to-face communication. Thus, the teacher can more easily distribute informative materials, course materials, homework, task assignments, can provide individualised feedback to each student, helping them to carry out the learning activity and to develop an autonomous learning style. In turn, students have the opportunity to access the materials more easily, without being conditioned by the classroom environment. In addition, virtual libraries, containing books in digital format, offer access to many other sources of information.

On the other hand, in the case of online communication, its oral form is deficient, compared to the oral version of direct communication. Intercommunication, interaction, interrelationship have seriously been affected in the case of communication taking place in the virtual environment.

Our critical analysis, oriented to online communication in the academic environment, allows us to conclude that in the complex process of developing teaching skills, digital skills, the use of new information and communication technologies, both for documentation and information purposes, as well as to integrate them effectively in the teaching activities or to replace the direct activities carried out in the classroom by the ones carried out in the virtual classroom, these should represent an important dimension of the competence profile. It is true that this form of communication cannot be capitalised in any context related to the initial professionalisation of teachers, but if developed out of necessity in the Coronavirus situation, it can subsequently become a form that can be used concomitantly or alternatively with direct face-to-face communication.

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