The human side of e-learning: Real people subjective experiences in virtual classrooms

Silvina Crenzel[1], *Francisca Cruz* [2], *Vera Nojima* [1]

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro[1], Fundação Getúlio Vargas –Rio[2]

Key words: *Human relations, subjectivity, e-learning environments*

Abstract:

This paper is based on a study of the subjective aspects of the student/e-learning platform tutor relationship. To find out how people feel in the role of 'e-students' or 'e-tutors', we have analyzed a set of testimonies collected through fifty five interviews. The interviewees were invited to speak and write about what they feel as e-learning subjects. Through their discourse, we could identify what kind of virtual-human relationships they have developed in this kind of environment. As well, we could learn their fears, gratifications, insecurities, frustrations and wishes when involved in courses that, instead of chalk and a blackboard in classes with lots of other people, they use the mouse, keyboard and PC screens in the privacy of their homes, or after hours at work, to achieve a diploma or a certificate, or to teach.

1 Introduction

The first image that comes to mind for some people when asked about how they picture an e-learning situation is one of tired individuals sitting in front of a computer at 5 A.M, or late at night, trying to study on their own while reading a paper displayed on the screen and, eventually, falling asleep at the keyboard. Other people, like those who have some experience of this kind, do not imagine a "nerd" facing a computer or typing like crazy, but still imagine a person alone in front of a computer, reading, thinking and writing.

We mention the sort of mental images people have regarding e-learning situations to bring up the subject we wish to discuss: who is actually involved in e-learning processes? At first glance it could seem to many people – and per our research, it certainly does – that e-learning is about people using computerized technologies to learn. In other words it could be translated as learning situations in which the actors are a person and a computer. Naturally, this leads to the idea of HCI – Human Computer Interaction – as what lies beneath e-learning structures. While that might be the most common way people think about e-learning, we believe that it has to be made very clear that, in fact, the computer here is just a mediator, and not the other end of the relationship: not the professor, the tutor or a classmate. In e-learning environments the computer is the tool that allows two or more people to create a learning situation. When we look at it this way it is easy to realize that e-learning is not about HCI – Human Computer Interaction-- but about Human-Human-Interaction MEDIATED by the use of computers [1]. In other words: e-learning is about people, about real people interacting in many kinds of ways, but, still, flesh and bones people who have good and bad days, who get sick and have problems at work or at home and still, like in traditional schools, have homework to do or meetings to attend, such as previously arranged chats with classmates or a tutor.

Having that in mind we started research about what people who deal with e-learning at both ends feel in the role of e-learning subjects. Our study focused on a group of individuals who participate in e-learning courses, both as tutors and students, who were contacted through e-learning platforms and forums. They were asked to talk about their subjective experiences, their feelings, their frustrations and gratifications while studying or teaching through this learning modality.

In this paper we summarize the most important and recurrent issues our interviewees brought up regarding how they feel while teaching or studying online.

2 About the recent e-learning boom

In the past few years the amount of people using e-learning platforms has dramatically grown around the world. The sophistication of digital communication technologies, and the evolution of Internet tools and services, have provided the ground for this growth.

> Internet has affected all industrial and commercial activity and accelerated e-learning growth. Due to cost, time, or flexibility for designer courses and learners, e-learning has been adopted by corporations as an alternative training method. E-learning effectiveness evaluation is vital, and evaluation criteria are diverse. A large effort has been made regarding e-learning effectiveness evaluation (...) [2]

As a result of this e-learning "boom," a lot is being researched and invested to meet the growing demand of tools and services related to this learning environment. The development of new technologies and improvement of e-learning platforms design is the goal of the great majority of studies, concerns and investments in this field.

2.1 The e-learning subjects

Among all the research and investment being done to keep up with the growing demand upon and interest in e-learning, very little has been found in the literature about studies focusing on the people involved in e-learning processes [1]. In other words, the needs and feelings of the people using e-learning platforms have often been neglected by most investigations in this area. Yet the human beings behind the computer screens, both students and tutors, are the reason why e-learning exists.

3 The Research

For our study we have collected testimonies through interviews and questionnaires. Their responses were analyzed using discourse analysis techniques [3].

A group of fifty five subjects were invited to express their feelings and write about their best and worst online experiences while using e-learning environments. The responses do not reflect the feelings triggered by a specific kind of platform, as the interviewees belong to different schools and/or on-line discussion forums on e-learning.

3.1 Research subjects profile

The forty five “e-students” and ten “e-tutors” interviewed for this study were both women and men, ranging in age between 20 and 65 years old. To participate they all had to have at least 4 months of e-learning experience and were all Portuguese speaking, mostly Brazilian or Portuguese citizens.

3.2 Main findings

- **About distance and closeness: Student feelings**

What seems to be the most important or outstanding of the positive feelings that have been described in detail by the majority of the interviewed students, is the great sense of friendship and closeness they develop with classmates and tutors. Although we only interviewed people who had managed to study using an e-learning platform through a significant period of time, this reported closeness opposes the idea that e-learning often fails due to student isolation and lack of “real world school” interaction, mentioned in many academic papers and books [4, 5, 6].

One emblematic case in this regard was of a female student who was taking an e-learning course to become an e-learning tutor herself. During part of her course she had to travel to a foreign country where she spent several months. She was five hours ahead in time, and the on-line meetings with the class ended up being scheduled in the middle of her night (and she needed to awaken to get ready for work soon after the on-line activities were over). She reported that it was due to the warmth of some e-classmates and the tutor who supported and encouraged her to participate in every session that she could make it through the end of the course. She said she never felt lonely or isolated while interacting with the e-learning platform or classmates through asynchronous or synchronous conversations and meetings.

Like many others who reported a sense of friendship and closeness in e-learning courses, this woman was already used to on-line conversations via instant messaging tools. Interestingly, not everyone was. Some other students who reported the same sense of closeness were not instant messaging or chat room users.

- **About distance and closeness: Tutors’ feelings**

All ten interviewed tutors were unanimous when referring to this issue: they never felt lonely or isolated while working as e-learning professors or moderators. They all reported to be very comfortable in such a position. Just like their students, they also seem to feel the virtual space of the “e-class," and even the “virtual professor’s meeting rooms,” as a very intimate and friendly one.

Many also mentioned that they had developed wonderful friendships all over the country and abroad thanks to this learning modality. Half of them actually wrote that they just love this teaching modality, and the separation or distance from their pupils was never a problem or even a nuisance.

The most expressive example was reported by one tutor who received two dozen roses and a birthday card digitally signed by 95% of the students of one of her e-classes. Her feelings can be translated by the message posted in the "social" forum of the class:

> *Dear class, hello!*
> *I have just received flowers and a beautiful card from you. I loved it. I'm extremely happy. More and more I convince myself that there is nothing about distance* **(a)** *in this learning modality.*
> *I'll be back with you in awhile. I need some time to recover from the emotional effect of this surprise.*
> *I love you all* [1]

(a) In Portuguese, e-learning is "***ensino a distancia***", that literally translates as: *learning from a distance* or *distant learning*

To some very shy professors, e-learning was the solution to a terrible problem as they were willing to teach but just couldn't stand the idea of facing a 40 or 50 people class. This modality allows them to teach comfortably, and even be funny without the (perceived) risk of making fools of themselves. For them, there is no better way to interact with a class.

- **About fears, frustrations and worries: Students feelings**

Some 25% of the interviewed students mentioned the fear of expressing doubts openly in the e-class forums, similar to the fear of misspelling and making grammar mistakes, and appearing "less intelligent or silly" to their classmates, as even the most insignificant questions could stay registered in writing "forever."

Another very common feeling that was reported is that some students thought their tutors "didn't like them", and as they never actually saw or heard the voice inflection of the tutor when they received a negative comment, they felt very insecure and never knew how to respond to such situations. Not being able to see the "others" during synchronous conversations and on-line meetings seemed to bother many students. The students most frequently mentioned frustration in regard to situations when they did not receive quick answers to questions or doubts.

- **About fears, frustrations and worries: Tutors' feelings**

Tutors who participated in this study mainly mentioned feelings of frustration regarding the response of some students who do not seem to "get it." For instance, even after the tutor had done everything they could do for a student, some still wouldn't understand what they were supposed to do as their "homework."

Another recurring complaint of tutors is the frustration felt when very few students showed up in on-line meetings. Some even reported feeling rejected by a class when many students did not inform them in advance that they would not be able to participate in on-line activities and meetings. The same goes for classes where dropout rates were very high and students did not bother to write that they were leaving the course, let alone explain why they were abandoning it. "As the statistics routinely show, dropout rates and failure to complete the required work is

[1] Original in Portuguese- free translation

a persistent problem" [7]. This has been mentioned as happening mainly in free courses. Tutors feel that it seems like the fact of not "costing" any money minimizes the real value of the course to the pupils.

4 Discussion

E-learning environments are often perceived as very friendly virtual spaces. To many people the lack of physical interaction is not a problem. On the contrary, it can even be the solution to a shyness problem – shy students and shy professors – just as it is for the lack of time and physical distance from the institution where the desired course is been offered.

To improve the subjective experiences of people in e-learning situations, some changes on interface design, plus image display and sound technological evolution, could be implemented. Those items have been suggested by many of the interviewees. On the other hand, some students and tutors are very comfortable with the simplest tools and technologies that are available nowadays, like keyboards and clean white screens. Some people, in fact, strongly react to technological changes for e-learning platforms. Some tutors and several students wrote that "there is nothing fantastic about the lights and shines of sophisticated multimedia technologies for the success of e-learning courses."

Interestingly, these kinds of situations, where some people prefer "white" and others "black," is absolutely normal in every case in which human beings are involved. As we mentioned when we started this paper, it is very clear that in regard to e-learning we are dealing with PEOPLE.

We hope our findings can motivate computer scientists, content developers and interface designers to adjust e-learning platforms, keeping in mind the feelings and needs of the human actors of this learning modality, and therefore provide the basis for creating the best possible subjective experiences for people taking e-learning based courses. As per the synthesis of the interviews we conducted, we believe it's very likely that they will come to the conclusion that, to make everybody happy, they will have to manage to create customizable platform interfaces (not just by the institutions that offer courses but also by each user), so that the more outgoing subjects can show themselves using webcams and see and hear some others, while the shyest can continue hiding behind their screens. The most technological could use a lot of multimedia resources and the most conservative can keep on typing their contributions.

References:

[1] Connolly, John. Problems in designing the user interface for systems Supporting International Human-Human communication. In: del Galdo, Elisa & Nielsen, Jakob. Eds **International User´s Interfaces** p 20-40. New York, Wiley, 1996
[2] [2] Tzeng, G., Chiang, C., and Li, C. 2007. Evaluating intertwined effects in e-learning programs: A novel hybrid MCDM model based on factor analysis and DEMATEL. *Expert Syst. Appl.* 32, 4 (May. 2007), 1028-1044. DOI= http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2006.02.004
[3] Pinto, Milton José. **Comunicação e Discurso**. São Paulo; Hacker, 1999.
[4] Howell, Dusty. **Elements of effective E-learning: three design methods to minimize side effects of online courses**. College Teaching 49 no3 Summ. 2001
[5] Frankola, K. Why online learners drop out. **Workforce**, 80(10), 52-58. 2001
[6] Osberg, C. How to keep e-learners online. **Training & Development**, 56(10), 45-47. 2002
[7] Jean Adams and Gareth Morgan **Second generation" e-learning: characteristics and design principles for supporting management soft-skills development.** Jean Adams and Gareth Morgan. ***International Journal on E-Learning*** 6.2 (April-June 2007): p157(29).

Authors:

Silvina Crenzel, Msc.
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro; department of Arts and Design.
Address: Rua Marques de São Vicente, 285 - Rio de Janeiro, Brasil
Email: silvina@net-expert.com

Francisca Cruz, Msc.
Fundação Getúlio Vargas; FGV on-line -
Address: Rua da Candelária, 6 - 4^{o} andar; Rio de Janeiro, Brasil
Email: franciscac@fgv.br

Vera Nojima, Dsc
Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro; department of Arts and Design.
Address: Rua Marquês de São Vicente, 285 – Rio de Janeiro, Brasil
Email: nojima@dsg.puc-rio.br