



A STUDY ON TEACHER'S SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING IN VIRTUAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

A virtual classroom is an online learning environment that allows for live interaction between the teachers and the learners as they are participating in teaching learning activities. Usually, virtual classroom interactions take place through videoconferencing, instant messaging tools, online white board for real-time collaboration etc. The teachers and learners have tools to present learning content in different formats, as well as to implement individual activities and collaborative. In this type of teaching learning, the teacher has the particularly significant role of the moderator who monitors the learning process and guide group activities and discussions. In order to cultivate and put into practice through virtual class room, teachers need to have a number of skills related to the command of digital technologies and an understanding of psychology of students and their affective, cognitive and behavioural characteristics and to then apply appropriate communication skills and strategies to deliver course materials and prepare the learners for this advanced learning method. Although teaching and learning in a virtual classroom provide an experience similar to the physical one, it requires new pedagogical approaches and a reform of the instructional model that includes the following Communication Skills for Effective Learning in Virtual Classroom Environment. Virtual Classroom's high Interactivity, Open and Honest Communication, Build Relationships, Collaborative Learning, Student-Centered Instruction, Variety of Content Presentation and Learning Activities, Psychologically Safe Environment, Positive and Constructive Feedback.

Keywords: Teacher's Skills, Effective Learning, Virtual Classroom Environment.

Introduction

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In order to cultivate and put into practice through virtual class room, teachers need to have a number of skills related to the command of digital technologies and an understanding of psychology of students and their affective, cognitive and behavioural characteristics and to then apply appropriate communication skills and strategies to deliver course materials and prepare the learners for this advanced learning method.

What is a Virtual Classroom Environment?

A virtual classroom environment combines real and virtual worlds to provide users with a sense of presence in the virtual environment. Such environments have emerged in teacher training programs as both effective and efficient approaches (Straub, Dieker, Hughes & Hynes, 2014). Therefore, teacher preparation programs must examine a variety of outcome variables associated with effective teacher performance and assess pre-service teachers' knowledge and instructional experiences in order to broaden and enhance their teaching skills (Lee, Patterson & Vega, 2011). One response to this need is the innovative use of multimedia platforms such as virtual reality learning environments within teacher preparation programs. A virtual reality learning environment allows for combined learning in content knowledge, teaching pedagogy, and problem-solving strategies (Ayles, 2008; Rieg & Wilson, 2009). Students, parents/families, and other individuals typically found in a school setting. The environment merges human interaction with technology to create a seemingly authentic experience in which pre-service and in-service teachers can "puppeteer" the classroom (Dieker, Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Benefits of Virtual Classroom Environment

Providing in-service and pre-service teachers with specific feedback on the many facets of teaching practices allows them the opportunity to contextualize experiences, reflect on their teaching, and understand why interim objectives were or were not accomplished (Britton & Anderson, 2010). Coaching, along with the incorporation of a virtual learning environment, expands and increases specific feedback opportunities that universities can provide to their pre-service teachers. In turn, this creates opportunities for pre-service teachers to construct and modify their beliefs and practices grounded in teaching experiences, as well as to solidify and deepen their understanding of skills applied in the teaching profession (Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman,



2005). The virtual learning environment ensures that pre-service teachers have additional opportunities (in addition to coursework and field experiences) to practice in connecting theory to pedagogical strategies. It also allows pre-service teachers to gain practical skills through first-hand experiences, fill gaps in knowledge, and improve teaching skills while under supervision receiving specific feedback during and after each teaching learning session. Virtual learning environments have the potential to make significant positive impacts on the way in which pre-service teachers prepare for work as in-service practitioners. Teacher candidates who are taught and given the opportunity to practice specific pedagogical strategies prior to going into a real classroom and who are coached about their specific areas of needed improvement have the potential to increase their own success as in-service practitioners and the success of their students. With the ability to practice and fine-tune skills in virtual learning environments, pre-service teachers will become better prepared for authentic classroom experiences and expectations.

Preparing for a Virtual Classroom Environment

Teacher preparation programs wanting to use a virtual learning environment should consider the organization of this type of program as well as needed preparation for both in-service and pre-service teachers. The way in which resources are organized is important. First, an essential consideration is designating a coordinator who is responsible for scheduling and organizing sessions, training faculty, and facilitating the setup of sessions so that both teachers and learners have a smooth and user-friendly experience. Second, programs should clearly identify which course or courses would benefit from the use of the virtual classroom environment. When planning virtual classroom environment, pre-service teachers must have clear opportunities to connect course content with the practice of individually defined strategies. Planning for specific courses can be based on explicit teacher preparation program areas of need, alignment with state or national objectives, or other considerations. Preparation is central to heightened participant comfort and session success in a virtual learning environment. Faculty and students must be fully aware of the functions and capabilities of the avatars (e.g., standing vs. sitting, modes of conversation, hand raising). Use of the variety of functions allows for a more authentic experience in the simulated learning environment. With the wide variety of simulations available, the faculty member must make a mindful choice of the specific scenario and adequately prepare for it. Coaching should intentionally connect the scenario (either immediately or delayed) to course objectives and techniques so that pre-service teachers can learn from mistakes, reflect, and practice again. Faculty must also consider specific data collection mechanisms for tracking the pre-service teacher's progress toward specified objectives so that individualized goals and adjustments in learning can be made to further propel each participant toward mastery. Pre-service teachers who are able to analyse and find patterns in their own teaching will likely grow and develop their teaching practices and pedagogical understanding.

Teacher's Skills for Effective Learning in Virtual Classroom Environments

Although teaching and learning in a virtual classroom provide an experience similar to the physical one, it requires new pedagogical approaches and a reform of the instructional model that includes the following Communication Skills for Effective Learning in Virtual Classroom Environment. Virtual Classroom's high Interactivity, Open and Honest Communication, Build Relationships, Collaborative Learning, Student-Centered Instruction, Variety of Content Presentation and Learning Activities, Psychologically Safe Environment, Positive and Constructive Feedback.

1. Virtual Classroom's high Interactivity

Training in a synchronous virtual classroom can only be successful with the active participation and engagement of the learners. This creates a positive learning environment and helps the participants achieve the expected outcomes. During the virtual session there should be opportunities for frequent interaction between learner and tutor, learner and other learners, and learner and content. Over the course of the virtual session, the tutor should encourage the students to participate every 3-5 minutes. This can be achieved by a variety of activities such as brainstorming, small group discussion, collaborative and individual tasks, Q&A sessions, hands-on experience, etc.

2. Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning means that the learners work together to achieve a common goal, exchange views, clarify the meaning of concepts, or solve problems together. It creates opportunities for cooperation in skills development. The emphasis is placed on interaction in which common understandings are subject to discussion and are developed precisely through exploring the differences in the participants' level of knowledge, skills, and positions. Applied in the virtual classroom, this approach is associated with an active process of the collective construction of knowledge using the group as a source of information, a motivational agent, and a means of mutual support.

3. Student-Centered Instruction

The lecture, which is a classic teaching format, often makes students more passive as the focus is on the content and the students must work independently with little opportunity for collaboration. This approach is more applicable to asynchronous virtual teaching, the tutor creates video lectures and self-directed activities, which the learners cover at their own pace. Synchronous virtual classes



require student-centered instruction in which the learners and the tutor interact equally – active participation, collaborative work, and communication are encouraged in this type of classroom. The tutor creates opportunities for both independent learning and learning from one another, and guides the learners in developing and practicing the skills they need. This increases the motivation level of the learners, as well as their interest in the learning activities.

4. Variety of Content Presentation and Learning Activities

This approach is related to differentiated instruction, which takes into consideration the differences in the needs, levels, and learning styles of the learners. It favours the creation of a more personalized learning experience and individual success. When a teacher uses various sources to present the content – text, images, diagrams, audio, video, etc. this can greatly improve the learning process by providing a live learning experience that is tailored to the various needs and preferences of the students. Presenting the content through various types of media retains the attention and interest of the learners.

5. Psychologically Safe Environment

Interactions in a virtual classroom create the sense of a more informal and safer emotional environment as the learners usually participate from the comfort of their homes. The learning process is much more focused because of the absence of the usual physical distractions that are found in the conventional classroom. Psychological safety leads to better learning outcomes. It also fosters creativity, confidence, and a willingness to experiment on the part of the learners. The virtual teacher also has a crucial role here – they need to encourage safe discussions, mutual respect, equal opportunities to participate, and the free sharing of different viewpoints. The teacher can enhance the psychological safety of the learners and make things more personalized by adding options for self-directed learning, as well as by communicating more frequently with every student through a Learning Management System.

6. Positive and Constructive Feedback

Unlike asynchronous virtual platforms, the synchronous virtual classroom allows for immediate feedback from both the tutor and the other participants in both an individual and a general way. The key role of the tutor here is to create an atmosphere of positive feedback by guiding the group's interaction. The need for feedback, which acknowledges the positive aspects of the learners' performance and gives valuable comments and recommendations for improvement, benefits the education and progress of the students. It also builds the habit in the group of trying to maintain a positive and constructive tone. All of these factors are vital in assisting the learners to overcome their mistakes without feelings of negativity, as well as by fostering confidence and inspiring them to achieve their full potential.

7. Open and Honest Communication

The lack of visual cues in the remote work environment might seem like an obvious point to bring up, but we often fail to appreciate just how much people communicate through nonverbal signals. While a confused expression, an uncomfortable shifting in a seat, or fidgeting fingers make it clear to everyone that something is amiss in an in-person meeting, these subtle hints would go unnoticed in a virtual one. It's absolutely vital, then, that team members share their concerns and thoughts whenever possible. Clear communication helps build and foster trust, which is a key element of all successful virtual teams. While text messaging and workplace chat applications allow for easy and instant communication, the lack of verbal and visual cues can cause messages to be misinterpreted, leading to confusion, frustration, and even resentment. Virtual teams must be committed to both making their thoughts known and providing clarification when something is unclear.

8. Demonstrate Respect and Consideration

The virtual workplace can leave team members feeling like they're operating in isolation rather than functioning as part of a group. Since they're not able to see what co-workers are doing most of the time, it's easy to forget everyone is wrapped up in their own tasks and can't be expected to drop everything at a moment's notice. In a traditional, in-person workplace, it's usually obvious when a question or request would interrupt someone's work. But working virtually requires team members to be more aware of each other's availability and workload. After all, some members might work in different time zones, making coordination even more difficult. If remote employees don't respect their co-workers' time and space, it will be difficult for them to develop trust in one another. This awareness extends to virtual meetings, as well. Without visual cues, it's all too easy for some members of the team to dominate a conference call, talking on and on without allowing anyone else to contribute. While active listening skills are of extreme importance here, it's also vital that a structure is put in place to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to contribute to discussions. Knowing who can speak and when both prevents confusion and makes everyone feel welcome and involved. One of the biggest challenges for virtual leaders, then, is creating an environment that provides some semblance of structure while still allowing for flexibility that respects the team's autonomy.



9. Build Relationships

Just because you're working remotely doesn't mean you have to be strangers! In fact, one of the biggest challenges with virtual teams is cultivating the social bonds that make everyone feel like they're a part of something special. A close knit team is more invested in seeing each member succeed, which creates a sense of camaraderie that makes the team much more effective. However, this kind of social interaction doesn't always happen naturally, especially with virtual teams where the members might rarely see one another. While frequent in-person meetings can be quite valuable for building social bonds, especially when the team starts out, cultivating positive interactions between team members is one of the most important tasks for a virtual leader. Top performing virtual teams often schedule events like virtual coffee chats or virtual lunches to promote social interaction and strengthen relationships. If virtual meet-ups like these prove difficult to organize, simply taking a few minutes before a conference call to encourage team members to share something about themselves can go a long way toward creating powerful emotional bonds that will hold the team together in the face of challenges.

10. Ask Questions

One of the advantages of working in a traditional office is being able to ask for clarification and assistance at any time. Despite having a wide range of communication options at their disposal, remote workers can easily fall into a pattern of working in isolation and keeping problems or questions to themselves. This can have terrible long-term consequences for productivity and morale. If anything, virtual teams should be communicating more deliberately than in-person teams. We often don't consider how many questions people ask in day-to-day conversation, ranging from minor clarifications to filling in sizable knowledge gaps. Virtual leaders in particular need to be tuned in to questions their team members might have, but are sometimes hesitant to reach out.

Team members should also ask frequent questions to stay abreast of any developments that might affect the team. With the wide variety of communication channels being deployed, it's easy for an important detail or two to go unnoticed by some members. Maybe someone wasn't part of a group chat about a particular client, or couldn't view a screen share during a teleconference. Asking short, specific, and frequent questions can keep team members informed and productive.

11. Communicate Progress on Goals

Since virtual teams don't have much day-to-day interaction, it can sometimes be difficult for members to get a sense of what everyone is working on at any given time. Remote workers are not constrained by the demands of a traditional 9-to-5 schedule and may choose to approach their tasks differently than their co-workers. Given these work pattern variations, it's crucial that communications focus on measurable accomplishments rather than less easily quantified activity. Demanding to know what someone is "doing" at any given time shifts the emphasis from results to process, which can be frustrating and discouraging. After all, if a remote worker is setting their own schedule, there's a good chance they're not working on a specific project at a given moment. Framing communication around quantifiable goals also helps virtual teams stay on task and get a sense of their progress. If objectives are measurable, there's less room for the kind of ambiguity that creates dysfunction in a virtual work environment. They also provide a common context for team members, allowing them to focus their conversations and interactions on what the team needs to accomplish to achieve success.

The virtual workplace is expanding rapidly to include industries with little experience in managing remote teams. Organizations cannot merely export their traditional team structure into a virtual setting and hope for the best. Effective policies for implementing a remote workforce need to be designed from the ground up and staffed by people with the appropriate skills. Virtual communication skills are certain to be among the most valuable assets for a generation of incoming workers entering this new workforce. By focusing on identifying and developing these skills in prospective team members, organizations can embrace the change and position themselves for success in the future.

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