UNIT 1.

INTERPERSONAL AND SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Unit 1. Interpersonal and social communication in distance learning

The aim of the unit is to present the conception, tools and environments for interpersonal and social communication in distance learning

Specific Topics:

- Know the importance of interpersonal relationships in remote learning.
- Improve own interpersonal and social competencies in virtual space.
- Support and develop students' interpersonal and social competencies in virtual spaces.
- Be able to apply various ways of establishing and maintaining interpersonal and social contacts in remote teaching

1.1. Interpersonal and social competencies in virtual space

Interpersonal interaction (learner-learner and learner-instructor) refers to the learners' and instructor's engagement (reciprocal relationships) in the learning and teaching process. It also refers to dialogue between and/or among different participants in online learning environments]. Interpersonal interactions are considered essential components by many educators and learners. These types of interaction can help ensure learners and instructors develop a feeling of community and connectedness to the course.

Challenges encountered during the pandemic not only united the community for the common goal to smoothly move to distance learning, to ensure quality studies, but also encourage collaboration outside the organization [1,2].

Various theories of distance learning are influenced by the latest technologies, i.e., distance learning is linked to new means of communication and collaboration, such as smartphones, computers, open-source, and learning environments that allow learners to access information from anywhere, anytime. The use of e-learning content and open resources has grown significantly in the pandemic, posing challenges not only in the selection and development but also in the sharing of e-resources. The pressure of time and inadequate preparation for the transition to the application of distance learning also caused problems in the distribution of massive participation and security. Despite the differences in learning processes, all educational processes are equally important. They should be successfully planned, and they should be prepared in advance for their implementation, i.e., learning planning, development, implementation, delivery, evaluation, and quality assurance [1].

The literature on distance learning mainly focuses on its overall effectiveness as a tool for supporting education and students' satisfaction. In some technical, quantitative disciplines that demand systematic work, distance learning approach can be less useful while teaching, as it falls short of sufficiency in terms of interaction. Also distance learners to be better prepared and more active as regards asking questions than their counterparts participating in traditional classes. Students learning remotely also perceived group work to be more satisfying and regarded related communication and decision-making processes as more effective. Distance learners were also found to have more autonomy in self-paced learning and to be more responsible for the learning process. Therefore, distance learning approach promotes student-

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centered pedagogy, and prepares students for ongoing self-learning, important for the professional development and mobility on the labor market. High activity on FB and LKND plays an important role in communicating with educators [3].

Distance learning requires appropriate digital competencies for the lecturer and the student. Before deciding on the organization of distance learning, a higher education institution must assess the digital competencies of lecturers in the following areas:

1) Professional activity: the use of digital technologies for communication, cooperation, and professional development;
2) Digital resources: information search, creation, and sharing of digital resources;
3) Teaching and learning: management and use of digital technologies in teaching and learning;
4) Assessment: the use of digital technologies and strategies for assessment;
5) Student empowerment: the use of digital technologies to promote engagement, personalization, and active student participation;
6) Improving students' digital competencies: allowing students to use digital technologies creatively and responsibly to gather information, communicate, create content, and solve problems.

The identified digital competencies and experience of lecturers to use the proper software, systems and virtual learning platforms contribute to the institution administration's decision on technology for the development of VLE. Once the lack of digital competencies required for distance education has been identified, the institution's administration should assess the possibilities to organize the development of digital competencies in the nearest future. In the absence of the possibility to provide the educator with the minimum digital competencies required for distance learning, support should be offered, it should also be prepared for the substitution of the educator and/or reallocation of the corresponding workload.

The digital competencies of students must also be assessed.

The following competencies should be assessed:

1) Literacy in the use of information and media;
2) Communication and cooperation in the digital space;
3) Creation of digital content;
4) Responsible use of digital technologies;
5) Solving digital problems.

If the assessment of the current situation shows that it is appropriate to organize distance, blended or hybrid education, further steps must be taken. Considering the needs and opportunities identified at the stage of preparing for distance learning, the higher education institution must organize the provision in the case of insufficient equipment for lecturers and students, an adequate social environment, the organization of the acquisition of ICT infrastructure suitable for distance learning, the creation of VLE, and the development of digital competences for lecturers and students.

1.2. Communication and collaboration in distance learning

Communication and collaboration plays an important role in most academic classes or courses, regardless of delivery method, but achieving successful collaboration with remote learning also poses some unique challenges. Yet, while all members of the learning group are separated physically, there are a number of steps that academic institutions, teachers, and students can take to help to facilitate successful remote teamwork [5].

Collaboration

Before exploring how successful collaboration can be achieved, however, it is useful to establish an understanding of why collaborative activities are necessary and what the benefits actually are. The collaborative skills are learned over time and the vast majority of employers actively seek candidates with the ability to successfully work as part of a team.

Of course, the importance of collaboration within remote learning goes beyond this, because it can help to overcome some of the natural isolation associated with studying from home. Crucially, the social aspect can help to make virtual classrooms more fun and interesting, which is essential for generating the right levels of student engagement.

Table 1. Collaboration tools

Title	Description
Slack https://slack.com/intl/en-gb/	is an exceptional collaboration and communication tool. It is essentially a chat platform, but with useful features.
Quip https://quip.com/	if you are not going to use Contractbook, or want somewhere to deal with documents that are not contracts, you could do a lot worse than take a look at Quip
Trello https://trello.com/home	a user friendly interface and intuitive operation, collaborate, manage projects, and reach new productivity peaks.
Confluence https://www.atlassian.com/software/confluence	Confluence allows teams to easily create, share and collaborate on documents, spreadsheets, presentations, and images. Tracking project progress is a breeze in Confluence.
Zoho https://www.zoho.com/docs/	Zoho Docs make document creation, storage, editing, sharing, and collaboration a breeze. Apart from your documents, spreadsheets and presentations, you can even upload your music, movies, and other files to the Zoho cloud and basically take your office wherever you go.
ReSkript https://www.reskript.com/	ReSkript offers a document collaboration and files management online platform with wide functionality, intuitive design & easy-to-use quality.

Synchronous Communication

One of the most obvious ways in which collaboration through distance learning can be made possible is via synchronous communication. In simple terms, this refers to communication methods that occur with all participants present and actively engaged in communicating at the same time, despite being in different geographical locations.

For example, online chat and instant messaging platforms allow for students to have back-and-forth interactions. This can make it much easier to work together on projects or share knowledge and

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information about the course. Collaboration can also be made easier through virtual classrooms, which function as a shared online space.

Concepts like video conferencing, digital whiteboarding, and screen sharing can all help members of the same learning group to collaborate, and these can all be enabled through solutions like myViewBoard. Meanwhile, teachers can help to encourage teamwork through virtual classroom quizzes, presentations, and similar team activities.

Asynchronous Communication

While most people think of collaborative efforts as group activities that occur through real-time interactions, the reality is that asynchronous communication has a role to play in facilitating successful collaboration too. For instance, many courses make use of bulletin boards, which can allow students to discuss topics and share information.

In some cases, students may be able to collaborate through delegation of different tasks and a subsequent sharing of their work via email. As an example, students working on a joint project may each take on separate workloads and then send each other the work they have done, before combining it all into the single finished project.

There are several advantages associated with asynchronous collaboration. For one, students do not have to be working on collaborative projects at the exact same time, providing flexibility. In addition, message board posts and emails do not suffer in the event of a temporary loss of internet connection. However, asynchronous collaboration is slower.

Table 2. Communication tools

Title	Description
Remind 101 https://www.remind.com/	is an app and website used for communication between teachers, parents, and students. Teachers can send a text message to created groups about upcoming tests, quizzes, and projects.
Social media (FB or etc.) https://facebook.com/	These social media platforms can be combined so that one post appears in both locations. One fun aspect of social media is creating hashtags. A teacher can create a hashtag, or several, for students to use when they post something for class
GoSoapBox https://www.gosoapbox.com/	GoSoapBox is a chat room designed for classrooms. Teachers can post different types of questions for students to respond to in real time. The benefit of GoSoapBox is that it encourages student interaction.
Edublogs https://edublogs.org/	Keeping a blog or having students write a blog keeps everyone informed. For a classroom blog, think about using Edublogs.
ClassPager https://www.classpager.com/	Send basic text reminders and surveys to students' cell phones.

The main features required for communication online [7]

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There are many factors you need to take care of to make your communication effective. The initial step for finding a proper communication tool is by looking at the features it should have. Let's see the most important ones:

Direct and Group Messaging. Having a communication tool without a direct messaging feature is a crime. This feature brings some sort of convenience by allowing employees to reply to less priority messages only when they have time for that. Group messaging is the same, but instead of one-on-one, here you communicate with all the group members at once.

Real-time communication is necessary for businesses, and email alone is not sufficient enough to do this job. With the help of a communication tool that has a direct messaging feature, you can have a text conversation with anyone by only creating a channel.

Video Chat. Video chat takes direct messaging features to the next level. Many a time, you might need to have face-to-face communication with your remote employees or foreign clients, and commuting every time you need this can make a dent in the pockets of both parties. Since these tools operate on the internet, the cost per call decreases. With the help of these tools, you can also easily reduce the cost of your call centre.

Screen Sharing. When you have a tool that has a good quality video chat feature, you should also ensure that it comes with a feature to share your screen. This feature is invaluable as it gives you an option to share docs, reports, or anything visible on your screen with the participants of the meeting. You don't have to open separate apps or close the existing meeting. With this feature, the flow of the meeting remains unaffected.

Audio Conferencing. It is one of the primary features that comes with communication tools. Sometimes you might need to clear a point on the spot. Here, jumping directly on video calls won't work, and texts will take a little time. This is when the audio conferencing feature acts as your guardian angel. It is a simple feature that works on your desktop, which means you don't have to switch devices or set up an external line of communication.

Secure File Sharing. Being able to share files is one thing, but when you have the ability to share files of multiple formats, that's when the game changes. If you do not want to compromise on the productivity of your tool, then you must ensure that it has the option to share files securely from platforms like Google Drive, Dropbox, and even your system.

1.3. Support and inclusion

Strong student-teacher relationships are linked to both short-term and long-term improvements on multiple measures: higher student academic engagement, better attendance, better grades, fewer disruptive behaviours and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates [6].

Support

Learner support focuses on what the teacher or instructor can or should do to help learners beyond the formal delivery of content, or skills development. Learner support covers a wide range of functions [9]:

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Scaffolding. Using scaffolding to cover the many functions of an instructor in diagnosing and responding to learners' difficulties, including:

1) helping students when they struggle with new concepts or ideas;
2) helping students to gain deep understanding of a topic or subject;
3) helping students to evaluate a range of different ideas or practices;
4) helping students to understand the limits of knowledge;
5) above all challenging students to go beyond their current level of thinking or practice to acquire deeper understanding or a higher level of competency.

These activities normally take the form of personal interventions and communication between an instructor and an individual or a group of students, in face-to-face contexts or online. These activities tend not to be pre-planned, requiring a good deal of spontaneity and responsiveness on the part of the teacher or instructor. Scaffolding is usually a means of individualising the learning, enabling student differences in learning to be better accommodated as they occur.

Feedback. This could be seen as a sub-category of scaffolding, but it covers the role of providing feedback on student performance of activities such as writing assignments, project work, creative activities, and other student activities beyond the current and perhaps future scope of automated computer feedback. Again, the instructor's role here is to provide more individualisation of feedback to deal with more qualitatively assessed student activities, and may or may not be associated with formal assessment or grading.

Counselling. As well as direct support within their academic studying, learners often need help and guidance on administrative or personal issues, such as whether to repeat a course, delay an assignment because of sickness in the family, or cancel enrollment in a course and postpone it to another date. This potential source of help needs to be included in the design of an effective learning environment, with the aim of doing all that can be done to ensure that students succeed while meeting the academic standards of a program.

Other students. Other students can be a great support for learners. Much of this will happen informally, through students talking after class, through social media, or helping each other with assignments. However, instructors can make more formal use of other students by designing collaborative learning activities, group work, and designing online discussions so that students need to work together rather than individually.

Why learner support is so important? Good design can substantially reduce demand for learner support, by ensuring clarity and by building in appropriate learning activities. Students also vary enormously in their need for support in learning. Many lifelong learners, who have already been through a post-secondary education, have families, careers and a great deal of life experience, can be self-managed, autonomous learners, identifying what they need to learn and how best to do this. At the other extreme, there are students for whom the formal school system was a disaster, who lack basic learning skills or foundations, such as reading, writing and mathematical skills, and therefore lack confidence in learning. These will need a lot of support to succeed.

However the vast majority of learners are somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, occasionally running into problems, unsure what standards are expected, and needing to know how they are doing. Indeed, there is a good deal of research that indicates that 'instructor presence' is associated with student success or failure in a course, at least in online learning. Where students feel the instructor is not present, both

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learner performance and completion rates decline. For such students, good, timely learner support is the difference between success and failure.

At the same time, although computer programs can go some way to providing learner support, many of the most important functions of learner support associated with high-level conceptual learning and skills development still need to be provided by an expert teacher or instructor, whether present or at a distance. Furthermore, this kind of learner support is difficult to scale up, as it tends to be relatively labour intensive and requires instructors with a deep level of knowledge within the subject area. Thus, the need to provide adequate levels of learner support cannot just be wished away, if we are to achieve successful learning on a large scale [9].

Inclusion. Here are some tips from teachers who are figuring out how to make remote work inclusive [6]:

1) Relationships come before content.
2) Get to know students' interests outside of academics.
3) Give personal feedback and notes.
4) Inject some fun into class time.
5) Use games for education.
6) Use gamification.

This can't be emphasized enough: Strong relationships will be essential to students' academic success and well-being in distance or remote learning.

The beginning of the semester, is a crucial time for developing the personal connections that students will need to sustain them through what is going to be an unpredictable school year, at best.

But with schools either operating remotely, alternating online instruction with in-person classes, or closing due to an outbreak, developing meaningful relationships between teachers and students—and even among staff, students, and families—will be a challenge.

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