USING MOODLE TO HELP STUDENTS COMPLETE THE THESIS COMPONENT OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Abstract: This paper aims to reflect the experience of the Department of Sociology of Education at Pedagogical University of Mexico with a project based on the use of the Moodle learning management system. Moodle is selected a flexible environment that minimizes time and space barriers and increases communicative options by offering new alternatives for tutoring and assessment. We analyze the results obtained so far and formulate some recommendations in order to improve future use of the platform.

1 INTRODUCTION

We live in a society in which information and communication technologies (ICTs) have modified our lives in many ways, including the way we teach and the way we learn. Due to the use of educational technology, instructional processes have changed. *"Educational technology can be referred to as the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using, and managing appropriate technological processes and resources"*. Beyond traditional school facilities, virtual environments have been created to provide support to learning communities. These environments provide resources as well as spaces for students to work and interact.

ICTs can facilitate the delivery of instruction as well as promote communication and collaboration among learners. ICTs offer a variety of tools and environments with great potential for education. Nevertheless, the application of technology to learning must take into consideration crucial pedagogical issues that should not be overlooked.

Some key indicators of the potential of virtual environments are:

- Provide the necessary elements for interaction and interactivity in learning environments;
- Contribute to a broader offer of educational services through access to different sources of information; and,

- Facilitate the development of abilities and skills in teachers and students.

The implementation of e-learning and virtual environments has generated high expectations since they helped to overcome geographical isolation of participants. Further, the use of e-learning has encouraged the formation of work groups.

2 USING MOODLE. THE CHALLENGE

Moodle is a software package for producing Internet-based courses and web sites. It is a global development project designed to support a social constructionist framework of education. It was originally developed by Martin Dougiamas to help educators create online courses with a focus on interaction and collaborative construction of content, and is in continual evolution.

It is not difficult to appreciate the usefulness of virtual environments during the students' learning process. However, our challenge was to consider its role in helping students write a thesis on a topic in the sociology of education. This requirement has hampered the progress of a large amount of who want to obtain their degree.

This paper aims to reflect the experience of the Department of Sociology of Education at Pedagogical University of Mexico with a project based on the use of a Moodle platform. The goal of

the project was to encourage students to complete their thesis – one of the degree requirements.
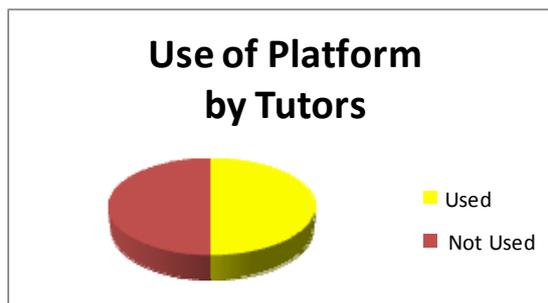
It is important to mention that some of the students had left the university 18 or 20 years ago, some others live in remote areas of the country. Thus, these students were unable to participate in a face-to-face tutoring. In addition, our syllabi have changed through the years; therefore, some students lacked basic academic elements, such as the knowledge of recent sociological theory.

The challenge was tremendous. Up to 75% of the students from each promotion were potential candidates for this project. It was difficult to know what to expect regarding the acceptance of our summons among students as well as the commitment teachers would have towards this activity. Similar projects in the past involving face-to-face tutoring had different levels of success in terms of completed thesis: high in 1994 near 85% of success, very poor in 2005 with only two theses completed out of 45 students registered.

The program was promoted through the university web page in September, 2011. The initial acceptance was higher than expected. Over 100 students applied for the program. Over thirty teachers were willing to participate as tutors.

The theses to be written were expected to be short and simple. The student could choose, according to their interests, between referring to a professional experience or writing an essay or a monographic description. The deadline for the papers to be completed was set for March 30th, 2012. Specifications of each kind of paper were submitted on line.
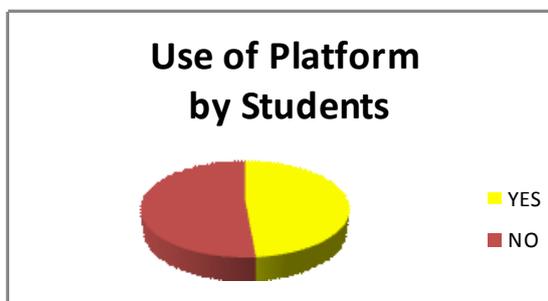
The Moodle platform was selected because it is a flexible learning environment that minimizes time and space barriers and increases communicative options by offering new alternatives for tutoring and assessment. It would provide a restricted accessed website where resources such as texts, videos and multimedia would be offered. Users would log in with a personal password. Students could submit their assignments on required dates and teachers could keep track of the progress of the students. In addition instructors could formulate comments and recommendations as well as provide new reading material or suggest special tasks. The support offered by instructors could be provided by e mail, instant messaging, chats and discussion forums. Online calendars and announcements were also included.

Use of Platform by Tutors
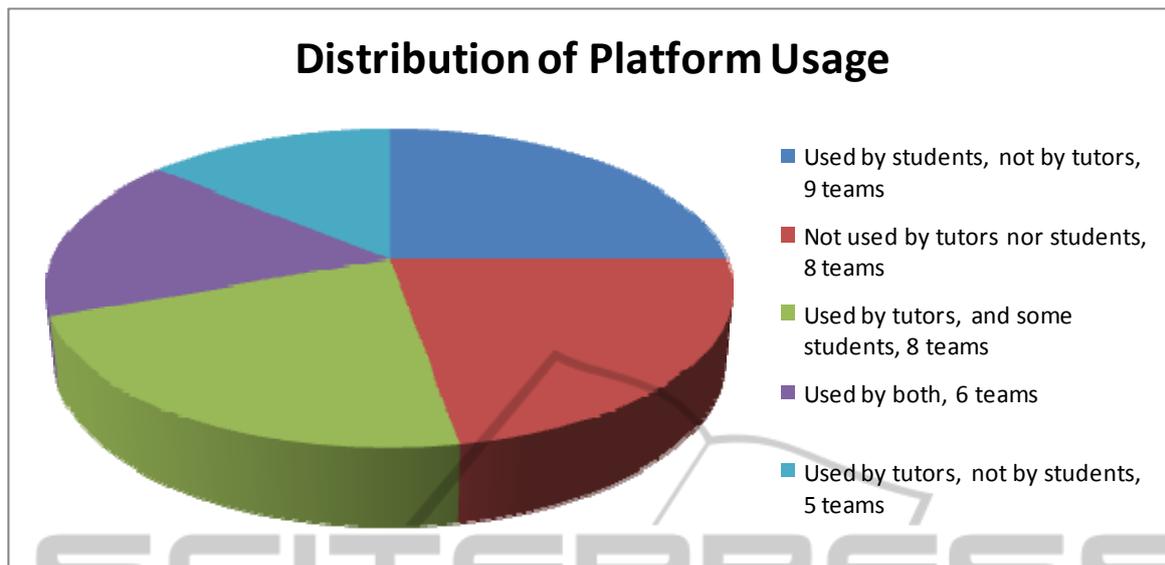
- Used
- Not Used

3 THE EXPERIENCE

During the first week of the program, students and teachers met and were notified of the virtual groups they belonged to. During the second week, two sessions were allocated to learning how to use Moodle.

Those who attended the sessions discovered that it was quite simple to operate and were motivated to do their work through it. However, 50% of the teachers and a considerable number of students (40%) declined to use Moodle and decided to communicate only by e-mail some showed a preference for face-to-face activity. The most frequently given reasons for not wanting to use Moodle were: "*I don´t have enough computer skills*"," *it is too impersonal*"," *I don´t feel comfortable with such a procedure*" and so on.

Use of Platform by Students

- YES
- NO

We are still waiting for the final results of the project, but so far, they are not as encouraging as we expected. From the very beginning, some students refused idea to work only on line. Thus they withdrew from the project and recovered their old research project they had started many years ago. Others begged to work in the old fashion way, because, even if they work and find commuting to the campus difficult, they prefer to interact closely with tutors, in a face-to-face manner.

Most of the tutors belong to the category known as *digital immigrants*; therefore, they only perform

Distribution of Platform Usage

- Used by students, not by tutors, 9 teams
- Not used by tutors nor students, 8 teams
- Used by tutors, and some students, 8 teams
- Used by both, 6 teams
- Used by tutors, not by students, 5 teams

very simple tasks with the computer and find the use of the platform too complicated.

Moodle platform is being used by all those participants who felt it would benefit their work. However, the following shortcomings have become apparent:

- For tutors: Lack of digital knowledge, slow and inefficient feedback, slow communication and profile different from sociology field.
- For students, insufficient handling of ICTs, insufficient motivation, poor planning and distribution of time, late incorporation to the program.
- For the staff: Poor scheduling of deadlines, groups too large and heterogeneous.

This is a first experience with Moodle in the Department of Sociology of Education. Despite the initial difficulties, some tutors and some students find Moodle useful. However, if this activity is to be repeated in the near future, important changes need to be made. Our contribution in this paper will be the formulation of the following suggestions:

- For tutors: To achieve effective counseling and motivation, to give a clear explanation of objectives and results expected.
- For students: To maintain constant communication and ongoing work.
- For staff: To provide training before the program starts, to build a more flexible planning of the advances

- For both students and instructors: To provide a longer training with Moodle, selling the benefits of using it.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As a final remark, we would like to state that Moodle is a very useful and powerful tool for learning. Besides being a low cost solution, it provides a variety of resources, It stands for a new university culture with emphasis on the student. Thus, it helps improve the learning of concepts and procedures an also facilitates the acquisition of attitudes and abilities. We are XX century teachers working in XXI century, involved in the society of information; ICTs are our everyday tools. Let's not be afraid of them.

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