Psycho-Pedagogical Support in Online Education: Strategies and Benefits

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Abstract

The growing advance of technology has expanded the use of online learning. Many students may face challenges when making the transition to online learning, such as the lack of face-to-face interaction and the need for self-discipline. Psycho-pedagogical support can help students adapt to this new environment by offering guidance and resources to develop self-management and organisational skills. This article explores the importance of psycho-pedagogical support in online learning. Here we highlight the strategy we used to help students who were in the first year of an online degree course. To this end, a non-formal space was created where challenges were presented, through forums, with themes that were not only relevant to the development of study and adaptation strategies, but also promoted the socio-emotional development of the students who wanted to take part in this experience. Online learning can be isolating and emotionally challenging for some students. Psycho-pedagogical support provides a safe space for students to express their concerns, deal with academic stress and develop effective coping skills. In brief, by implementing effective psycho-pedagogical support strategies, students' well-being can be promoted and, as a result, their learning potential maximised.

Keywords: *Psych-pedagogical support; Online learning; Socio-emotional support; Adult students; Higher Education*

1. Introduction

The increasing growth of information and communication technologies, as well as the growing need to meet society's challenges, means that online learning is gaining ground and is increasingly sought after by those who need to keep up with the updates their jobs require. Lifelong learning has become part of our daily lives, but not always with ease. It is in this context that digital learning has gained momentum due to its flexibility in terms of time and physical barriers, helping to respond to the challenges facing society.

Online learning can be isolating and emotionally challenging for some students. According to [1], virtual education has many advantages as long as the factors that affect student satisfaction are taken into account in its design. Although student satisfaction is related to academic performance, it is also related to affective dimensions that influence performance. According to [2] "learning online can be exasperating for the student as for the instructor, particularly for those taking an online course for the first time" (p.293). The task of managing students' expectations is very important in an online course, as they often create expectations that an online course is much easier than a face-to-face course, or that the teacher is at the "computer 24/7". All these expectations must be managed to maintain a socio-emotional balance on the part of the students and keep them active in the course, avoiding dropouts. This teaching system forces students to be more active and independent or to work more collaboratively. This form of positioning can be more stressful than classic classes, where the student can be more passive, taking notes or occasionally answering a question.

Psycho-pedagogical support provides a safe space for students to express their concerns, deal with academic stress and develop effective coping skills. Maintaining student motivation and engagement is key to success in online teaching. You need to collaborate with students to identify their intrinsic motivations, set realistic goals and develop strategies to overcome learning challenges. Organising workshops and online support groups to discuss relevant topics such as time management, effective study strategies and emotional well-being can be a form of psycho-pedagogical support. It is also important to provide online resources to help students develop self-regulation skills. Simpson (2012) [3] defines "student support" as "all activities beyond the production and delivery of courses materials that assist in the progress of students to success in their studies" (p.13).

According to the same author, student support in e-learning, from a holistic point of view, can be divided into two large groups. The first relates to what he calls academic support, which contains

aspects related to the cognitive, intellectual and knowledge aspects specific to the course. In other words, really being a "teacher". The second group is non-academic or counselling support (p.15). The aim here is to support students emotionally and in terms of organising their studies.

Fig1 | Holistic online student support (adapted from [2])

The outcome of elearning is affected by numerous factors that can range from the personal characteristics of the students to the resources, instructional design and even the underlying pedagogical model, among others [4]. Written communication can trigger positive or negative reactions, depending on how each person interprets it. Here too, the facilitator plays a crucial role in creating a positive environment between students. However, we know that these strategies can be learnt [5].

Motivated students can find strategies and skills to deal with stress and don't need much external support. On the other hand, demotivation, among other factors, can lead to students dropping out of courses. We end with the formula recommended by [3] (p.106) for student success,

$$S = AC + EId + (E + C)\ PaM$$

S = Student Sucess
AC = Appropriate Course Choice
EId = Early Identification of vulnerable students
E = Early
C = Continuous
PaM = Proactive Motivational Support

In addition, setting goals also influences learning by deactivating affective reactions, for example. Knowing how to set goals is important because when they are achieved, they increase the degree of self-satisfaction, while on the other hand their difficulty can generate levels of difficulty in achieving them [6].

2. An example - The Central Space

From the teaching of the curricular unit (UC) PEA, of the 1st year, 1st semester of the Degree course X, which aims to develop the following competences:
At the end of the course unit the student should be able to:
- Develop work and study habits that enable lifelong learning.
- Write and reference academic work.
- Critically analyse their own study and learning practices.
- Introduce the recursive cycle of self-regulation into their study practice.

And to help consolidate the students' knowledge of the concepts and theories, as well as providing a set of resources, experiences and skills in the use of ICT, we designed a common space for the different classes that make up this CU. This space, called Central Space, helped to work on the concepts of the course, but with the emphasis on the student. In other words, it helped them to reflect on their own experience as students in that teaching system. We can therefore say that the aim of this space created from the PEA CU was to

- support students not only with the content of the course, but also by exploring and helping to define the content.
- getting them to question the content centered on their own experience.
- discussing the content helped motivate them to learn
- Using the platform, forums and other resources develops learning skills.

 Therefore, considering the instructional design we used led us to structure the Centre Space into 4 large areas. Its general structure can be seen in figure 1.

Fig.2| General Structure of the Central Space

Central Space

News Foruns

Challenge Space

Reflection Space

Space Questionnaires

We'll operationalise each of these spaces below. Thus,

Table 1 | Operationalisation of Spaces

Space	Contents
	News space about the main developments in space
	The Challenges Forum aimed to address the relevant aspects of studying online and the content learnt in the course itself. So, over the course of the semester, 9 challenges were created. We'll go into more detail later.
	The Reflection Space was made up of a set of questions that were asked at the end of the continuous assessment period. Throughout the semester there are two online assessment periods for students who choose the continuous assessment option. Their structure is presented in the following section.
	The Questionnaire Space was made up of a set of questionnaires that were grouped into 4 large groups and concerned student characteristics, studying in online environments and the approach to learning, in general and online.

This was the general structure we had designed to work on the issues we felt were relevant to helping students enter their study environment.
At the start of the school year, after presentations about the PEA course, its objectives, content and structure, students were invited to take part in the Central Space. Participation was voluntary. Of the 329 potential students invited to take part in the Central Space, only 13 never did. So, although it's not

possible to count how many times they took part, we know that 316 students carried out activities in this space.

Participation varied in the different areas. The one with the least robust participation was the Reflection Space. The forums were synchronised with the structure of the course, but not coincidentally.
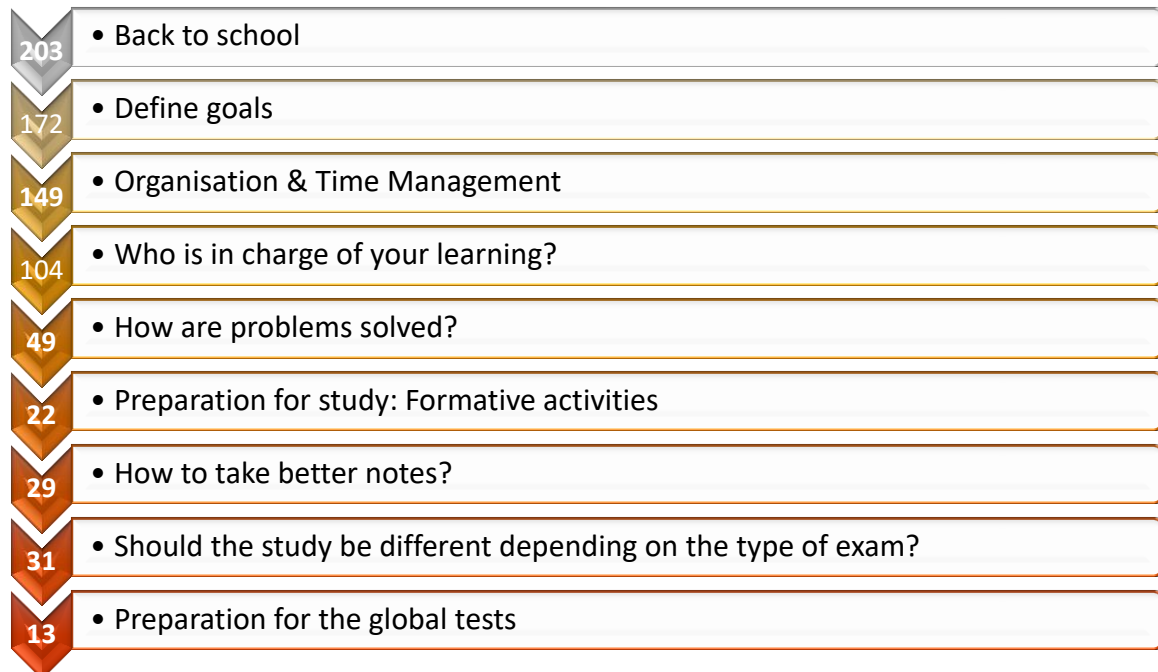
At the end of the semester, a short questionnaire was sent out asking for suggestions for this space.

2.1 The Challenge Forum

The format of all the challenge forums was identical, with an introduction to the topic to be worked on aimed at reactivating the students' responses. Feedback from the facilitator was given at the beginning and in the middle of the discussion to summarise what had already been said and prepare for the continuation of the discussion.

Over the semester, 9 different Challenge Forums were launched consecutively, with a total of 772 different participants. The different Challenge Forums focused on the following themes:

Fig.3 | Forum themes Challenges

203	• Back to school
172	• Define goals
149	• Organisation & Time Management
104	• Who is in charge of your learning?
49	• How are problems solved?
22	• Preparation for study: Formative activities
29	• How to take better notes?
31	• Should the study be different depending on the type of exam?
13	• Preparation for the global tests

We considered it pertinent that the first challenge to be launched should be about returning to school. Let's remember that, in our case, we were dealing with adult student-workers who had stopped studying a few years ago. Their study skills needed to be reactivated and it was important for them to realise the difficulties they faced when returning to school. This was the most participated forum (203 participations). Many concerns emerged, but in almost all of them words like Challenge, Organisation, Management, Evolve, Persistence, Strength gained prominence.

Fig.4 | Word cloud *Back to school*
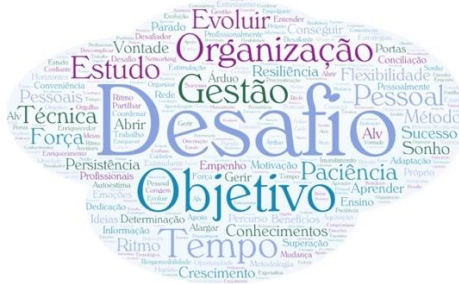
2.2 The Reflection Space

The reflection space aimed to encourage self-regulation of learning. Until then, the students had been studying this concept from a theoretical point of view as part of the PEA course. It was clear to us that more than knowing this concept, they needed to know how to use it in their practice. So the space for reflection consisted of 2 specific moments - the moments relating to their 2 e-folios (their continuous assessment, the maximum value of which was 4). These 2 moments were predetermined and known to the students from the beginning of the semester. They were online assessment moments where they had about a week to develop their work and at the end of that time, they had to post it on the device set up for the purpose. After each of these moments, a questionnaire was made available online, consisting of 2 parts - Identification and Body of the questionnaire. This last part was made up as follows:
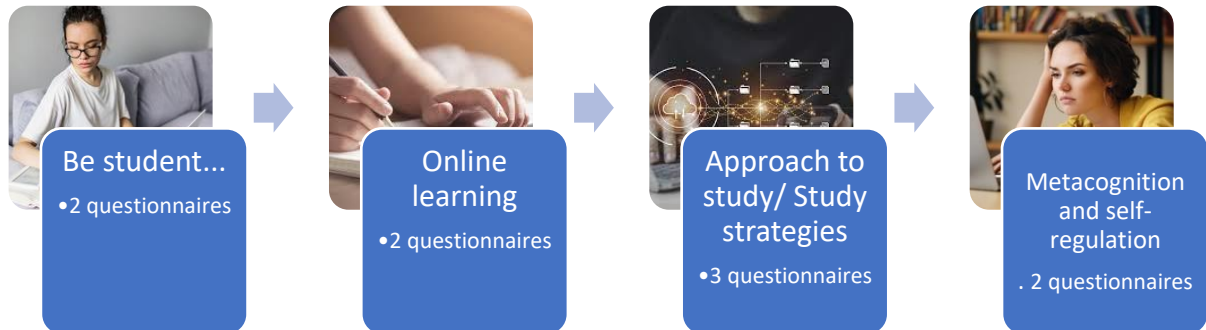
- - What grade do you expect to get for your e-folio A? (indicate only one number)
- - Approximately how much time did you spend preparing for this e-folio? Please estimate in hours and do not use ranges (e.g. 3.5, not 3-4).
- - What percentage of your test preparation time was used for each of these activities? (The total should equal 100%)
  - Reading the UC texts
  - Consulting diagrams and videos
  - Revising notes
  - Making study material: notes/schematics/conceptual maps
  - Studying in a group or with a friend
  - Taking self-quizzes
  - Consult material outside the UC
  - Other (please specify)
- - Based on your answers to the previous question, please indicate at least three items that you plan to do differently in preparation for the next e-folio. For example, do you plan to spend more time studying, change a specific study habit or try a new one (if so, please indicate which one), prioritise studying, try something else (if so, please indicate)?
- - Perception of self-reflection (1st moment only).
  - o This type of self-reflection helps me improve my study habits
  - o This type of self-reflection helps me improve my grading
  - o I hope to apply this type of self-reflection to my other course units

Only 35 students answered the questionnaire. Most of them expect to get a positive mark (>= 2). Regarding the perception of self-reflection, 100% of the students agree that this type of self-reflection helps them to improve their study habits; 94% agree that this type of self-reflection helps them to improve their marks and, finally, 97% agree that they would use this self-reflection in other curricular units.

2.3 The Questionnaire Space

In order to help students, understand their role as a student in general and in the online context in particular, we have compiled a set of 9 questionnaires which we have grouped into 4 main categories.

Fig.5| Questionnaire Space

| Be student… •2 questionnaires | → | Online learning •2 questionnaires | → | Approach to study/ Study strategies •3 questionnaires | → | Metacognition and self-regulation . 2 questionnaires |

The response rate to the questionnaires varied, with the highest being 280 responses and the lowest 136.

The opening of this space stated that its main objective was to encourage reflection on the different aspects of each person's learning process, as well as aspects linked to study approaches and competences, in a very specific context. To this end, they were asked to reflect on the specific content of each questionnaire while answering them and to try to project themselves into each learning situation.

The questionnaires were made available at the start of the semester and there was no deadline for answering them.

2.4 The Role of the Teacher / Facilitator

The teacher played a dual role, teaching the content of the PEA curricular unit, and facilitating the management of the Central Space. Each time a new news item appeared, or a new Challenge Forum was opened, a news item was posted. It was in the News Forum that students were asked to participate in that space, particularly in the Reflection Space. Within the Challenge Forums, the teacher/facilitator created the environment for the content to be dealt with and called for student participation. The feedback or summary of what had been covered was given after a while and the students were asked to participate again.

2.5 Opinion/Suggestions

At the end of the semester, they were asked to give us their opinion/suggestions regarding this central space. However, despite being in an online teaching system, some students have made use of synchronous sessions. For others, the development of digital skills is very important for "good study practice". Anything that can provide "useful insights into how to overcome the challenges associated with these learning environments" is very important. Others emphasised the "presence" of teachers as a key element for success. The importance of the teacher's work and its relationship with student satisfaction has been analysed by several authors [1]. Finally, they emphasised the relevance of the space throughout the semester, as it "highlighted the need for students to rethink the way they study". All this with the guidance of the tutor and the "participation and socialisation of knowledge by colleagues".

3. Conclusion

With the creation of the Central Space, we wanted to provide students with skills, not only in theoretical content, but above all to make them feel learning issues in a particular way. What we did is closer to what Simpson (2012) calls *Developmental Support*. At this level, the tutor/teacher/facilitator should help students develop goals, competences, and motivation. In our case, the development of competences was aimed at broadening awareness of being an online student, as well as setting

goals, dealing with issues of time and procrastination, and becoming a more self-regulated student. Self-regulation is a vast and complex field that combines motivation as well as cognition and personality theories [6]. By increasing these competences, the aim was to increase general motivation. The more contextualised the student is, the higher their level of satisfaction and, in turn, motivation. We know that motivation is essential for a student's progress. Teaching work not only affects academic performance, but also other social and emotional factors related to the digital learning experience [1].

More important than having theories to support students is to help them experiment and develop study methods that are effective for them.

By offering socio-emotional support, psycho-pedagogical support can help students deal with the stress and anxiety associated with online learning, thus promoting a more healthy and productive learning environment. As well as improving academic performance, psycho-pedagogical support in online teaching helps students develop essential life skills, such as resilience, self-knowledge, and the ability to face challenges.

[7] in his study found results pointing to digital support strategies that 'better met the needs of the students'. Needs that were, on the one hand, predictive of the level of engagement; on the other, that support for the relationship was very important.

However, [8] despite research showing the importance of student satisfaction with online pedagogical support, it is important that the authorities do not neglect aspects related to enrolment and psycho-pedagogical services.

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