



## **E-Learning and Student Engagement in a Teacher Training Course**

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### **Abstract**

*Digital technologies in higher education facilitate the learning/teaching process, creating a student-centred environment (Johnson et al., 2016). According Alexander et al. (2017), teachers need to develop digital literacy as e-learning cannot take place without e-teaching. Both teachers and students should have relevant training and support in order to use new technologies in an efficient and effective ways (Guri-Rosenblit and Gros, 2011). During the present crisis e-learning has been playing a significant role. This study investigates the issues of student engagement in on-line environment, the development of cognitive, social and self-directed learning skills of students, future EFL teaching, during a teaching methodology, teaching practicum course. The participants were 40 university students (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year). Their age ranges from 18 to 25 years old, their L1 is Cypriot Greek and they all reside in Cyprus. We have analysed students' engagement and participation in on-line classes, oral and written mode. The on-line sessions via Microsoft teams were recorded and observed regarding the frequency, quantity and quality of students' participation in discussions, question-answer sessions and blogging via Blackboard. We also investigated the attitudes of the students (via questionnaires) towards e-learning and the use of digital tools such as chat, camera, video, blogs, comments, group work, channels and break out rooms and their perception of their value in terms of the learning/teaching process, development of their critical thinking, reflection and analysis skills, continuous professional development. The analysis of the data showed that overall students have a positive attitude towards e-learning, but they prefer either blended learning or face-to-face learning, especially in a post-COVID time. The students tend to use written mode of communication (chats, blogging) rather than oral (audio, camera). They believe that blogs facilitate their development as teachers and practitioners via creating on-line community in a user-friendly way. The students have the opportunity to interact more with their peers and the tutor, express their views, exchange ideas, gain new knowledge and experience, increase the level of their digital competence, especially in the current COVID situation.*

**Keywords:** *E-learning, digital skills, students' engagement and participation.*

### **1. Introduction**

Digital technologies in higher education facilitate the learning/teaching process, creating a student-centred environment (Johnson et al., 2016). According Alexander et al. (2017), teachers need to develop digital literacy as e-learning cannot take place without e-teaching. Both teachers and students should have relevant training and support in order to use new technologies in an efficient and effective way (Guri-Rosenblit and Gros, 2011). Young generation of students can be characterised as “digital natives”, “millennial students” or “Homo Zappiens” (Ubachs et al., 2017), thus, they can be easily trained to use digital tools at university (Alexander et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2016). Students can be autonomous learners, but educational institutions can help them to construct knowledge via guidance and assistance of the teachers and experts (Andrade, 2015). The outbreak of corona virus disease (COVID-19) has affected the higher education sector. During the present crisis e-learning has been playing a significant role. This study investigates the issues of student engagement in on-line environment, the development of cognitive, social and self-directed learning skills of students, future EFL teachers, during a teaching methodology, teaching practicum course.

### **2. E-learning and digital tools**

Web and digital literacy are essential for teachers and students in our modern world. Multiple language and teaching resources can be accessed online. Information communication technology (ICT) should be integrated into the classroom (Spiro, 2013). Both teachers and students need to learn to adopt and adapt new materials, strategies and tools (Godwin-Jones, 2003). Blogs are considered to be a useful on-line tool for learning, teaching, training and education. The students and teachers can share their thoughts and ideas, can express their feelings and opinions in an online environment (Deng and Yuen, 2011). No special technological skills are needed in order to post a blog entry.



Bloggng promotes creativity, critical thinking, reflection, collaboration, interaction and active participation. Blogs can help to gain and share knowledge as well as to increase digital literacy of both students and teachers, change their attitudes towards the Information and Communication Technology (Goktas and Demirel, 2012). According to Rourke and Coleman (2009), blogs can change writing practices, teaching and learning culture and promote self-expression. In the process of writing, bloggers “become part of a discourse community in a complex multimodal setting” (Raith 2009: 276). The students are involved in cooperative learning, they negotiate and construct meaning, develop their L2 writing skills, reflection and analysis (Spiro, 2013).

### **3. Methodology**

The participants were 40 university students (32 female and 8 male, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year). Their age ranges from 18 to 25 years old, their L1 is Cypriot Greek and they all reside in Cyprus. We have analysed students’ engagement and participation in on-line classes, oral and written mode. The on-line sessions via Microsoft teams were recorded and observed regarding the frequency, quantity and quality of students’ participation in discussions, question-answer sessions and blogging via Blackboard. We also investigated the attitudes of the students (via questionnaires) towards e-learning and the use of digital tools such as chat, camera, video, blogs, comments, group work, channels and break out rooms and their perception of their value in terms of the learning/teaching process, development of their critical thinking, reflection and analysis skills, continuous professional development.

### **4. Results**

The analysis of the data showed that overall students have a positive attitude towards e-learning (17.5%), but they prefer either blended learning (20%) or face-to-face learning (57.5%), especially in post-COVID time. Below are some of students’ views in favour of face-to-face teaching:

...you can feel the connection with your professor and it is easier to ask questions and participate... (S1)

...this is the classic way that I am used to concerning learning, participating, and observing... (S5)

...nothing can replace this kind of interaction between the teacher and the student... there are no connection or audio issues... (S18)

At the same time the students do understand the value of on-line teaching and learning:

...the opportunity to feel comfortable and express yourself without being watched by others... online classes are the best solution during COVID situation. (S36)

...more comfortable both for students and for the teachers because we are all in our house, a familiar environment...it helps to feel healthy and protected from any kind of virus. (S15)

...with COVID19 I think that it is best for us to do most of the things on-line. (S27)

The participants have reported that the most popular tools that are used for teaching and learning at the university are Microsoft Teams (85%), Zoom (65%) and Blackboard (65%). The students tend to use more written mode of communication: written chat (77.5%), written blogs (40%), rather than oral: audio (32.5%), video/camera (7.5%), this is based both on the analysis of the data obtained via questionnaires and recorded teaching/learning sessions. With respect to digital tools, the most popular are written chats and recorded sessions as well as blogs, videos, and Turn-it-In, on-line assignment submission tool, see Figure 1.

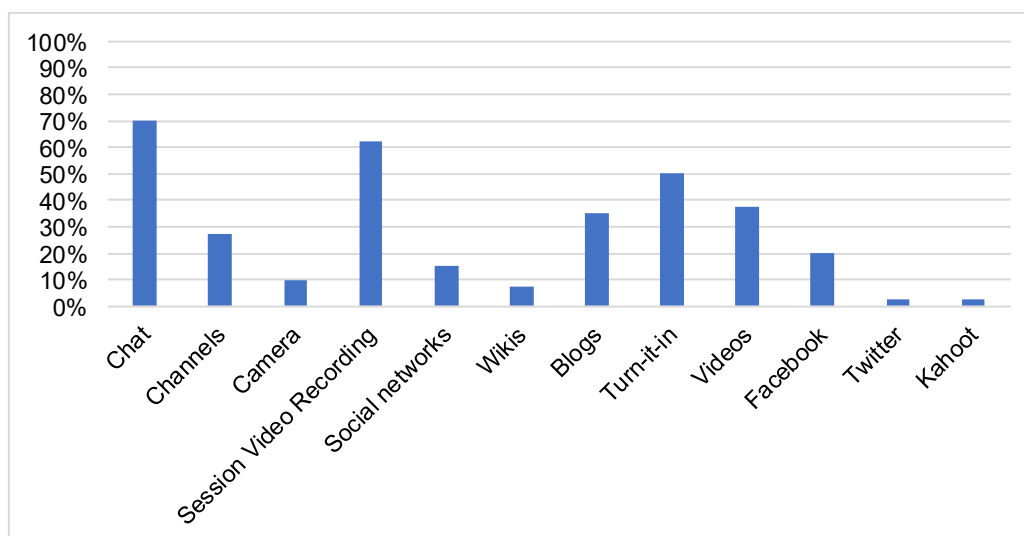


Fig.1. Which tools you would like/prefer to use?

Overall, the students consider themselves to be digitally literate (mean score of 4.05 out of 5), but they still would like to improve their digital competence (3.51). They support the view that blogging is a useful pedagogical and educational tool (3.6), it is a creative activity (3.75) and a useful skill (3.54). It helps them to develop reflective skills (3.89), though it is also a type of assessment (3.35). Blogging gives them the sense of belonging to a community (3.21) and they find it great to share their ideas with their peers in a blog (3.51). The respondents stated that they have freedom to express their views and ideas in a blog (4.32). Blogs help them to comprehend the material better (3.45) and to read more on the relevant topics (3.45); tutor comments and feedback are useful (4.18). Overall, blogging facilitates teacher-student communication (3.32).

As it can be seen in Figure 2, the main purpose of blogging, according to the students, is to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas, to develop their critical thinking, reflection and communication skills, self-directed learning and to create on-line environment for teaching and learning.

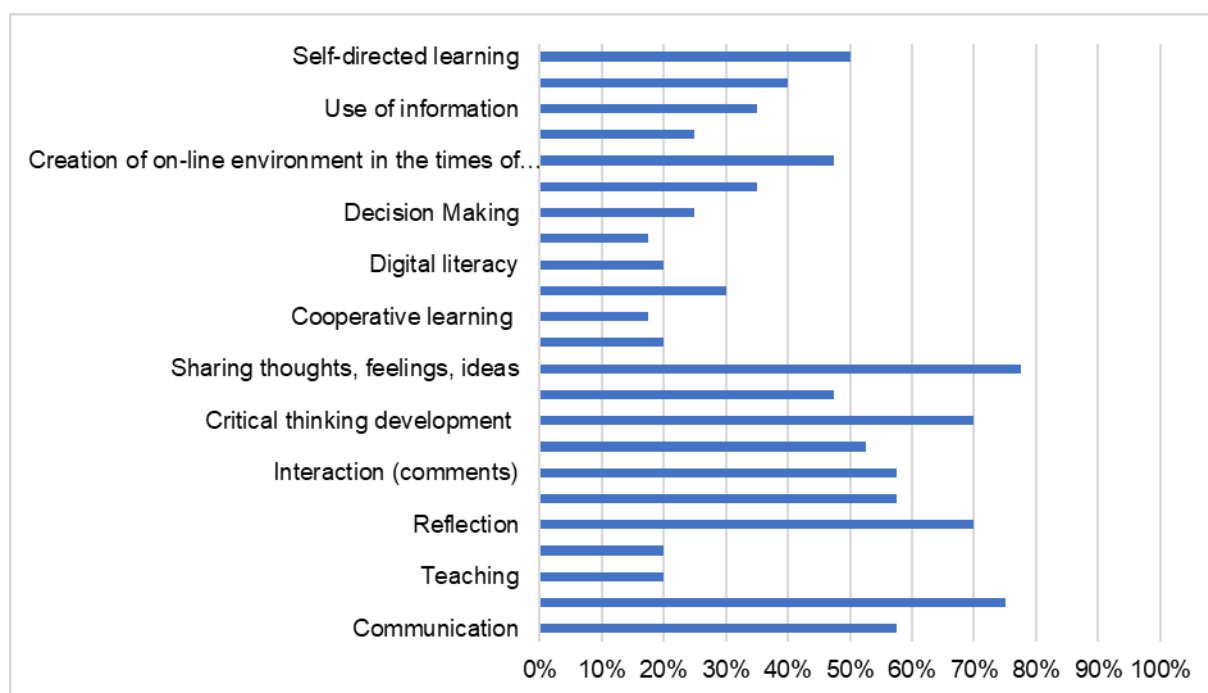


Fig.2. What is the purpose of the blogging?



The students have the freedom to discuss various topics in their blogs and reflective journals:

...profession of the teacher, behaviour of the teacher...suitable and efficient tasks...effective ways to make a lesson funny and not boring for students... (S2)

...critical thinking... creativity... to share our experience and feelings more... about our dreams, current achievements, goals and everyday life problems...(S17)

...the topics covered in class force me to revise what we have been taught... (S25)

In general, it seems that students have a positive experience with on-line learning and use of digital tools such as blogging:

I found blogging the perfect place to share my thoughts and views related to our course and the topics that are being addressed... (S40)

It also encouraged me to think in ways that I would not think before. It provides me with feedback... (S31)

I gained a lot of knowledge and confidence to share my thoughts with my colleagues and I also learn a lot by reading what everyone else has the same about the topics we are dealing with. (S18)

They also have some suggestions of how to improve their on-line learning experience:

Group discussions... quick assessments at the end of lectures...(S9)

...watching some educational videos...quizzes can also be interesting (S11)

We can also play games like Kahoot... (S24)

Movies about cultural differences, videos about teaching experiences or Ted Talks about the teaching environment from experienced teachers. (S36)

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of the data showed that overall students have a positive attitude towards e-learning, but they prefer either blended learning or face-to-face learning, especially in a post-COVID time. The students tend to use written mode of communication (chats, blogging) rather than oral (audio, camera). They believe that blogs facilitate their development as teachers and practitioners via creating on-line community in a user-friendly way. The students have the opportunity to interact more with their peers and the tutor, express their views, exchange ideas, gain new knowledge and experience, increase the level of their digital competence, especially in the current COVID situation. More research is needed in order to get insight into both students and teachers' views regarding on-line teaching/learning environment and digital literacy and their impact on the development of students' critical thinking, reflection and analysis skills as well as on their continuous professional development.

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