ВЫСШЕЕ ОБРАЗОВАНИЕ: КРИТИЧЕСКИЙ ДИСКУРС

Reflective Hyperconnectivity of Social Networks Virtual Space as a Factor in the Design of Distant Learning Environment

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Abstract. In this article, topics related to the urgent transition to distance education (DE), through decisive measures taken to protect Russian university community against consequences of COVID-19 epidemic are covered. Based on semi-structured interviews with administrators, faculty, IT specialists and students, it is argued that in the force majeure circumstances the university offers for DE a standard model of one-size-fits-all curriculum though modified through information and communication technologies. The use of the Internet in a localized online space is limited to delivering courses without considering needs of individual learners, their autonomy, preferences and prior knowledge of the subject. The observation method was used by both participant and non-participant. An experiment on the teachers' self-assessment proves that many still view the university as a source of offline information for students. The article purports to discuss ways to promote DE by the concepts of postindustrial educational space connectivism, hyperconnectivity of social networks, teachers' reflective practice, digital nativity of teachers and students in mastering information and communication technologies. It is claimed that real transition of a Russian university to DE cannot be achieved without internet-provided increased transactional distance in the dialogue between the teacher and students mediated by technology and reflective approach.

Keywords: Russian university, distance education, distant learning, interaction of teachers and students, reflective practice, information and communication technologies

Introduction. The globalization of the modern world is manifested in the interweaving of economic, cultural, political, professional and social spaces where interaction takes place at the junction of traditional borders. Technology has transformed economic and financial boundaries, making the world change from a bunch of isolated societies to the postindustrial community

as a whole. Collateral results of social processes are new, technologically stratified forms of educational organization, directly dependent on stereotypical national parameters of transnational situations. One of these forms, distance education (DE), introduces innovation and creativity, takes advantage of new technologies, fulfills the social task of enhancing a technologically unified educational space. This task requires integrating information and communication technologies (ICT) into the educational space to modernize the process of distance learning (DL) and provide equal opportunities for all potential learners. The problems of deploying DE are especially relevant at the present stage of modernization of Russian higher education, as they involve innovative technologies of teacher-learner interaction. The current situation in Russian university system is characterized not only by the long-term trends of changes associated with the globalization of socio-economic relations but also by the universal spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, which has required urgent and decisive measures to be rapidly taken to protect Russian university community against potential disastrous consequences.

At the V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University (CFU), where the authors of this article teach, DL mode was introduced by the orders of the Rector of CFU of March 16, 2020, No. 249 and March 19, 2020, No. 259. The provisions of the orders held, in brief, that:

• the educational process would be continued on-line; all offline classes would be canceled at the CFU, students would be transferred to distance learning form through the University educational environment and social networks;

• teachers would be encouraged to use accessible Internet technologies;

• a situational center would be established for the maintenance of online distance learning to safeguard the information technology aspect of educational activities;

• deans and heads of educational structural divisions would organize, coordinate and control the teaching staff for implementation of educational programs and the students for on-line attendance of lectures and practical classes;

• heads of departments would monitor the quality of the implementation of educational programs and distance learning technologies, control preparation of teaching materials and provide faculty and students with links to online educational resources.

The process was launched by the order of the Minister which was automatically followed by the accompanying orders of his subordinates, heads of educational institutions. This sequence of actions was predictable in the vertical management hierarchy of Russian education.

Literature review. Paradoxical as it may sound, with the advent of the coronavirus epidemic, Russian higher education received a unique chance to move into the postindustrial technological space within a fantastically short period of time. Some basic views on transition to DE should be mentioned. Following F. Saba's definition, a standard mistake in DE curriculum design is made through a one-size-fits-all academic schedule completely ignoring fundamental needs of learners [1, p. 31]. Teachers and students, the central actors of the transition to DE, actually remain beyond the scope of the management system's dormant eye. Their reflection upon the transition to DE has not been taken into account in delineating agenda of the process.

Reflection is defined as a metacognitive strategy to help teachers and learners as individuals or organizations reflect upon experiences, actions and decisions taken. Practitioners engage in reflections when problems in practice arise and attempts are made to understand and resolve them [2]. Self-reflection allows teachers and students to correlate their experience with their beliefs, knowledge and emotions that permeate learning. In other words, reflection conceptualizes your beliefs as ideas that arise in the process of understanding actions, the world, and yourself in DE process.

Far back in the 1960-ies – 1970-ies Charles A. Wedemeyer, one of the first scholars in the emerging field of distance education, developed a concept and principles, of cradle-to-grave "open" education which he defined as «various forms of teaching-learning arrangements in

which teachers and learners carry out their essential tasks and responsibilities apart from one another, communicating in a variety of ways, for the purposes of <…> starting, stopping and pacing individualized learning programs which are carried on to the greatest extent possible at the convenience of the learners» [3, p. 551]. As C. Wedemeyer's biographer W.C. Diehl maintains, the definition introduced the idea of a domain of education in which teachers and learners «carry out their essential tasks – apart from one another» a core characteristic of distance education. Wedemeyer's idea of Independent Study referred to both internal study and external study, implying that Independent Study could be applied both in campus face-to-face traditional as well as distance education programs [4, p. 39].

Developing C. Wedemeyer's concept, M. Moore argued that distance in education does not necessarily mean physical separation between student and teacher. Distance education is not a geographic separation of learners and teachers, but a pedagogical concept. It is a social and psychological phenomenon denoting the transactional distance determined by the dialogue between the student and the teacher. The transactional distance is measured by two factors: a) the independence necessary for each student in the process of teaching and learning; b) the structure that the teacher or the school should use to ensure that students achieve the required learning goals [5, p. 154]. The Internet provides increased potential for transactional distance in classes based on the technologies of educational systems, individual communication is imitated, providing opportunities for horizontal exchanges and two-way communication [6, p. 64]. Preparing teachers to introduce technology into the learning process is difficult, as it is not just about teaching them how to use hardware and software in a classroom context but teaching them how to help students act in an online mode, in discussion forums, in the course of DE [7, p. 195]. Teachers should realize that the online structure of a DE course is based on the ideas of connectivism, on a constructivist ap-

proach, involving online discussion and dialogue between the teacher and students, which allows them to create an interconnected learning community in which integrative and socially-cognitive approaches are practiced [8, p. 6].

The objective of this article is to present a vision of the problems of transition to DE and to analyze the key points of reflection on teaching and learning in a university environment which, in our opinion, have not been paid proper attention in the current DE implementation process: reflective interaction of all parties involved in the process, intrinsic connectivism of postindustrial educational space, hyperconnectivity of social networks, impact of variation in digital nativity of teachers and students. In this research the authors rely upon their own experience as administrators and teachers of foreign languages at the CFU Institute of Foreign Philology and upon views shared by their colleagues and students in a number of semi-structured interviews.

Materials and methods. The prerequisites for analysis of the CFU transition to distance teaching and learning were: 1) the survey of organization and delivery of online studies aimed at verification of the activity of students in relation to restructuring the format of education; the use by teachers of ICT resources and interdisciplinary approaches in online classes; 2) the design of questionnaires for faculty and students aimed at checking how they master online techniques pertinent to distance education format, ICT hardware and software they deploy; 3) the observations of faculty meetings, consulting sessions and online classes.

The observation method was used by participant and non-participant researchers. Participant observation required the researchers to be subjective participants in the sense that they used information accumulated through personal involvement with administration, faculty and students to discover all parties' attitudinal position and activity in the transition to the DE format. Non-participant observation required the researchers to maintain critical reflexivity and discuss cognitive, behavioral and interac-

tional deviations from basic provisions of the DE theory and the transactional distance theory reflected in the literature on cognitive and pedagogical underpinnings of DE [9, p. 1].

The researchers' stance was also preconditioned by two more factors: 1) a personal factor – we are well known in the CFU community as teachers of foreign languages (English, German and French) specializing in the field of domain-oriented intercultural communication, which requires an interdisciplinary approach; 2) an objective factor – interdisciplinary and intercultural approach employed at many CFU departments encourages administrators, faculty and students to take part in online discussions. During online communication they not only verbalize what they are doing, but also disclose their beliefs based on personal experience. In online discourse personal ideas are shared by other participants and take on a social character [10, p. 59].

Therefore, every time we were going to interview an administrator, a teacher, a student, or an ICT specialist, it was obvious they expected a hidden agenda to be discussed and never missed a chance to speak about problems arising in the CFU transition to DE.

Results. At the first stage of the study, on March 16–31, 2020, the authors took part in informal preliminary discussions with administration and teachers of various university departments, which made it possible to outline the range of problems that arise in the process of CFU transition to DL. At the second stage, April 1–30, 2020, pilot interviews were carried out to analyze the functional and pragmatic readiness of faculty and students, representing the main social and age strata of the CFU community, for transition to DL. Three groups of students and teachers of non-linguistic specialties were interviewed via e-mail, skype and social networks on condition of anonymity, but with indication of age and duration of pedagogical and scientific experience of the informants.

Summarizing the results of the analysis based on the documents of the Ministry, the CFU management, and the interviews, eight general provisions can be distinguished.

1. The urgent transfer of Russian higher education to the format of DL in the current pandemic situation is fundamentally different from regular DL based on open online courses. Educational institutions that are forced to work with students remotely to reduce the risk of the spread of coronavirus infection should take this difference into account when assessing the effectiveness of their DL system.

2. The spread of the coronavirus and the introduction of general quarantine can be viewed as an opportunity to confront the challenges of new educational technologies and prepare for a gradual transition to the online format. Progress in this direction will lead to success in the new educational space. The main obstacle along this path is the human factor. So, according to our data, over the past three academic years, a quarter of foreign language teachers at the Institute of Foreign Philology of the Crimea Federal University have never held classes, lectures or presentations in a distance format. On average, their level of proficiency in online learning skills is 3.2 out of 5 on their self-assessment.

3. Online learning is fundamentally different from classroom learning, so the effective transition to DL may be slowed down due to insufficient readiness of the administration. Moreover, the regulations do not encourage teachers to prepare high-quality online courses and presentations for DL. The reason, obviously, is that the transition to DL takes more time, since a carefully detailed organization of the training course is required. What has previously been discussed in the classroom should be detailed on the online. A high-quality online lecture or seminar is not an ordinary broadcast via a webcam but a completely different form of the material presentation and control of its acquisition. Distance learning requires a higher degree of self-organization and independence from faculty and students.

4. The management system of the university, including administration, dean's offices and departments' offices, performs the functions of supervision and approval of documentation. The

system traditionally requires reports from lower offices and prepares reports for higher authorities. Our findings prove this order of things is being kept in the new reality. The online classes are conducted according to the approved schedule, though without physical presence of students and teachers in the classrooms. The new Situation Center activity is limited to information and advisory functions, while its technical support is only advisory in nature.

5. The convenience of the educational process for students is not taken into account. They are not allowed to choose between synchronous and asynchronous study of the educational material. Teachers with no previous DL experience prefer, to the detriment of students, the synchronous format, when all students must simultaneously sit at their computers, which can be difficult for personal reasons or due to a local failure of Internet.

6. The normative documents say nothing about the factors that are vital for the organization of the educational space of DL, about the variables of the online learning process and the ways of using ICT. The need for reorientation of teachers and students, which is indispensable for construction of post-industrial education, is not mentioned.

7. As a result of processing the respondents' interviews, it turned out that they all use ICT, about half of them approve of the idea of transition to DL, while hardly anyone is familiar with the theory of DL and reflexive methodology. With a generally positive opinion of the respondents about DL and their obvious level of proficiency in ICT, their understanding of DL is limited by the reality in which the use of Internet is limited to online provision of theoretical and practical courses in which students are not differentiated according to their educational preferences and prior knowledge of the subject.

8. The respondents were asked to conduct a pilot self-assessment test of their readiness to switch to the DL format, marking levels of their ICT skills and knowledge of DL theory. Grading scale: 1 – fragmentary; 2 – unsatisfactory; 3 – satisfactory; 4 – good; 5 – very good. A prerequisite for this stage of the experiment was understanding that the respondents are oriented towards the realities of the university community, and this orientation prevails regardless of the subject they teach or learn. The average self-assessment mark of the level of ICT proficiency was 3.26. In general, teachers of the older age group demonstrated lower self-assessment marks of ICT proficiency than their younger colleagues. Their vision of modern higher education is based on the prevailing view of the university as a source of information. On the contrary, young teachers, along with students, belong in the "digital generation", sufficiently prepared to search for information online.

Only a small group of respondents would like to move to DL on a permanent basis, while teachers in the older age group claim they are not ready for online teaching.

Discussion. Thinking over the format of DE introduced in the CFU, we presume that it is not enough just to transfer traditional methods into the technological environment. New forms of constructing, expanding, practicing and disseminating knowledge must be taken into account, overcoming the barriers of time and space and creating transactional distance between teachers and students. The development of the students' cognitive abilities through interaction with their teachers depends on the faculty's ability to convey their experiences, beliefs and assumptions in the light of new information and this can best be achieved through joint discussions and explanations in the communities of virtual practice [11, p. 361]. The teacher, as a moderator of communication online, should be an intermediary between students and information sources, should motivate them, clarify doubts, improve skills of searching, organizing and analyzing information. Our teaching experience shows that there is what we will call a conflict of interests between the compulsory DL format, the general components of the curriculum, and the reality factors that our graduates will face in their professional activities.

We would like to refer to M. Moore's idea of three sets of variables in special teaching

procedures of the transactional distance which is a function of the dialogue, the structure and the learner autonomy. 1) The dialogue is the first set of variables that is developed by teachers and learners in the course of their interactions. 2) Structure is the second set of variables formed by the elements and ways in which the teaching program is structured so that it can be delivered through various communication media. With less dialogue and more structure, the transactional distance is higher. In a course with little transactional distance, learners have guidance through ongoing dialogue. This would be more appropriate, or attractive to learners who are less secure in managing their own learning. Moore recognized that with minimal dialogue, students are forced to make their own decisions for themselves and generally exercise autonomy [12, p. 2]. 3) The learner autonomy is the third set of variables describing the behaviours of learners. M. Moore postulates that these are not technological or communications variables, but variables in teaching and in learning and in the interaction of teaching and learning [13, p. 23].

F. Saba adds that the transactional distance in education varies for each individual student throughout the entire learning period, since the dialogue and the structure vary in the dynamic process of interaction between the student and the teacher, as well as between the students [1, p. 32]. The transactional distance depends on the stable online connections between data and processes, teachers and students, on their hyperconnectivity. *Hyperconnectivity* is the use of many systems and devices so that you are always connected to social networks and other sources of information. It implies the growing interconnectedness of all parties in the process based on the Internet and mobile technologies. Hyperconnectivity undermines traditional ideas about how education is structured, how teachers and students interact and receive information. However, as noted by E. Murphy and co-authors, we cannot forget that interaction in a virtual environment of hyperconnectivity is determined not by communication channels, but by their pedagogical application during which online instruc-

tion mode can be changed for the knowledge to be acquired to build new knowledge [14, p. 585].

Due to technical progress, teaching/learning situations are characterized by changes, unpredictability and complexity. The introduction of new types of learning mediated by digital technology has changed our understanding of knowledge acquisition and teaching activities [15; 7; 16]. Accordingly, teaching methods must be adapted to include the concepts of connectivity [17] and online learning, which are already effective in various social fields, and this often requires changes in the beliefs and practices of language teachers. As M. McVee and co-authors point out, even teachers familiar with the daily use of computers and the Internet know little about how to integrate technologies to facilitate teaching and learning. When they try to integrate technology into training sessions, they usually do this based on their beliefs and experience [18, p. 197]. As for students, they are prone to limit the scope of technology to their individual needs of communication and information retrieval outside the classroom [19, p. 159].

It is important to stress that teachers' reflection is understood and deployed in different ways. Therefore, the suggestions for DE presented in this article reflect our own conceptions as teachers and researchers about teaching and learning in general, and about teaching and learning mediated by technology, that is, in a virtual context. Technology serves as a means by which interaction and learning can be facilitated, as a means that can enhance cooperation and collaboration between students and teachers in the active construction of knowledge, as well as in the meaning and reframing of personal theories involved in the process of teaching and learning [20, p. 303].

The monitors of this process in the university environment are teachers, whose actions reflect what they know and believe in. The cognition of teachers is a set of processes aimed at searching, coding, decoding, storing and processing information about people as members of society, about their activities and behavior, as well as a set of knowledge generated as a result of this

process. Teachers' reflection includes decision making, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and understanding of their environment. It is a combination of cognitive reactions and affective reactions, responses to the educational context, and factors related to students. J. Song and S. Andrews point out that, among these constructions, beliefs play a key role in how teachers interpret information about the process of teaching and how they translate these interpretations into their practical activities [21, p. 3–6].

We would like to highlight three points that characterize the beliefs of teachers: 1) beliefs are complex and dialectical – they have a paradoxical character, because at the same time they are both stable and dynamic in specific contexts; 2) beliefs are inextricably linked with knowledge, which includes the teacher's interpretation of her/his experience and reflection on this experience; and 3) beliefs are influenced by reflection, and they can change when people have the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs or when learning contexts change [8, p. 5].

Beliefs in DL can provide all participants with engagement in critical and reflective discourse through online discussions with teachers and colleagues. The more satisfied the participants are with the structure and with interaction, the more satisfied they are with their perceived knowledge gained [9, p. 6]. By verbalizing their experience, beliefs and emotions in virtual discussion groups, teachers can realize their mental processes through explanations and examples, creating opportunities for questioning, expanding and reformulating ideas that arise in communication [18, p. 82]. This is possible because one of the characteristics of beliefs is that they are influenced by the mode in which teachers can rethink their practice and views regarding teaching and learning.

We define three prerequisites without which reflective learning in DL is impossible.

1. The task of mastering a given volume of professional knowledge has been replaced by the task of mastering the universal skills of searching, selecting and analyzing information that meets the ideas of professional competence.

2. Professional competence is always substantive and aimed at aspects of interest to participants in the learning process. The aspects of interest should refer to a strictly regulated basis of belonging to any specialized field of knowledge.

3. The «epistemic vigilance» [22, p. 185], or ability to verify the communicators' claims helps to discriminate between genuine and false information because the communicators are not always competent and communication is thus open to the risk of misinformation. If communication has to remain advantageous on average, humans have to deploy an ability to calibrate their epistemic trust.

Reflective approach makes the teacher conduct a preliminary analysis of the future needs of students and, based on this analysis, carry out the development and organization of the curriculum, search for training materials for classes, etc. The search for means to accomplish these tasks should be related to a) the ideas of multiculturalism, b) the requirements of intercultural competence and c) the interdisciplinary content of globalized DE. These three aspects must be carefully studied by the teacher as they require knowledge in various fields.

Interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches in reflective learning contribute to the formation of motivational preferences of both teachers and students. The motivation of the teacher can come from: the locus of internal control (if I believe that my behavior determines the events of my life) or external (if I believe that the events are out of my control). External motivation refers to the material benefits associated with the profession, such as salary, social security, etc. Internal motivation is associated with the teacher's beliefs, self-esteem, personal growth, emotional assessment of one's competence and the results obtained.

Beliefs are perceived as metacognitive knowledge that we must use to better understand our potential. They are the result of our personal experience, our interaction with the outside world. As such, beliefs are social, but also individual, stable and contextual [8, p. 3].

Reflection on the beliefs of all participants in the DE process is characterized by a wide variety of possible sources, including: a) personal experience of social practice, b) personality factors and preferences for modeling social distance, c) principles based on well-known approaches or methods. Beliefs are conceptualized as a form of thinking, as a construction of transnational reality, ways of seeing and perceiving a multicultural world and its phenomena, constructed in our experience and resulting from the interactive process of our interpretations.

Self-acquired beliefs of the DE process participants cannot be inspired by rigid group structure limitations of a traditional university. Following the connectivist definition of S. Downes, group emphasises: 1) sameness, 2) order and control, 3) borders and membership, 4) additive, cumulative knowledge. On the contrary, network emphasises: 1) diversity, 2) autonomy, 3) openness, 4) emergent knowledge [23].

The concept of network is prominent in the theory of connectivism that characterizes knowledge as a flow through a network of human and non-human nodes. A network comprises connections between entities (nodes), where the nodes can be individuals, groups, systems, fields, ideas, resources or communities. S. Downes and G. Siemens, exponents of the openness and interpretive nature of knowledge and the connectedness of learning online, proposed connectivism as a learning theory for the digital age, a successor to behaviourism, cognitivism and constructivism [24; 25; 17].

Conclusion. Traditionally, training university students has been marked for rigid group structure limitations. It presupposes developing professional and methodological skills in acquiring specialized knowledge for their professional practice. However, training students to act in the reality of contemporary DE means preparing them to deal with constant scientific and technological advances, where knowledge quickly becomes obsolete and the concept of DE as something definitive needs to be revised. It is necessary that teachers should have a posture of permanent apprentices, which involves willingness to discover new ways and courage to discard old teaching formulas, such as those based on textbooks and classes.

Experiential learning ends up being somewhat facilitated when we consider DL training courses which develop a range of skills integrated with a) digital literacy for locating and evaluating information from different sources; b) personal and participatory literacy provided by ICT spaces where teachers interact and share personal experiences based on the ideas of connectivism and hyperconnectivity; c) mixed literacies which integrate reflective techniques and ICT. Thus, there is a possibility of greater integration between theory and practice in the DE course.

Depending on the use of educational ICT, online learning makes it possible to modify passive reception of knowledge into building knowledge. Thus, online learning is seen as an active construction process triggered by learners, both at the individual and social levels.

The preparation of this article was motivated by the discussions and interviews the authors have held with the colleagues at the CFU which have led us to report and problematize on our outlooks in an attempt to establish relations between the cognition of educators, teachers and students, to promote reflective practice, to popularize general DE principles, online connectivism and hyperconnectivity in the ICT space.

The authors are convinced that what facilitates dialogue and the re/construction of knowledge and beliefs is not the technology itself, but the way the activities mediated by this technology are proposed and, above all, conducted by teachers, tutors and students in the virtual learning context. In order to discard traditional visions of teaching that still mark the DL reality of Russian universities, more collaborative forms of knowledge construction focused on diversity need to be presented to students and teachers in the course of training.

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Рефлексивная гиперконнективность виртуального пространства социальных сетей как фактор создания среды дистанционного обучения

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются факторы, связанные с неотложным переходом к дистанционному образованию (ДО) посредством принятия решительных мер по защите российского университетского сообщества от последствий эпидемии COVID-19. На материале интервью с администраторами, преподавателями, специалистами в области информационных технологий и студентами утверждается, что в форс-мажорных обстоятельствах университет предлагает для ДО стандартную модель универсального учебного плана, которая модифицируется с помощью информационных и коммуникативных технологий (ИКТ). Установлено, что использование локализованного онлайн-пространства ограничено проведением курсов без учёта индивидуальных способностей и потребностей студентов, их предпочтений и предшествующего знания предмета. Эксперимент по самооценке преподавателей доказывает, что многие по-прежнему рассматривают университет как источник информации для студентов. В статье анализируются пути продвижения ДО с помощью концепций коннективизма постиндустриального образовательного пространства, гиперконнективности социальных сетей, рефлексивной практики преподавателей, подготовленности к использованию ИКТ. Утверждается, что реальный переход российского университета к ДО не может быть достигнут без дистанционного взаимодействия и диалога между преподавателем и студентами посредством ИКТ и рефлексивной методики.

Ключевые слова: российский университет, дистанционное обучение, взаимодействие преподавателей и обучающихся, рефлексивная практика, информационные и коммуникационные технологии