



Dossier: "The virtual environment student"

The virtual environment student in Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages at the UOC

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Submission date: January 2007

Published in: May 2007

RECOMMENDED CITATION

BORGES, Federico; FARRÉS, Jaume; GALLEGO, Cristina (2007). "The virtual environment student in Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages at the UOC". In: Federico BORGES (coord.). "The virtual environment student" [online dossier]. *Digitum*. Iss. 9. UOC. [Date of citation: dd/mm/yy].
<http://www.uoc.edu/digithum/9/dt/eng/borges_farres_gallego.pdf>
ISSN 1575-2275

Abstract

With the convergence with the European Space for Higher Education, reflections on the Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages student in virtual environments are becoming more appropriate than ever. This article will be addressing the problems of this type of virtual student from the perspective of their generic profile, the skills and competences that they should have, and their specific needs.

Keywords

student, virtual environment student, Humanities student, Language and Literature student, foreign language student, virtual student profile

Resum

Amb la convergència amb l'espai europeu d'ensenyament superior la reflexió sobre l'estudiant d'Humanitats, Filologia i llengua estrangera d'entorns virtuals esdevé més adient que mai. En aquest article s'adreça la problemàtica d'aquest tipus d'estudiant virtual des de l'òptica del seu perfil genèric, de les destreses i competències que ha de tenir, i de les seves necessitats específiques.

Paraules clau

estudiant, estudiant d'entorns virtuals, estudiant d'Humanitats, estudiant de Filologia, estudiant de llengua estrangera, perfil de l'estudiant virtual



1. Introduction

Part of the reflection on the new forms of education raised by the new age consists of analysing and studying a type of student that did not exist a few years ago, and one which has great future growth potential: the virtual environment student in Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages. When considering this student, it is essential not to lose sight of the problem that institutions, teachers and students have to deal with in terms of the new situation of studies associated with these qualifications by the convergence with the European Space for Higher Education. Utilitarianism and placing maximum importance on technical capacities or the skills and competences¹ that students should possess to graduate as future professionals is combined with a revision of the studies associated with these qualifications, with the risk of reducing credits, in re-planning the qualifications map, the academic load or the obligatory nature of these studies.

It is true to say that convergence with the ESHS involves designing and offering studies focused on the skills and competences that as future professionals students will have, but without forgetting that the emphasis shifts *from conveying knowledge to facilitate learning*, and that a *degree of autonomy and responsibility* is expected of the students. It is for this reason that, apart from acquiring and developing skills and competences of a professional nature, certain transversal skills and competences have to be taken into account (which also offer quality and value to other more technological fields), such as the ability to communicate and express oneself efficiently, the ability to analyse and synthesise, the ability to establish relations, the ability to criticise while incorporating criticism, the ability to create and innovate and the ability to learn from the past, to name but a few. These abilities are precisely many of those that online students of Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages subjects and studies have to develop. Generally speaking, these students have specific common characteristics and needs that need to be taken into consideration when designing and offering these studies in telematic training environments.

2. Generic profile

On all UOC courses, and also in the Humanities degree, the Catalan Language and Literature degree and the foreign language subjects at the university, we find mature students, generally

between the ages of thirty and forty, with family responsibilities and full-time employment, which they have to combine with their university studies.

Even though very many Humanities and Catalan Language and Literature students work in primary and secondary teaching, in the civil service or for institutions, they also come from professions that are not directly related to their studies, such as veterinary surgeons, architects or engineers². From whatever background, the love of language and the humanistic and social aspects are the reasons that, in many cases, steer them towards these studies; there might even be a previous desire, or it might be awoken, to devote themselves to it professionally after graduating. As regards foreign language students, in general an extrinsic motivation predominates, such as an academic need or work reasons. Generally speaking, Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign language students have a high level of motivation and personal enthusiasm and are determined and diligent people. There is also a strong desire for personal enrichment, to improve as people, and to acquire and consolidate a general cultural wealth.

By contrast, these students usually display some shortcomings, which, if not adequately resolved, may harm the motivation and enthusiasm that we have mentioned. These shortcomings fall into two groups, one relating to the learning medium and the other to the achievement of their learning.

Learning medium:

- Low or insufficient mastery of basic ICT³.
- Insufficient mastery of the e-learning environment.

Achievement:

- Lack or loss of skills and abilities for personal study.
- Lack of skills and abilities for studying in a virtual environment.
- Difficulties of expression and mastery of linguistic and communicative competence.

Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign language students in virtual environments are no different from others in the sense that today a large number of them start university studies with a low mastery of basic computer tools in terms of communication and word processing, and very little operative dexterity with a computer as a study tool; it is now commonplace for many of these students to be taught or helped by their children or friends in mastering the necessary tools. It should be highlighted, though, that these shortcomings are generally

1. Skill understood as a compendium of the knowledge, the knowing how to do things, and the knowing how to act that a person learns or develops. Competency understood as a visible and measurable manifestation of the skills, attitudes, knowledge and desire that an individual brings to the achievement of an aim.
2. In English language, French language and Chinese subjects, the professional background of the students is logically much more varied.
3. ICT: Information and Communication Technologies.



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less and less visible in new virtual environment students in these studies and subjects.

At the same time, logically, every student has to familiarise themselves with their e-learning environment, and this practical knowledge will be quicker and more satisfactory the higher their ICT user profile.

In any event, even though more and more new students are good ICT users, the personal skills and competences for study and for achieving learning in a virtual environment *are as essential as they are non-existent in many cases*. The mastery of ICT tools does not constitute a guarantee that the new virtual environment students know how to study in a virtual environment, with such skills as:

- Communicating efficiently with the lecturer and their classmates.
- Searching, selecting and producing information.
- Debating and constructively criticising, while accepting criticism at the same time.
- Contributing to group work while learning from their classmates.
- Using mistakes as a source of learning.

It is not a question of "recovering" the skills and competences from their student years to be able to apply them again to their e-learning, but of acquiring and developing the appropriate skills in e-learning environments (Borges, 2007). As one of these is that of participating in the classroom communication spaces, these students may at first feel that they are not "up to it", and the fear of making a fool of themselves limits them greatly.

Also, not knowing what learning in a virtual environment is may lead students to underestimate the time that they will have to devote to it, which is why there are cases of over-enrolment or of bad time management. Studying in a virtual environment is different from what students knew years before. The skills and actions that they carry out in face-to-face learning cannot be translated directly into online learning (Borges, 2007), and students soon become aware that studying in a virtual environment is hard work and not at all free of difficulties.

Despite this, once the initial stage has been overcome, the profile of the best student in these subjects is not only seen in the marks, but also in the profile of a successful student who makes the most of their learning.

Firstly, they are usually students who choose the subjects that they are able to take on. They plan their work and their time well, devoting daily time to study and always ahead of the work required of them. Normally, good students also enjoy taking part in the life of the institution and they establish links with their classmates. They are usually proactive and participative, helping their classmates. They are also constant in their work and feel curiosity for learning. They are not always, however, students

who have luck on their side as they also suffer technological problems, administrative problems or a work overload. What sets these students apart from the rest is precisely not the absence of problems, but *their reaction to them*: their patience, their proactivity and responsibility, and their constancy.

3. Skills and competences required

In principle, the skills that the students in these subjects and studies must have, and the competences that they have to display, are no different from those of other students. For example, communication in the virtual environment is primarily written, and therefore efficient written expression and communication competences are essential for their academic success in a virtual environment. In particular, the Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages student must have the following essential skills:

- Mastery of the language and register that they use, bringing clarity and order when using them.
- Logical organisation of all types of texts, be they e-mail messages or tasks.
- Appropriate analysis, synthesis, relating, deduction and argument.
- Reflection to create their own discourse.
- Habitually correct and proofread their own texts.
- Implement strategies to read texts well that contain objective difficulties (poetry, essays, etc.)
- Depending on the subject or study, it is highly desirable that students should have a good knowledge of other languages.

The above skills will become apparent, for example, in competences such as sending contributions to the classroom with a clear, well thought-out text, or when students display their own discourse that is the result of analysis and reflection.

In short, the Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign languages student cannot drop their guard in these matters. The most important point is that students of these qualifications see their studies as an opportunity, a discovery, a journey towards knowledge and towards unknown moments and experiences; things go badly when they view their studies as an obligation and a routine.

4. Specific needs of these students

In subjects and studies where the interpretation and knowledge of the past, textual analysis, mastery of a language, or grounded and reasoned discussion are key elements, communication tools between students are essential for the correct achievement of the



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academic syllabus. Despite this, the existence of communication tools is by no means a guarantee that all the specific needs of these students will be met. There are types of tools that can improve specific learning in these studies, in addition to guiding students towards deeper critical thought, towards reflection and participation in the classroom, and towards improving working processes in collaboration.

Without a doubt, the success of the student depends initially on their interest, their work and their assimilation, but some organisational modes and specific tools and resources may increase or improve it. It is for this reason that these students have specific needs that lie beyond being able to exchange opinions and texts. An example is the technological possibility of working with phonetic symbols. Another is that the online student of these qualifications faces a huge network world. Therefore, they should be taught or guided on how to search for and select websites and resources of interest that relate to these areas, including basic websites or ones that must be consulted, and they would even have to make their own personal compilation. Another need is the existence of a correctly functioning virtual library which provides resources that relate to the object of the search. Another specific need is being able to provide complementary material to classmates or the classroom and that the students pool "discoveries" (bibliographies, articles, websites, exhibitions and other discoveries) that they have made over the course of their studies and that are related to the content of a specific subject.

As with any other type of student, they also need to be able to learn and work in collaboration. Without considering here the advantages and drawbacks of learning in collaboration, online students of these studies must be able to experience it and benefit from *learning from* other classmates and *with other* classmates (Bautista et al, 2006). Group work enables them to get to know other points of view, other focuses, and other ways of studying and learning; it allows them to establish relationships and bonds between students, which may develop further and translate into opportunities and exchanges in the students' professional or personal development sphere. It is true to say that badly designed and badly carried out work in collaboration may lead to student "burn-out"; therefore, they should be aware that group work often demands many hours of dedication, opinions and ways of working must be agreed on to reach their goals, and work paces may be different. As with any human group, there may be problems of communication, heated discussions and differences between the members' skills, and it will also be essential to balance the different interests and effort and dedication of each member.

Besides this, a geographical information system may be an example of specific software. A *geographical information system*⁴

(GIS) is a database that displays information in thematic layers in such a way that pointing out an object or node of interest may offer information about its attributes, and also the opposite, selecting records from the database enables us locate them on a map. These attributes may be geographical, demographical, historical, archaeological, environmental, etc. For foreign language students, a specific software need is a synchronous communication tool that offers them the possibility of verbally interacting with other classmates and with the lecturer from the virtual classroom. It is clear that real time conversation interaction is essential if the foreign language student needs to practise their conversation skills; despite this, the need for synchronous communication is not exclusive to foreign language learning, as we can see from the specific needs of engineering students compiled by Lluís Vicent (2007).⁵

In any event, the central idea is that online Humanities, Language and Literature, and foreign language students require specific software, which calls for monitoring of their needs and innovation by the institution that allows the students to have resources with which to achieve an improvement to their learning in a virtual environment.

Other needs of virtual environment students in general, and of these studies in particular, relate to the expectations towards their lecturers consistent with their degree of maturity, of responsibility and of involvement in their learning: they expect the lecturer to be there, for them to note their presence in the classroom and to give life to the classroom with an adequate pace of messages. They do not expect their lecturer to be the world's leading authority in the subject, or for them to transmit all of the knowledge needed as the students are capable and they like discovering and learning. But they do like the lecturer to motivate them, to give them elements of reflection on the content, to communicate their enthusiasm for the subject to them. They also expect a personal lecturer-student communication if necessary, a personal or general comment on difficulties or questions that need to be resolved, or also on the work done. As online students, they expect from the teaching staff clear instructions, orientative texts, and diligence and speed in replying, correcting and marking exercises, activities and assessment tests.

Reading the article by Marta Dziubińska and Joanna Opoka (2007), one can understand that the expectations of virtual environment students towards the teaching staff and their institution is not a whim of Humanities, Language and Literature or foreign language students by their character, but a constant of virtual environment students. This requirement should not be considered as the tyranny of the students but rather a good way of raising teaching quality and of improving the professional practice of the lecturers and the institution.

4. To find out more, go to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gis>.

5. To view the use of a synchronous tool in technical studies, go to <http://www.salle.url.edu/semipresencial/cat/demostracions.html>



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Finally, very often, what students most need is simpler than a piece of software or specific tools: they need time; time to work more on their own work and the assessment tests and to take more care with them, and time to be able to carry out a more solid and more satisfactory continuous assessment, as teaching periods are short, the demand of activities, exercises and assessment tests is stiff and it gives students the sensation of not being able to keep up.

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