

Social presence in online courses. Presuppositions, perspectives and interpretations of humor

Presença social em cursos online.

Pressupostos, perspectivas e interpretações de humor

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Resumo

Este artigo enfoca os modos pelos quais a presença se realiza na aprendizagem online, com especial atenção para o humor. O desenvolvimento da tecnologia trouxe consigo muitas melhorias e facilidades em quase todas as áreas da atividade humana, mas também produziu muitas outras perdas. No domínio da Educação, a comunicação mediada por computador veio com desafio de substituir ou pelo menos complementar a interação face-a-face com a interatividade online. Neste contexto, a amplitude e as clássicas ferramentas de ensino estão sendo constantemente reavaliadas ou redesenhadas. O lugar de espontaneidade no novo contexto educacional foi discutido de modo profundo e polarizado. O artigo enfatiza alguns dos mais importantes pressupostos, limitações e benefícios destes conceitos aplicados ao ambiente online.

Palavras-chave: Aprendizagem online. Humor. Presença social. Comunicação mediada por computador.

Abstract

This paper focuses on the ways in which social presence is realized in online learning, with a special attention on humor. The technological development brought with it many improvements and facilities in almost every area of human activities, but also produced many other losses. In the educational domain, computer-mediated communication came with the challenge to substitute or at least to complement face-to-face interaction with the online interactivity. In this context, the amplitude and the forms of classical teaching tools were constantly re-evaluated or redesigned. The place of spontaneity in the new educational context was discussed in deep and polarized ways. The paper emphasises on some of the most important presuppositions, limitations, and benefits of these concepts applied to the online environment.

Keywords: Online learning. Humor. Social presence. Computer-mediated communication.

Revealing presuppositions: communication, social presence, and technology

The pervasiveness of new media in educational practices is now an obvious fact. As in many other domains of life, technology shaped the social relationships, the ways in which the content is disseminated, and the general perspectives about humankind and society. Critical inquires in the role of technology balanced, generally, between the instrumental conception of technology, the technological determinism, and the social shaping of technology theory. The later seems the best approach for education, as a nuanced and coherent perspective in which the technology is not the single force that draws the changes, but also the social actors have the power to influence the course of its development. In the classroom, for instance, the teacher is the authority who can decide if she or he will use the new media settings, and to what extent. Thus, some technological software designed for educational purposes may be well rejected in practice for different reasons. So the people may have a feedback and this response is an important criterion according to which the complex nexus between education and technology is regulated.

Following the interrogation “What is lost when something is gained?”, different possible lists with the benefits and disadvantages may be created. The face-to-face interaction remains a gold standard for the educational model because it includes the whole set of components such as the context, the participants, all the range of communication tools (verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal cues) and adapted methods. The online medium is a less rich medium (DAFT; LENGEL, 1986), and all the physical attributes of presence are blurred. As Terry Anderson pointed out, “the online learning environment is also a unique cultural context in itself” (2008, p. 48), that has to be comprehended in another hermeneutic frame. The minuses of the medium can be fixed through the means of blended learning, a trend in higher education that supposes “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” (GARRISON; KANUKA, 2004, p. 96). Thus, the effectiveness of the process is augmented by combining the advantages of multiple way of communication (synchronous and asynchronous), different media instruments, and various methods. The community of learners can also be strengthened through this integration of activities and by the constructed continuum of interaction.

In this new frame we also find new methods, relations, and tools beside the adjusted “old” ones. In Dewey’s tradition, interaction is a valued key element of the educational process. In this vein, the questions focused on the capacity of new media to offer real interaction and not just simulated interactivity. How the digital medium can create social

presence in online learning activities remained a central concern for those involved in this area. As Garrison and Cleveland-Innes stated, social presence “appears to be directly associated with the magnitude of interaction” (2005, p. 142), and not with the quantity of interaction that cannot reflect the quality of relationships and discourses. The nature of interaction established in online context remains decisive in establishing social presence.

This problem recalls an old dispute about the social characteristics of new media, and their effects are the inner presuppositions of the actual discussions in the field of online learning. Thus, the polemics were situated between the negative effects of using Internet, such as social isolation, loneliness, depression, deindividuation, decrease of commitment for the organic communities, and the positive influences, such as well-being, more relationships, easiness in initiating and maintaining interpersonal bonds, more skills for better communicating or better immersion in the online and offline social life. Very eloquent for the complexity of this issue is the example of the research made by Kraut and his colleagues in 1998. They reported bad outcomes of using Internet even if the participants at the study intensively used the Internet for communication (for this reason, they labelled these effects as “paradox”). In 2002, Kraut and his team revisited the “Internet paradox” with significant changes: their subjects “generally experienced positive effects of using the Internet on communication, social involvement, and well-being” (KRAUT et al., 2002, p. 49). Anyhow, even if the Internet was not created for social purposes, this facet has rapidly propagated and almost became the principal motif of its utilization. The familiarization with the medium was an important element of better using it while the control increased. The early research into “the interpersonal dynamics of computer-mediated communication began with the naïve assumption that media characteristics would have determining effects on interaction” (BAYM, 2002, p. 72). In this vein, Nancy Baym reminded us that adequate social meaning can be obtained by taking into consideration the variety of contexts, the particularities of users, and last but not least, the integration of online experiences into the offline background.

In online learning environments, when the participants are from different countries, with various cultural backgrounds and probably different skills and educational orientations, a community of study seems hard to construct. Creating interpersonal contact with the teacher and the other participants in online course is challenging. As every other medium, the Internet tries to induce the sensation of immediacy, transparency, and instantaneous connectivity. In new media literature, interactivity is presented as one of the defining concepts of the digital era (GANE; BEER, 2008; MCMILLAN, 2003), even if this is not a

genuine trait of it. Radio talks or telephone conversations can be really interactive while some face-to-face conversations might not be (MCMILLAN, 2003, p. 241; RAFAELI, 1998, p. 110). Lev Manovich (2001) talks about “the myth of interactivity” since theatre, painting, sculpture, architecture and “all classical, and even more so modern, art is ‘interactive’ in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art and other representational ‘shortcuts’ require the user to fill in missing information” (MANOVICH, 2001, p. 56). If Marshall McLuhan (1964) described the electronic media being “cooler” than analogue media, Manovich reverts this relation. To describe the computer media as interactive seems truly redundant, because any object once represented here becomes automatically interactive. Nevertheless, the new media interactivity is considered somehow more limited than the interactivity of older medium, since “we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations” (MANOVICH, 2001, p. 61). In this respect, Manovich indicated two forms of interactivity: open and close (2001, p. 40). Thus, the notion of interactivity should be used *cum grano salis*. The human-computer interfaces are interactive in a different way from other media and “although it is relatively easy to specify different interactive structures used in new media objects, it is much more difficult to deal theoretically with users’ experiences of these structures” (MANOVICH, 2001, p. 56). Interactivity is an evolving situation, in the same time with the new forms of communication that expanded into the everyday life of users (mobile media, for example). User-to-user interactivity, user-to-system interactivity, and user-to-document interactivity are three levels of interactivity that have two main characteristics: direction of communication and control over the communication process (MCMILLAN, 2003, p. 242). Also, machine – machine interactivity is a subject particularly discussed in technical, psychological, social, political, and cultural terms. These variable forms, context, perspectives of interactivity have to be rethought on the basis of the genealogy of new media (GANE; BEER, 2008, p. 101) and depending on very concrete instantiations of it.

In the online educational area, talking about social presence is a fruitful path in order to have a situated approach of interactivity. Short, Williams, and Christie define this concept as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (1976, p. 65). They conceived social presence as depending on the characteristics of the communication medium itself and on its abilities to transfer also non-verbal cues. Thus, two components are central for this interpretation of the social presence: intimacy and immediacy of communication, both of them contributing to the reducing of the psychological distance and of the easiness of the interpersonal contact. The

social presence is a subjective perception of the others and, as Rafaeli stated, “communication could occur with little or no interaction” (1998, p. 118). For him, communication can be interactive, reactive (quasi-interactive), and non-interactive) and these types are usual sequences of interaction among people. When the interactivity is fully accomplished, we get social presence.

The question is how the social presence can be constructed in the online environments, with similar positive effects as in the face-to-face medium? Patrick Lowenthal (2010) explained the genealogy of online social presence theories. Thus, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the theories of social presence, developed for the “classical” educational situation, began to be applied to computer-mediated communication. In general, first approaches were more sceptic about the real potential of new media setting in producing meaningful social presence. This positioning derived especially from the perspective of computer-mediated communication (CMC) seen as impersonal and even antisocial, producing isolation and social fragmentation, because important cues are filtered out. In the mid of 1990s, scholars began to wonder if the characteristics of the medium constitute the most important factor in creating social presence. In this vein, Gunawardena (1995) conducted two studies in order to discern the dominant influence on social presence between the attributes of the medium and the users’ perception. He concluded that

even though CMC is considered to be a medium that is low in social context cues, it can be perceived as interactive, active, interesting, and stimulating by conference participants. However, it is the kind of interactions that take place between the participants, and the sense of community that is created during the conference, that will impact participants’ perceptions of CMC as a ‘social’ medium. Therefore, the impetus falls upon the moderators of computer conferences to create a sense of online community in order to promote interaction and collaborative learning (GUNAWARDENA, 1995, p. 147).

Thus, J. B. Walther developed his theory of “hyperpersonal interaction” and stated that mediated communication is rarely impersonal, is interpersonal when users want that, and hyperpersonal when they present themselves into a better light by a selective self-presentation and editing. In this vein, online communication is “no less personal than face-to-face communication” (WALTHER 1996, p. 33). Answering to the interrogation: “Does computer mediation make communication either impersonal or hyperpersonal?”, Walther briefly said: “No, not computer mediation alone” (WALTHER, 1996, p. 33). The opportunities of new media are recognized, but not the medium itself is the only element that procure social presence or not; the users’ individual ways of perceiving the presence seems more important than the medium’s traits. In computer-mediated communication, the users will find

various ways in order to achieve immediacy and to transmit more than words through “verbal and textual cues” (WALTHER, 1992, p. 52).

Many studies focused on the benefits of social presence in the classroom: inclusion, affective learning, instructional effectiveness, warm medium, student satisfaction. For Aragon, “the overall goal for creating social presence in any learning environment, whether it be online or face-to-face, is to create a level of comfort in which people feel at ease around the instructor and the other participants” (2003, p. 60). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that social presence is highly correlated with the student satisfaction and also the using of emoticons is one of the strategies of remediating the medium cuelessness: “social presence is a strong predictor of satisfaction in computer conference. The results also indicated that participants who felt a higher sense of social presence within the conference enhanced their socio-emotional experience by using emoticons to express missing nonverbal cues in written form” (GUNAWARDENA; ZITTLE, 1997, p. 23). Based on the idea that social presence can be “cultivated” among the online learners, Gunawardena and Zittle believe that the design of academic computer conferences has to be adapted to this request of social presence. Thus, the role of the moderator is crucial in creating the sense of “reality” of participants and also a sense of community. Susan Copley Cobb (2009) verified the reliability of the Social Presence Scale and Satisfaction instruments developed by Gunawardena and Zittle and confirmed its consistency and usefulness.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) included social presence into a model of community inquiry comprising three main components: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Social presence is defined here as “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (GARRISON; ANDERSON; ARCHER, 2000, p. 89). They emphasised that computer-mediated communication does not provide automatically a sense of social presence, seen as a form of socio-emotional communication, but only the potentiality of it. Moreover, social presence adds value in every community, that becomes much more than a simple act of information transfer or downloading. They are three categories of indicators of social presence: emotional expressions, open communication, and group cohesion (GARRISON; ANDERSON; ARCHER, 2000, p. 99). Social presence depends on cognitive presence – “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (GARRISON; ANDERSON; ARCHER, 2000, p. 89) – but also it depends on teaching presence, conceived as the binding

element of the community. The latter is linked to three categories of indicators: instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction. In spite of the absence of paralinguistic and non-verbal cues, teaching presence can be produced in online environment, with significant influences on understanding process and educational climate. The quest for efficient strategies for creating social presence was a natural path to follow. In this vein, I only mention Aragon's typology of strategies for three targets: course designers, instructors, and participants (ARAGON, 2003). Also in his perspective, the instructors have the main responsibility in constructing social presence. The course design strategies include: developing welcome messages, including student profiles, incorporating audio, limiting class size, and structuring collaborative learning activities. Delivery and management strategies include: contributions to discussions boards, promptitude in answering e-mails, providing feed-back, striking up conversations, sharing personal experiences, using humor, emoticons, addressing students by name and also allowing students' options for addressing the instructor. The strategies of the participants are: contributing to discussions boards, promptitude in answering e-mails, initiating conversations, sharing personal narratives, using humor and emoticons, too. Of course, this list of strategies is not exhaustive and it doesn't represent a magic recipe ready to be replicated. In the meantime, other online tools were introduced in usage and other strategies may contain them already.

Rourke, Anderson, and Garrison (1999) tried to calculate the social presence density in order to provide a quantitative depiction of computer conferencing environments. In this respect, they made a remark upon the question: how much social presence is really effective in online learning? Their answer was slightly unexpected: "Although we postulate that fairly high levels of social presence are necessary to support the development of deep and meaningful learning, we expect that there is an optimal level above which too much social presence may be detrimental to learning. Discourse in a community of inquiry is not equivalent to social interaction over the garden fence or the bar at a neighbourhood pub" (ROURKE et al., 1999, p. 61). Based on Rourke et al.'s contribution about the dangers of using too much social presence, Costley and Lange (2016) studied the relationship between social presence and critical thinking, the results indicating that

social presence and critical thinking have a negative correlation. This highlights the need for awareness of learner discourse, as an increase in social presence may lead to a decrease in critical thinking and vice versa. The likely cause of this is that learners tend not to change the discourse once the discourse within a particular context has been set (COSTLEY; LANGE, 2016, p. 89).

In spite of these possible limitations, social presence remains a main element of deciphering the online learning experiences, for both students and teachers.

Humor in educational settings: online and offline perspectives

The above perspectives on social presence included humor as a strong strategy that can be used in order to improve the learning in online environments. Online social presence, conceived as “the degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication feel affectively connected one to another” (SWAN; SHIH, 2005, p. 115), strongly shapes not only the student satisfaction, but also their own presence in online discussions. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) consider humor as a key element to social presence and to learning. Thus, humor decreases social distance and also the differences between the heterogeneous participants in the online courses are perceived as lessened. It is seen as an emotional expression of people (alongside self-disclosure) that can build collaboration and mutual understanding.

In the same time, humor seems to be one of the hardest things to perform online, because of the traits of the medium itself. Moreover, the restraint control of its effects is another problem. As Hellman (2006) noticed, “there is one tool many have failed to use and that is humor”. Anyhow, the general discourse about the use of humor in computer-mediated communication has been polarized. As Nancy Baym (1995) pointed out in the early phases of the development of computer-mediated communication, this form was “rarely seen as a means of making people laugh”. Nevertheless, she asserted that humor “can be accomplished in computer-mediated communication and can be critical to creating social meaning on line” (BAYM, 1995). In recent years, new media offered a privileged place for creating and disseminating humor; there are many sites dedicated to the comic and a huge online traffic of humorous images, memes, videos, jokes. The social networking sites are an epitome of this phenomenon and the distribution and re-distribution of humorous content is quite a constant activity there. Shifman and Menahem (2010) observe that one central theme of this kind of humor is the technology itself, the medium that made possible the transmission of the joke. Thus, the online humor is also about networks and computers, emphasising the remediation theory (BOLTER; GRUSIN, 2000) and its logic of hypermediacy, according to which the sender “strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight that acknowledgement” (BOLTER; GRUSIN, 2000, p. 33). Also, this type of computer-oriented humor is born from the anxiety that a new medium

always creates at the beginning of people's familiarization with it. In this vein, the technological imaginary plays an important role in the orientation of expectations and concerns about a new technology and the previous technologies determined different sets of jokes that were usually distributed through other established media. But in the case of the computer, "the message is the medium: humor about networked computers is conveyed by them, and is therefore charged with reflexive qualities" (SHIFMAN; MENAHEM, 2010, p. 1349). Shifman and Menahem (2010, p. 1362) clustered the humorous content into four themes: perceptions of computer makers, traits of computer users, interactions with tech support, and attitudes towards the networked computer, indicating one more time the complexity of humor and the difficulty of studying it. Commenting D. Chiaro's statements (1992), Nancy Baym reveals a bunch of difficulties in the quest of better understand the humor. Thus, it "cannot be separated from the group in which it is used or the individuals who participate. It is embedded in shared knowledge, shared codes and shared emotional significances which provide its meanings and determine its appropriateness" (BAYM, 1995). In this respect, to study its forms (critical, responsive, intertextual humor, and so on) is quite insufficient; a better positioning requires the analysis of humor as "situated performance" that aids to realize a self-presentation, to create a common understanding, to construct solidarity, to generate group identity, and to debate the sensitive parts of the society.

Besides the constraints of the medium, studies of humor had to face the historical theories related to its role in the classroom. Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) mentioned the study conducted in 1979 by Bryant, Comisky, and Zillman who revealed the historical rejection of humor from the class, because the educational process was conceived as serious one. In this vein, humor was seen as a disruptive intervention in the well-established methods or as a useless tool that rather produces confusion and distraction than positive outcomes. Current conceptions about humor have evolved from this paradigm toward one that sustains the efficiency of using humor as a teaching tool. Sachou (2013) introduced the sense of humor in the category of innovative methods of teaching. It generates "learning through delight", facilitating the retention of information, enhancing the recall, strengthening the relationships between students and teachers, relieving stress, creating a propitious atmosphere for communication, increasing perceptions of teacher credibility (if humor was related to the subject), augmenting the attentiveness, facilitating self-disclosure, etc. (SACHOU, 2013; TOROK; MCMORRIS; LIN, 2004; WANZER, 2002; GARNER, 2006; LEI; COHEN; RUSSLER, 2010). As Garner (2006) showed, *ha-ha* can lead to *aha!*, if comic situations are well thought and well introduced at the right time. Humor is not a learning

facilitator in itself; a bound of conditions has to be accomplished for its efficacy. Melissa Wanzer (2002) seized upon a difficulty of integrating the conclusions of the multitude of studies made on this matter. Thus, these analyses differ in types of humor investigated, placement or channels to communicate humor, the age of students or the education level, and their findings may be even inconsistent. Of course, usually the initiation of a comic situation in classroom belongs to the teacher; in this context, the teacher humor orientation may be another important indicator related to the perceptions of instructor immediacy.

Another important aspect is related to the type of humor used in the classroom, because not every kind of humor is constructive and conducive for learning. Appropriate humor refers to “related humor, unrelated humor, impersonation, nonverbal behaviors, disparaging humor, humorous props, sarcasm, and unintentional humor” (WANZER, 2002, p. 121). Inappropriate humor refers, for example, to “making fun of students, humor based on stereotypes, failed humor, sexual humor, swearing to be funny, joking about serious issues, and personal humor” (WANZER, 2002, p. 121). It is obvious that some of these items may be perceived totally different by diverse people, and Wanzer correctly observed that sarcasm appears as being an appropriate and also an inappropriate type of humor. Also, at the end of their effort of categorizing the appropriate and inappropriate use of humor by teachers, Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, and Smith (2006) pointed out one “intriguing” finding of their research, namely the overlap between these categories of humor, in spite of their detailed and articulate typology, that includes beside the four main categories of appropriate humor (related humor, humor unrelated to class material, self-disparaging humor, and unintentional humor) and of inappropriate humor (offensive humor, disparaging humor student target, disparaging humor: “other” target, and self-disparaging humor), many subcategories for each level. This remark announces, in fact, a limit of the general research on this subject and it is another indication of the complexity of this term and of the difficulty of study it. Humor represents a multi-layered concept, with many participants that use different cultural backgrounds and filters. In a very recent article, Chiang, Lee, and Wang (2016) mentioned the family influences, media influences, peer influences, and teacher influences in the construction of humor at adolescents. They introduced the concept of “acceptance of humor messages” that correlates the student’s acceptance of certain types of humor with their cognitive reframing of others’ humor manifestations. Their findings are relevant:

the acceptance of humor messages increased students’ use of each type of humor, and the student humor climate enhanced their use of humor. When the student classroom

climate favored self-deprecating/other-devaluing humor, and adolescents accepted self-deprecating/other-devaluing humor more, they engaged in more of that type of humor (CHIANG, LEE, WANG, 2016, p. 560).

This quick overview of the presuppositions, benefits, and perceptions of humor gave us a hint about the challenges that the use of humor in online brings. In this respect, the strategies used aren't solely simply adaptations of traditional ones for the online environment, but also this new medium required new approaches and methods. As David James observed, online humor is "a unique kind of humor, one that is much more linguistically oriented" (2004, p. 93). In this context, the implementation of an online pedagogy containing the humor as an effective teaching tool seems to be a hard task. Anyhow, the online courses have a history, so many findings are already archived. As in the case of humor used in the classroom, the online humor may obtain positive effects with a careful implementation. As Anderson (2011) concluded after her study, there is a significant difference between the online courses without humor use and online courses with the presence of humor in terms of student engagement in online discussions and students' perceptions about the online learning medium. LoSchiavo and Shatz (2005) indicated the importance of humor in increasing student interest and participation in online courses, but they doubted the real influence of humor in augmentation of student performance. James (2004) emphasised again that humor has to be non-hostile in order to induce positive effects in online courses (a more supportive learning environment, enhancing attention and students' pleasure in learning, increasing the divergent thinking, better scores at exams and a better attitude concerning the theme).

Instead of conclusions, a small excursion into real perceptions

In the absence of a current participative observation in order to examine the dynamics of using humor by teacher and also by participants, I chose to analyse the perceptions of students that followed an online course. Thus, the evaluation of a course offers many relevant clues, in particular because the criteria of assessment are personal and are not guided by a set of traits. In this vein, I tried to observe if humor is a recurrent element that is mentioned by participants or not (if this item appeared, I would count how many times); I have also analysed in a qualitative manner the perception of appropriateness or inappropriateness of humor used in the online course. In this manner, I tried to briefly notice the perception of online learners about the role of this tool.

First, I chose a course on Coursera, rated 4.9 out of 5 of 182 ratings. The course is entitled “Algorithms. Part 1” (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/introduction-to-algorithms#ratings>) and I selected it according to the general presupposition that the “technical” courses have, in principle, small opportunities in introducing humor in teaching, but, when this thing really happened, the educational experience is very well perceived and evaluated. In this context, taking into account the subject of the course and also its rating, I supposed that there are chances to find evaluations about humor at work. In this indirect way (because the participants were not questioned directly about their opinion on humor), I found two explicit reviews (from 42) that talked about humor. Thus, one participant affirmed: “I find the problem sets challenging and fun”, while another one said: “Home works are super fun and challenging”. The majority of reviews acknowledged the teaching style of the professor and his pedagogical qualities. Also, the main part of the reviews labelled the course as “great”, “excellent”, “nice”, “awesome”, “high-quality”.

Second, I analysed the reviews for “Introduction to Public Speaking” course (<https://www.coursera.org/learn/public-speaking#ratings>), rated 4.7 out of 5 of 1614 ratings. This course has 399 reviews, with 14 direct references to the humorous characteristic of the course, of teaching style or of the homework. 14 learners used the term “fun”, “humor” or “humorous” for evaluating this course or the instructor (10 occurrences for “fun” or its word family, and 4 occurrences for “humorous”). 7 reviews evaluated the course as fun, and 7 reviews made considerations about the humorous abilities of the teacher. The language of the reviews were English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Portuguese. Some examples for the evaluation of the course are: “Impressively nice, productive, fun and useful course”, “Interesting, informative, really fun and truly useful course”, “Awesome course – fun, helpful, and a diverse range of skills!”, “This course has been extremely helpful and fun. I have learned a lot from it, and have enjoyed its intense amount of knowledge”, “All the sessions were interesting, engaging and fun!”, “Very comprehensive, funny, understandable course”, “Lecture videos were funny and useful”.

Also, the term “fun” appeared directly for the evaluation of the teacher, seen as “inspirational and extremely funny” or as a “funny lecturer!”. Also, the teacher was perceived as humorous in three occurrences (for instance, “the instructor is humorous”), while just in a single one the teacher was perceived as not sufficiently humorous: “I prefer the teacher can be more humorous”.

The appreciation of the humor level of the teacher is done almost every time into a larger context of his cognitive skills, pedagogical abilities, way of information delivery, and

other personal qualities, such as “enthusiasm”, “energy”, “kindness”. Thus, the reviews took into consideration the course design, the attitudes of the participants, the interactivity, the structure of the lessons and tests. An important element is the multilingual competences of the participants and the various kinds of their cultural and educational backgrounds. These facts appeared constantly in the comments, especially if the student does not use as her first language the language of the online course. In this context, the requirements are bigger and the possibility of missing the humorous parts is quite obvious if the prime understanding is diminished.

Even if this was a small and surface analysis, the cues that it revealed are relevant. For both courses, humor proved to be a useful, appropriate and even desirable educational tool. Humor is a multifaceted and complex concept that needs a facilitating context. It works into a well controlled environment (even if unplanned, humor leads to good effects, too), in which many important factors play a part in the fulfilment of an optimal educational climate. The online social presence is, from the beginning, a challenging task for teacher and students, too. The right dosage of quality humor is always an effective tool in the learning process. The need to communicate with “real” people, even if we do that into a virtual world, is a key presupposition that gives the communicators orientation in the online learning environment.

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