

Virtual Education Space as a Resource of Universities Intercultural Interaction in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Learning is a highly complex process that has many different aspects of goals, content and knowledge management, sharing, enhancement, and provisioning. To serve an education process, a Virtual Education Space (VES) is a context-aware scenario aiming at expanding the space for lifelong learning. Given the multidisciplinary nature of this research, this paper attempts to show how current research has elucidated a complex relationship between digital space and learning. It presents an approach to and the experience of networking cooperation carried out at Ural State Pedagogical University (USPU), Yekaterinburg, Russia.

We hold the following dominant positions: firstly, the increasing use of virtual space in education necessitates the development of a theoretical and practical online education. Secondly, there is a consensus that every virtual space is a distinct learning environment. Thirdly, academic discourse on learning task design and digitalized content is permeated by a social environment. Furthermore, the supporting assistants, implemented as intelligent agents, and technical requirements of project implementation are described. VES architecture plays an important role in supporting the emergence of a “sense of place” among students. As an example of this approach, the paper analyzes educational opportunities of the project “Global Understanding” crucial for successful self-realization in the digital world. This project has been implemented at USPU since 2012; it is carried out with East Carolina University (ECU), USA, and 43 other universities around the world.

That means that intercultural interaction occurs with members of different cultural groups, from different backgrounds, of different behavior which requires designing strategies for positive and productive interaction. The above mentioned issues will be covered in the paper.

Keywords: *virtual space, digitalized content, network, interaction, academic mobility*

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern digitalized society is characterized by dynamism determined by various factors. One of the most important factors is the so-called “information revolution” that manifests itself in the development of new information technologies including digital education to radically change the living space of a modern man. The ongoing changes affect all-social institutions, one of which is the education system. The Bologna process, the formation of a single interdependent world in the field of education, can be considered as a logical consequence of the spread of globalization.

The fact that the concept of “globalization” first appeared in the academic vocabulary in 1952 to “indicate a holistic view of the accumulated experience in the field of education” is not only interesting but also important [1]. Analyzing the possible educational results associated with the implementation of the Bologna process, it can be noted that the concept of “studying abroad” is currently becoming purely nominal. Indeed, all the universities of

partner countries become part of a unified system with a common set of educational credit units, the same form of fixed received qualifications and mutual recognition of academic qualifications [2].

As for Russia, historical facts indicate that our country began to use the potential of intercultural interaction in the field of education long before the start of the information revolution. The first attempts to send Russians to Europe “to science” were made back in the 16th century during the reign of Ivan the Terrible. Later, under Peter the Great, the training of young people from Russia abroad became widespread: according to various sources, from 700 up to several thousand people received European education. Before the times of Peter the Great, education in Russia was controlled by the church, which was reflected in its content. If we add to this the isolation of Russia from European countries, then the lack of educated people in Russia at that time in areas not related to traditional crafts becomes clear. In modern Russia, the revitalization of the activities of intercultural interaction in the field of education was in the early 90s of the twentieth century.

It was at this time that the first international organizations were created: 1991 – the creation of the Russian National

Committee of the international public organization Youth For Understanding, 1993 – the opening of the Moscow representative office of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), 1994 – the beginning of the implementation of the European Union programs in Russia (Tempus program to promote the development of higher education systems in partner countries (non-EU countries), academic mobility program Erasmus Mundus, 1997 – creation on the Internet of the Russian-language website IREX (American Council for International Research and Exchanges, founded by leading US universities to administer exchange programs with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe).

2. MATERIAL

2.1. Labor mobility as a necessary element of the professionalism of a modern specialist

One of the important goals that society sets before the system of higher education in the context of globalization is the training of specialists of a new level, having a certain life position, ready and able to respond to changes in such a way as to maintain continuous movement in the direction of their successful professional development. This position implies the rejection of the “one profession and one company (organization) for the whole working life” attitude that prevailed in the consciousness of the previous generation [3] and the transition to the installation of a new profession that is in demand on the labor market, to inclusion in a new team (including heterogeneous from cultural affiliation), to a change in the place of residence (including the country) to expand professional opportunities and self-realization.

In our opinion, the concept of “mobility” is the most appropriate for describing the marked life position. This concept has an interdisciplinary nature and covers various aspects of changes in human life. According to the Oxford explanatory dictionary [4], the term “mobility” in its general meaning refers to the concept of movement. In the literal sense, it means the physical movement of the stimulus, object or organism, and in the metaphorical sense, it means movement through spheres that can be social, professional or even cognitive. The concept of “mobility”, because of its widespread use, is usually accompanied by a clarifying word explaining what it refers to.

Labor mobility is a comprehensive concept that includes professional and geographical mobility as its components; it is a necessary element of professionalism. The task of increased mobility of faculty and students was formulated back in the 1998 World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century [5]. It is necessary to correctly place semantic accents to form students' attitudes corresponding to a high level of labor mobility. Students should not have the opinion that labor mobility is a person's forced adaptation to external conditions. Training and

professional activity in different countries allow us to overcome the cultural egocentrism by assimilating the system of meanings of another culture; it can be virtual interaction and encompass specialists of various profiles from around the world. Higher education institutions can help increase labor mobility not only for students but also for adults who are solving the problem of managing their careers. To meet the educational needs of this target group, educational institutions expand the range of forms of training through the implementation of short-term modular courses, part-time studies, and distance learning through a special organizational structure – the Center for Additional Education. Creating opportunities for adult learning using flexible, open and creative methods is considered one of the priority measures for the development of higher education in the modern world [5].

2.2. Academic mobility as a background for labor mobility

The formation of labor mobility of future specialists is a difficult task since we are talking about the formation of an appropriate system of attitudes. However, higher education institutions can contribute to solving this problem by creating organizational conditions for the formation of academic mobility of students as the first stage, or background, to the formation of labor mobility. Organizational measures to enhance the academic mobility of students can be: participation in international student exchange programs and providing students with opportunities for parallel education.

Since both of these measures require serious additional efforts and lifestyle changes from students, the psychological prerequisites for the successful implementation of these measures are a clear understanding of the advantages of academic mobility both by representatives of the university's organizational structures and by the students themselves. Let us dwell on the advantages that are associated precisely with participation in international exchange programs.

The first advantage is connected with the choice of those universities (and professors) that specialize in the student's area of interest. This allows one to implement the principle of “learning from the best”, getting “first-hand” knowledge that is the result of the latest authentic research. The main result is not only the borrowing and application of knowledge and experience (albeit innovative) but the creation of conditions for the further production of new knowledge, that is, for more intensive development of science and production.

The second advantage is associated with personal development since living and studying in another country extends the student's life experience. Moreover, gaining new experience takes place in fairly safe conditions regulated by the norms of the educational environment, many of which are universal or common for different countries. Part of new life experience is the experience of direct interaction with other cultural groups, and, as a

result, can help to increase intercultural tolerance. Thus, in 1951, one of the world’s largest international non-profit exchange organizations – Youth For Understanding (YFU) – was created to allow German high-school students to see a different way of life than that of their destructed homeland [6].

In the modern world, where people of different cultures and values are constantly confronted with the “need to live together” tolerance ceases to be a unique property of a person and turns into a vital quality. It is a prerequisite for the formation of the competency necessary for “collective work in a multicultural context” [5]. An important personal result of intercultural interaction is the formation of the so-called “bicultural personality” [7]. The first step in learning the system of meanings of another culture is to learn the language of that culture. From this point of view, it becomes clear why in Article 15 of the Universal Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century it is stated that “the practice of multilingualism should be an integral part of all higher education systems”[5]. And the most effective way to overcome the language barrier is intercultural interaction. The acquired values organize and direct one’s process of cognition of the surrounding world: its perception and evaluation. Therefore, switching from one language to another, a person “gets access to two different cultural models of thinking”, as well as other elements of subjective culture, such as norms, roles, attitudes, values, in behavioral differences [8].

The considered advantages raise the question of the need for organizational measures aimed at creating favorable conditions in the field of higher education for the formation of students’ set of competencies in the process of professional training that would allow them to achieve successful integration into a global society and which can be described by the concept of "global competence" [9]. We assume that it is precisely new forms of an educational activity that allow us to effectively solve this problem.

2.3. Virtual educational environment of the university and its characteristics

International exchange programs are currently one of the popular forms of training that contribute to the formation of “global” students’ competencies. To ensure this, at least two conditions should be fulfilled. On the part of the higher educational institution: ensuring compliance with the requirements necessary for participation in such international programs [10]; on the student’s side, their motivation to expand the life experience, the level of knowledge of a foreign language. An important role is also played by the financial resources of the applicants. According to the surveys of students conducted at USPU,

among students with English as their major, the proportion of those who go abroad to get an education does not reach 10% [11].

In our opinion, psychological reasons may contribute to the insufficiently high involvement of USPU students in international exchange educational programs: many students before entering the university lived in small towns of the Ural region and had no experience of traveling abroad. Therefore, studying for even one term at a university of another country may seem to them too dramatic because of the change in lifestyle associated with a high level of the situation uncertainty. Under these conditions, using the VES for the more active involvement of students in intercultural educational interaction is of particular importance.

If we talk about the concept of a virtual educational environment in general, it is an information space for the interaction of participants in the educational process generated by information and communication technologies, including a set of computer tools and technologies; it is a self-adjusting and self-improving communication system that provides direct connection and feedback between students and other participants of the educational process [12]. By self-adjusting we understand the adjustment of behavior, actions of the participants in the communication process to changing conditions; self-improvement involves the gradual establishment of the effective relationship, its perfection as you master and adopt more complex types of relationship. The advantages of a virtual educational environment include: flexibility, economic efficiency, interactivity, mobility [13]. The last of these advantages is especially important: if intercultural interaction is successful (which happens in most cases), then students increase their self-confidence and interest in knowledge of another culture. It also increases the level of motivation to participate in international exchange programs through the formation of psychological readiness for real intercultural interaction (Fig. 1).

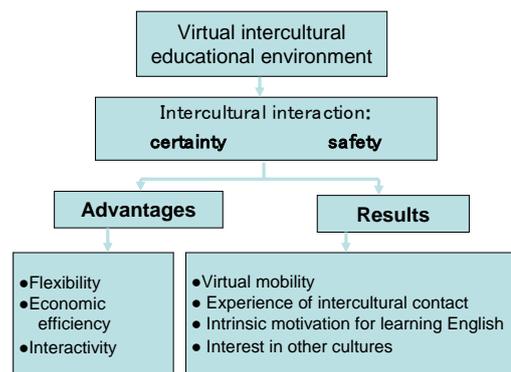


Figure 1 Advantages and results of a virtual intercultural educational environment

3. USPU EXPERIENCE IN ORGANIZING THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE UNIVERSITY

The virtual educational environment created at USPU allows our university to be an active participant in online forms of educational programs. These forms are used to improve the quality of education, to expand students' access to modern educational technologies, to provide the opportunity to choose various training profiles, majors, and modules. The formal features of a network educational program are the participation of several organizations in the implementation of the educational program, and the existence of an agreement on the network form of implementation of the educational program [14]. In 2012, USPU became a member of the international cultural and educational organization "Global Partners in Education", which currently unites 64 universities from 33 countries [15]. One of the main projects implemented by this organization is the "Global Understanding" project, which was initiated by the University of East Carolina (Greenville, USA) in 2004.

3.1. "Global Understanding" project

The mission of the project is to use VES to bring together students from all over the world to build their cultural tolerance and awareness, which will help them to successfully live and collaborate in the global community. For 7 years, our partners in this project were universities of Egypt, China, Colombia, Macedonia, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Poland, and the USA. The main feature of this project is the ability to organize the educational process by creating a virtual educational environment that allows us not only to carry out the educational process in a convenient place and at a convenient time, regardless of the location of the teacher and students, but also to realize the academic mobility of students through virtual mobility, which, unlike spatial mobility, expands the educational process due to the use of the Internet technologies (Skype, video conferences, chat). Virtual mobility is an opportunity for students and teachers to "virtually move" in the educational space from one university to another to acquire knowledge, transfer or exchange experience, and overcome national isolation. The site of the "Global Partners in Education" project is both a training portal (virtual lectures, information materials, joint projects) and a platform for dialogue with project partners (forum, blogs) [16].

The "Global Understanding" project is implemented in cycles of one academic semester. Project participants (12-16 students from different areas of training) are subject to two basic requirements: 1) knowledge of the English language (basic vocabulary) to describe reality and express their thoughts; 2) a high level of motivation for regular attendance and active interaction with students from a partner university. During each semester, project participants study together with students from three

universities, for 4 weeks from each. The interaction between students is carried out in various forms, such as online videoconferences, chatting, electronic correspondence, preparation of a joint project and its presentation at the last lesson in the videoconference mode.

The content of the "Global Understanding" project is determined by a range of issues that are fundamental to any culture; at the same time, approaches to solving the issues reflect the specifics of a particular culture. About 300 USPU students participated in the "Global Understanding" project.

3.2. "Global Leadership" project

The "Global Leadership" project was launched in 2014. The project aims to study modern leadership theories to develop students' leadership style: our students gain experience as a part of a virtual intercultural team with students from partner universities (China, Russia, USA, and Peru).

The implementation of the "Global Leadership" project is carried out within the framework of a virtual educational environment using the Global Classroom technology. Currently, the project participants are USPU and ECU, USA. The project is implemented during the spring semester; joint classes are held twice a week for about two months (usually 16 joint classes). Forms of classes:

- Online lectures are held once a week in the form of a video conference; they cover theoretical issues of leadership ("Virtual Leadership", "Leadership in the Global Community", "Prejudices about Leadership", "Gender Aspects of Leadership").
- Online work in subgroups includes both the discussion of the issues of the previous lecture and the work on the final joint project. At each lesson, one of the students is asked to take on the role of the leader of a virtual intercultural team that is one of the objectives of the "Global Leadership" project.
- Preparation of a joint project and its presentation: at the beginning of joint classes, each subgroup selects a global problem for developing a joint final project (for example, lack of resources, environmental pollution, restrictions on access to education, dependency, etc.). The task is to propose a solution with the help of their leadership skills and taking into account the cultural context of each country. Finally, the groups present their projects and answer the questions of other students.

3.3. "Intercultural dialogue in Russian" project

"Intercultural dialogue in Russian" was initiated by the USPU in 2013. The project is jointly implemented with the State Higher Professional School named after Stanislaw Pigony in Krosno (Poland) and Prešov University (Slovakia). The working language of the

project is Russian. The dialogue involves students of the USPU Institute of Psychology and the Department of Russian Studies of Stanislaw Pigonya State Higher Professional School (Poland).

The project is implemented in the form of video conferences (once in 2 weeks), electronic correspondence, local classes via a specially developed program. Student enrollment to participate in the project is carried out voluntarily and does not depend on educational programs. All participants have a high level of academic achievement, motivation, and general cultural competency.

In 2017, USPU submitted the project “About Russia in Russian: History, Culture, Education as the Basis of Intercultural Dialogue” for grant competition, which included three types of events — educational (for foreign students studying Russian), cultural and educational (reflection and discussion of the common history in the format of round tables, joint excursions) and cultural and entertainment (tea drinking in Russian traditions, karaoke contests, concert programs).

The project team included the leaders of the “Intercultural Dialogue in Russian” project and students – participants of the project. The project received support from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, which provided a grant for the years of 2016-2020 in the form of subsidies from the federal budget as part of the implementation of the federal target program “Russian Language”.

3.4. Possibilities of a virtual educational environment for joint research

The virtual educational environment is not only limited to conducting joint training sessions but also provides opportunities for research. The USPU experience includes the following activities in this area:

- 1) Conducting comparative studies in the framework of ongoing intercultural projects;
- 2) Creation of virtual research groups with an intercultural composition;
- 3) Giving students opportunities to participate in international academic events.

The results of joint research were presented at annual conferences of “Global Partners in Education” and at the International Virtual Exchange Conference (IVEC 2019) in Tacoma, WA, USA [17].

3.5. Difficulties in the implementation of intercultural interaction in a virtual educational environment

Our experience in organizing a VES indicates that the effective use of this environment for the formation of global competencies of students requires analysis and control of those factors that lead to decrease in its

educational value. We highlighted three groups of factors [18]:

- objective: the most significant are the time difference and the quality of the video image. The spatial-temporal characteristics of the virtual environment are significantly different from the real ones. This can lead not only to differences in students' behavior but also to incorrect interpretations of the reasons for these differences. During online communication in a virtual environment, we see only video images of our interlocutors. If the image quality is low, then this leads to the loss of non-verbal information, which signals the emotional state of a person. The effect of this factor may worsen the understanding of representatives of high context cultures (China, France, Japan, Russia);
- language: since the working language of intercultural projects is English, the level of linguistic competence of the participants is critical. Participation in virtual intercultural projects, on the one hand, provides opportunities for removing the language barrier and expanding language practice, on the other hand, motivates students to independently improve their language competence;
- psychological: despite the important role of the language factor, our experience shows that often students with a lower level of language competence demonstrate a higher level of involvement in intercultural virtual interaction.

To control the influence of these factors, before starting the work of the group, we conduct a 2-hour lesson, which is aimed at: 1. reducing the emotional stress in the group by introducing the group members to each other; 2. determination by members of the group of their goals and expectations from participation in the project. Thus, the psychological and pedagogical methods that we have tested are aimed at controlling the effects of factors not recognized by participants in intercultural interaction but that affect the nature of this interaction, reducing its productivity. Perhaps some of these techniques reflect the specifics of Russian culture and mentality, and will be less effective when working with students belonging to other cultures. This issue requires further consideration. It should also be noted that despite the confirmed effectiveness, the discussed techniques and means of organizing the effective activity of students play an auxiliary role in the educational process. They will be effective only with a high level of internal motivation and students' interest in intercultural interaction.

4. RESULTS

4.1. The implementation of the educational process through the creation of a virtual environment allows us to talk about the following results

4.1.1. Formation of skills to establish and maintain contacts with representatives of other cultures

In the process of intercultural interaction, students gain experience in direct communication with representatives of other cultural groups. Part of this experience is an understanding of some cultural features that may appear in the process of interaction. The knowledge of these features and the ability to take them into account when establishing and maintaining contacts with representatives of other cultures increases the willingness of students to pursue professional relations with colleagues from other countries in the future.

4.1.2. Increased mobility as an element of professionalism

Direct communication with representatives of other cultural groups contributes to the correction of false stereotypes and prejudices about a particular culture. The cultural view of another country is becoming more realistic; it creates the prerequisites for increasing the mobility of students without crisis experiences. A high level of mobility (professional, geographical, intercultural) implies a willingness to be included in a new team (including heterogeneous in terms of cultural affiliation), to change the place of residence (including the country), to expand professional opportunities and self-realization.

4.1.3. Acquisition of skills of joint activities in a virtual team with international participation

A virtual team as a form of organization of joint professional activity is becoming increasingly popular. Students gain experience in collaboration by working on a joint project with their partners from another country. At the same time, they encounter difficulties typical for this form of work (differences in time zones, lack of personal contact, and the specifics of virtual influence on a partner) and learn to cope with them.

4.1.4. Content change in stereotypical impressions about another culture

In 2013, at USPU a pilot study of changes in the content of Russian students' stereotypical representation about American students was conducted. The following trends were identified: the image of the culture of the partner country has become more personalized and the partners themselves began to be perceived as more prone to interpersonal interaction. This result can also be considered as an indirect confirmation of the possibility of increasing the level of tolerance in the process of intercultural interaction as an important quality necessary for life in the conditions of the coexistence of different cultures and different values.

4.1.5. The English language skill development

As noted in Article 15 of the Universal Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st Century [5], the practice of multilingualism should be an integral part of all higher education systems. The most effective way to learn a foreign language and to overcome the language barrier is to communicate with native speakers.

4.2. The problem of assessment of the results of virtual intercultural interaction

When it comes to introducing innovative elements into the education system, the question of evaluating the effectiveness of innovation is very important.

One of the main goals of the virtual educational environment is the formation of the so-called global competencies among students as prerequisites for successful professional activity in the modern world. However, the answer to the question of whether this goal is achieved requires the development of measuring pedagogical tools. Usually, a questionnaire is used as such a tool, which is offered to students "before" and "after" the end of joint online classes with students of a partner university. An example of such a questionnaire may be Common Survey Items for Virtual Exchange Programs worked out in 2019 by Stevens Initiative organization [18]. Questionnaire questions are assorted into 5 groups by global competencies: 1. knowledge of the other country or culture; 2. perspective taking and empathy; 3. cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural collaboration; 4. perceptions of the "other" in the exchange dynamic; 5. participant satisfaction and prior experience with a virtual exchange. A certain limitation of the questionnaire is that it includes statements (for example, I know some of the cultural traditions of ... (the name of the country) or I understand common issues facing youth in ... (the name of the country), which you need to evaluate by choosing one of the answers: Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Agree; Strongly agree. In our opinion, the use of the technique of

scale ratings can reduce the content of the answers. However, the addition of scales to open questions (for example, Give an example of any of the traditions known to you ... (name of the country)) will help to increase the

validity of the questionnaire. We plan to use Common Survey Items for Virtual Exchange Programs to assess the impact of intercultural interaction on students and identify competencies most sensitive to this impact.

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