

# USING ONLINE PLATFORMS AS AN EXTENSION OF LEARNING COMMUNICATION – FROM INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES

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## ABSTRACT

*Media and technology applications, particularly online platforms, have been widely used in the classroom. Learners exhibit a more positive attitude towards their learning experience when instruction includes technology. On the other hand, instructors are challenged to innovate curricula to include the use of various electronic and digital materials. Previous studies regarding the application of online platforms have revealed various benefits in terms of convenience and ease in disseminating information from both the perspective of the learners and the instructor. This research employed Social Information Processing Theory by Walther (2008) in the analysis of a semi-structured interview with a participant regarding her perceptions of how an online platform affects the communication process between the instructor and the learners. The data gathered and analyzed reveal that communication in an online platform is diversified and that online platforms provide an extension of the traditional learning environment. This research implies that users of online platforms use such technology for an improvement in both the teaching and learning experience of the instructor and the learners.*

**Keywords:** online platform, verbal cues, asynchronous communication

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of technology has been evident in all fields and industries in society. This movement of new media can be likened to that of "...the printing press revolution in the fourteenth century and the photography revolution in the nineteenth century, which prompted all forms of culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution, and communication" (Mukherjee-Das, 2014. p. 2). This movement is continuously reshaping the way people interact with one another. One such reshaping is reflected in the field of academe. Because of the continuous advancement of technology, the learning of the student is no longer confined to the tasks and activities given by the teacher inside the classroom; learning takes place beyond the school, in the online world. It is through the online platforms that students are given the opportunity to continue learning in another form that is common amongst them.

Using media and technology applications in the classroom produces a number of challenges to both the instructor and the learners. Previous research of different

contexts has shown that the usage of media and technology is not restricted to the classroom. Because students are given the opportunity to express themselves in another platform, learners become more socially active (Hamann, Pollock, & Wilson, 2012; Kyalo & Hopkins, 2013; Pellas, 2014; Shilpa, 2014; Sun & Rueda, 2012). Furthermore, when students learn the course material and accomplish assigned tasks at their own pace and their own time (Galway, Corbett, Takaro, Tairyam, & Frank, 2014; Gikandi & Davis, 2011; Porter, Pitterle, & Hayney, 2014; Rochester & Pradel, 2008; Thomson, 2010), the online platform becomes an avenue for academic independence. Various studies underscore the interaction of the learners with the instructor, as well as the interaction among the learners, the latter of which has been found to contribute to an overall positive learning experience for the learners (Kuo, Walker, Belland, Schroder, & Kuo, 2013; Sun & Rueda, 2012, Thomson, 2010).

The role of the instructor in the careful planning on the utilization of media and technology applications is also highlighted in a greater number of studies (Lin & Lai, 2013). Both the opinion of the instructor and the learners are analyzed upon the completion of the course material (Joo,

Lim, and Kim, 2013; Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2013; Sun & Rueda, 2012). Some studies have also used both qualitative (Chang & Chen, 2014; Thomson, 2010) and quantitative (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2013; Kuo, Walker, Schroder, & Belland, 2013; Pella, 2014) interviews, which highlighted the benefits that media and technology bring to classroom instruction (Gikandi & Davis, 2011; Sun & Rueda, 2012; Thomson, 2010). Research shows that the instructor is important for media and technology used to be successful in instruction (Casey & Evans, 2011; Porter et al., 2014; Qiu & McDougall, 2013; Thomson, 2010).

Despite the various studies in the usage of media and technology applications in instruction, there have also been a number of areas that were overlooked. Feedback during the formative stages of learning should be considered (Shen, Cho, Tsai, & Marra, 2013). Proper training for instructors in the appropriation of media and technology in instruction must also be studied (Thomson, 2010). The learning relationships of the instructor and the learner in online platforms have to be analyzed further (Mukhurjee-Das, 2014).

This research aims to investigate how online platforms affect the learning communication between the instructor and the learners. Classroom communication is an important component in the teaching and learning process (Thomson, 2010). This research also aims to analyze the students' participation in the communication process in the online platform. Furthermore, this study aims to examine the manner through which instructors perceive how the usage of media and technology applications affects the learning relationships within the class.

Utilizing media and technology applications in instruction gives learners the academic freedom to learn at their own pace and at their own time (Galway et al., 2014; Gikandi & Davis, 2011; Porter et al., 2014; Rochester & Pradel, 2008; Thomson, 2010). This freedom to understand the course material, together with assigned assessment tasks, can increase the students' interest and emotional engagement in the learning process. Online pedagogy provides educators the opportunity to innovate in their curricula (Casey & Evans, 2011). There is a need for research to investigate how communication is present in online platforms to encourage instructors to make use of media and technology applications in their classes. Through this research, media and technology applications utilized in classrooms are given more emphasis on the learning relationships forged by the learners amongst themselves, and with the instructor.

## Social Information Processing Theory

Previous research regarding the usage of media and technology applications reveals several pedagogical principles, theories, and frameworks. Piaget's theory of active learning is one of the common theories used by researchers where it is evident that learning occurs when one acts on and applies new ideas and concepts (Galway et al., 2014). Other researchers (Changa, Liub, Linb, Chend & Chenge, 2013; Pellas, 2014; Sun & Rueda, 2012) who made use of the active learning theory found this ideology relevant to their investigations because learning assessment is measurable through precise methodologies. Nevertheless, in the study by Galway and colleagues (2014), the researchers postulated that the structure of traditional classes and online portions have to be coherent in order to ascertain the success of any blended learning environment. The emphasis on proper connections between learning interactions is also emphasized in the study of Thomson (2010), where results revealed that there is a need to facilitate the teacher-student, student-content, and student-student interactions in an online learning environment.

In the absence of a prevalent theory amongst the previous studies reviewed by the researchers, it is necessary to note the recurring concept of learning interactions. In the work of Sorenson and Takle (2005), learners actively discussed and shared personal learning goals in the online platform which later echoed a result of a more positive learning experience for the students. Additionally, Hamman and colleagues (2012) underscored students' perceptions regarding the benefits of verbal cues in comparison to face-to-face discussions, which include variables such as tone of voice, interpersonal distance, body position, and even appearance. Therefore, a new theoretical framework is needed to account for variables like verbal cues and online discussions.

Social Information Processing Theory by Joseph Walther (2008) highlights interaction in an online setting, as well as how an online interaction develops into relationships. For Walther (2008), using verbal cues in an online environment is vital in establishing impressions of other people. Additionally, Walther (2008) claims that the absence of variables found in face-to-face discussions is not unfavorable to the definite impressions formed, and the relationships established in an online format. In the absence of contexts exhibited in face-to-face discussions, the role of the teacher to communicate effectively is more in an online environment than in traditional classroom interactions. The instructor needs to ascertain that unfamiliar vocabulary and phrases are

avoided so that learners are encouraged to give feedback, and also for learners to develop higher levels of thinking and understanding (Wosley, 2008).

In communicating online, asynchronous communication is also considered, as proposed by Walther (2008) in Social Information Processing Theory; extended time is necessary for users of online platforms to form effective relationships with another. Walther (2008) also claims that online interaction takes four times as long to be considered equal to that of a single traditional form. Given the freedom to learn course material at their own pace, learners are more likely to make more conscious and personal decisions about their personal learning. Furthermore, students recognize the benefits of asynchronous discussions in online platforms because they can reflect on the understanding of the content before posting any response on the platform (Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007). In the Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), users of computer-mediated communication can be more personal in interaction since they are given the chance to ponder, contemplate, and even revise one's comments more positively.

## METHODOLOGY

Underscoring the importance of verbal cues and asynchronous communication, the researchers designed semi-structured interview questions using variables and concepts from Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008). The interview questions centered on the instructor's perspective of how the communication process is reflected, and how this process affects the learning relationships of the teacher and the students.

The researchers set participant qualifications to facilitate recruitment. First, the participant should have used the online platform as a teaching strategy and not as a primary venue of learning in the first semester of the academic year 2014-2015. This criterion is in line with concepts from the Community of Inquiry model by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) who postulate that there must be teacher and curriculum presence to complete the educational experience in computer-mediated communication. The classes involved in the study must have accessed the online platform at least four times throughout the semester as a basis for effective communication since Social Information Processing Theory

(Walther, 2008) notes that communication conducted online should be done at least four times for it to be comparable to the traditional form.

The researchers purposively recruited participants for the research by submitting request letters to the languages department of a private university in Metro Manila.

The researchers contacted the recommended and qualified participants from the department and arranged for an interview time and place most convenient to the instructor. The participant signed a consent form that guaranteed anonymity, approval to be audio recorded, and agreement to participate in the research. The researchers conducted the semi-structured interview once and transcribed the data into a word processor.

The researchers transcribed the interview and analyzed data inductively in accordance with protocols by Hatch (2009). The researchers coded the salient points found in the transcript and clustered these points into groups of similar ideas. The researchers read the transcript again with the use of the salient ideas to countercheck if the important ideas are evident in the data. Afterwards, the researchers analyzed the clusters of important keywords within and across groups to uncover relationships. The researchers gleaned themes from the transcript which showed that the online platform serves as an extension of learning from the traditional classroom environment. Additionally, the data revealed that the online platform gives diversity in the manner of communication between the instructor and the learners. The researchers analyzed the transcript once more to discover responses from the participant which will support the themes. Furthermore, the researchers also found statements that are considered as negative examples of the themes gleaned from the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the semi-structured interview revealed that the online platform is a reinforcement, an enhancement, and a variation from the learning environment, and the communication process is reflected in the traditional classroom. This research will present the themes gleaned from the data gathered, upon inductive analysis (Hatch, 2009). The initial theme discussed is regarding the extension of the learning environment perceived by the instructor in the online platform. The researchers explain the diversity in the

communication process reflected in the online platform. The discussion and explanations for the themes are supported by quotes from the semi-structured interview.

**The online platform is an extension of learning.** In a traditional class, the instructor has complete control in the decision-making for the utilization of teaching and learning materials. This same authority is also reflected in an online class. The participant of this research articulated a similar experience in her own usage of the online platform, Edmodo, for her class. Despite using the online platform as an additional venue and not the primary venue for learning, the teacher still perceives the online platform as her class. Once the students, log in to their profile accounts in the online platform, the instructor considers the learners as in the actual class, regardless of the time and the students' physical location. Furthermore, within the semester, the teacher continuously emphasizes to the students that the online platform is strictly for academic purposes only, and not for any other concern. Thus, both the instructor and the learners act in a manner that is acceptable in a traditional class. The responses of the participant had themes which emphasize the learning environment of the class in the online platform. The learning environment of the class is reinforced, enhanced, and varied in the online platform.

From the perspective of the participant, the online platform reinforces the learning environment of her class. An example of this would be when the instructor implements the same classroom procedures such as having a set of rules and regulations for the online platform, exactly how she does in the traditional class. The participant articulates:

"I see Edmodo as a classroom, but it's online. I don't physically see my students there, but I know when I ask them to submit a task online, they're there. We're there."

The online platform also enhances the learning environment of the traditional class. The enhancement of learning through the online platform attempts to address a number of limitations that a traditional class exhibit. The participant believes that utilizing various teaching strategies to supplement learning is important to innovate her manner of instruction. Because of the participant's desire to innovate, the instructor uses an online platform. The participant further underscores the value of being student-centered in her instruction. In the perspective of the participant, the learning

experience of her students must not be limited to the traditional classroom, as seen in the response:

"... the students find it (the online platform) interesting, they are also tired of the usual way of learning. That's why, why not make it fun, interesting, interactive, understanding for them. If we could (use an online platform), why not?"

Additionally, the online platform provides a variation to a traditional learning environment. Inside a customary classroom, instruction ends once the allotted time for class ends. In an online platform, learning is accessible anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, the constraints of a traditional classroom, such as limited interaction between teacher and learners are addressed by the asynchronous communication feature. In Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), asynchronous communication allows the users of any given online platform to have a more personal form of communication since the sender of the message believes that the recipient will read the message at a convenient time (Griffin, 2009). Moreover, asynchronous communication can also be seen when learners post their personal comments and are simultaneously answered by the teacher. In posting comments online, learners are also given an additional venue for participating more in discussions, demonstrated by the instructor's sharing:

"...but when they (the students) are online, they find themselves more confident, because probably no one's around, so they could be free. Free in providing any comment when nobody's judging them."

**Communication in the online platform is diversified.** Communication between the instructor and the learner in the traditional class is most often than not limited because the teacher can only attend to a limited number of students at a given time. Furthermore, there is a striking difference between face-to-face communication and communication conducted online. Face-to-face communication is reflected in various forms, and not only verbal cues. As postulated by Walther (2008) in Social Information Processing Theory, the absence of variables such as "...physical context, facial expression, tone of voice, interpersonal distance..." is not disastrous to the development of relationships formed in an online platform (Griffin, 2009, p. 140). In the online platform, both the instructor and the learners utilize verbal cues to communicate with one another. Verbal cues are the

primary means of interaction in the online platform. The instructor gives direct instructions for tasks and occasionally posts announcements and reminders. The students exhibit approval and understanding of the assigned tasks and announcements through verbal cues as well. In the online platform, communication conducted solely through verbal cues reinforces, enhances, and provides variation to the traditional form. The reliance on verbal cues is not only practiced by the teacher, but by the learners as well. This reliance is articulated by the participant when she said:

“I think they (the students) do it (comment) online because that’s the only way that they could respond, by, of course, typing comments.”

The participant shared her experiences regarding the manner she communicated to her students on the online platform. A recurring theme is the reinforcement of her traditional communication in the classroom. The participant puts emphasis on the same classroom management style in the online platform as that of her traditional classes. The participant insists on utilizing the online platform for academic purposes only; therefore, the manner through which she gives directions for class activities in class is the same in the online platform. The reinforced communication is reflected in the response:

“But inside the class, and/or online, I am the same in providing instructions. I am very particular and specific, for example, the format, the same for me, inside the class or online.”

The dependence on verbal cues of online platform communication may also appear to be limited to the natural form of communication carried out by both the instructors and the learners. Since posts and comments are the only means of communication between the teacher and the students, other idiosyncrasies are missing, and possibly affect the actual communication. The participant observed this phenomenon among her students, as she shared:

“...(in the online platform) they’re (the students are) more formal, they don’t really react on each other’s works or comments... Maybe because they don’t want to offend their classmates because they could easily be misinterpreted...”

Despite the limiting feature of communication conducted in an online platform, the participant emphasized the benefits that the online platform offers. When inside the traditional

classroom, the instructors and the learners are constrained by allotted class time. Furthermore, it is also possible that the learners are not given opportunities to communicate their ideas during traditional class discussions because the students have their own learning and communication styles. The enhancement of communication is perceived by the instructor among her learners, as she narrates:

“There are students who are more comfortable expressing themselves in front of many people, but there are students who are not really comfortable expressing themselves. It’s not because they don’t have anything in mind. It’s just that they don’t have the confidence like the rest. I think, having Edmodo, they give themselves the opportunity to at least express themselves even if it’s just a simple click on an “Awesome” icon or type a comment such as “Thanks, Miss”...”

When communicating with her class online, the participant instructor admits to differing from the usual way that she conducts herself in the traditional class. In Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), verbal cues are the central focus of communication. However, since the participant has already formed a learning relationship with her students inside the traditional classroom, any form of communication seen in the online platform refers to what is actually happening during the regular class sessions. In the regular classroom setup, the instructor may exhibit other forms of communication through hand gestures and body language; thus, the online platform may confine the sending and receiving of messages to verbal cues alone. The instructor notes that since the nonverbal cues are absent in the communication in the online platform, the tone of her communication may seem to be more formal. The participant acknowledges that communicating online can also be limiting for her, as compared to talking in front of her class during discussions, as reflected in her response:

“...I could say that I’m less formal inside the class because I could be bubbly, I could be animated, but online, I am probably strict.”

Variation is also seen in the way the instructor communicates to her students in the online platform. In the traditional classroom, the art of questioning and discussing the course material is ongoing and constant. Also, the students have a short span of thinking time before responding to the discussion questions. The instructor continuously explains and clarifies possible concerns that students might have about the current task. In the online

platform, the instructor needs to ascertain that the initial instructions are understandable enough for the students. The careful selection of words to be utilized underscores the importance of verbal cues in any form of communication seen online, as noted in Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008). Because of the participant's aim to be clear and precise in her instructions, the participant shares a variation in the way she communicates to her students in the online platform:

“...when I am with them (the students) face to face, I could actually easily clarify, if there are some things that are unclear; but when I post things online, I make sure that I actually review the things I post before I click send or post because I don't want them to misinterpret anything.”

The learning environment and the communication between the instructor and the learners are reinforced, enhanced, and varied in the online platform. This research inquired about the perceptions of the instructor regarding the communication process between the instructor and the learners, as well as the way the online platform affects the communication process. Given the responses by the participant and guided by Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), the researchers discovered that the communication reflected in the online platform cannot be analyzed as an independent form of communication, apart from the communication that exists in the traditional class. Since the online platform is perceived as an extension of learning, all tasks conducted within the platform are considered part of the holistic learning of the students. Because of the extension of learning, the online platform affects the communication process of the instructor and the learners in a way that is dependent on the actual communication found in the traditional classroom. Furthermore, the learning and the communication process perceived by the instructor in the platform is always dependent on the already existing form of learning and communication inside the regular class.

composed interview questions regarding an instructor's perceived communication in an online platform. The researchers conducted a semi-structured interview, and then transcribed and analyzed the interview inductively (Hatch, 2009). The analysis revealed that the online platform is an extension of learning and that communication in the online platform is diversified.

The researchers aimed to investigate the perception of the instructor regarding communication in the online platform. The semi-structured interview revealed recurring themes which describe the experience of the instructor in the reinforcement of her classroom management from the regular class to the online version. Additionally, the instructor also experienced enhancements in her class whenever she sees students verbally comment more often on the online platform than how the learners would do in the classroom. Also, the participant talked about the variations in the online communication she has seen in herself and among her students as well. The variations are depicted by the more formal tone of communication online than that of the traditional setup. On the other hand, the instructor also sensed a limiting effect of the communication in the online platform. The limitation is exhibited by the instructor whenever the tone of her instructions online appears to be more formal to avoid misinterpretation amongst her students.

The importance that the instructor and the learners give to the written word reflects the Social Information Processing Theory of Walther (2008) which specifies that verbal cues are the central considerations in forging effective relationships online. Another variable of the theory is asynchronous communication (Walther, 2008), and this is also reflected in the online platform whenever the teacher carefully reviews her posts and comments before publishing them online to achieve a more personal form of communication.

As presented by Thomson (2010), Porter and colleagues (2014), and Qiu and McDougall (2013) in their research, there is a need for the instructor to carefully plan the usage of any media and technology application in instruction to attain learning objectives. In the case of using online platforms, the instructor must still exhibit proper classroom management and be in control of the communication process (Thomson, 2010). The instructor demonstrates her classroom management online through verbal cues which are consistent with those of her policies and procedures in the classroom. Furthermore, because the instructor sets herself as the

## CONCLUSION

Guided by the variables of Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), specifically the emphasis on verbal cues and asynchronous communication, the researchers

standard of how the communication should be conducted online (Casey & Evans, 2011), the learners eventually follow the teacher's tone of communicating. The reinforced, enhanced, and varied communication process that is present between the instructor and the learners may possibly help in the holistic and positive learning experience of the learners (Kuo et al., 2013).

The communication process between the instructor and the learner implies that users of the online platforms can articulate their ideas and messages to one another effectively. This research denotes that effective communication can take place only if the instructor and the learner are coherent in their ideas and messages. Proper articulation of ideas and messages is equal to the effective utilization of verbal cues in the online platform. The verbal cues will then lead to an environment conducive to a positive learning experience for the learners. The reinforcement, enhancement, and variation of the learning environment and the communication process are dependent on the capability of the instructors and the learners to verbalize their messages.

This research focused on the online platform Edmodo and is therefore constricted to the features found on that specific platform alone. Future studies may analyze communication in online platforms used in learning by having a variety of online platforms to investigate. Furthermore, additional analysis may also be conducted examining the perspectives of the learners. Also, greater detail and more depth must be given to communication conducted online to expound on the ideas that online platforms are extensions of learning, and that online platforms provide diversity in communication. The work has added to the literature on online classes in the Philippine setting, but more work needs to be done to ensure that these classes truly meet their goals and allow students to learn.

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