

DISTANCE LEARNING: ONLINE TEACHING TOOLS AND APPROACHES

BASHIROV Oxana, master in pedagogy, assistant lecturer

Universitatea de Stat din Moldova, Facultatea de Litere,
Departamentul Limba Engleză și Limba Franceză Specializată

În secolul XXI tehnologiile ocupă un loc tot mai important în viața cotidiană, iar tehnologizarea procesului educațional este inevitabilă. Acest proces a devenit și mai vital în contextul pandemiei COVID-19 și trecerea la învățământul online. Într-un pas mai lent, sau mai alert utilizarea tehnologiilor digitale în procesul educațional la distanță duce la schimbarea și îmbunătățirea sistemului educațional. Prin aplicarea tehnologiilor și diferitelor instrumente digitale procesul de predare-învățare va reuși să facă față provocărilor timpului și să răspundă nevoilor educaționale a nativilor digitali. Lucrarea de față studiază rolul instrumentelor utilizate în procesul de predare la distanță și încearcă să evidențieze necesitatea implementării lor în scopul eficientizării învățării și sporirii calității produselor și proceselor de învățare. Inițierea acestui tip de învățare necesită o atenție sporită asupra contextului și obiectului de învățare, finalităților, caracteristicilor instruiților în scopul de a atinge combinația optimă de instrumente de instruire și metode de furnizare.

Cuvinte cheie: *învățământ la distanță, clasă virtuală, instrumente digitale, învățare sincronă, învățare asincronă.*

Technology has swept over every aspect of our lives, including the education system. It has played and continues to play an important role in the development and expansion of online education. The online education is becoming an important long-term strategy for many institutions. During these times wherein the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred educational institutions to rapidly adapt in-classroom learning, the online format of educating teacher candidates has prevailed. Accordingly, many institutions during the pandemic, have reported an increase in the use of online tools. Given the rapid growth of online education and its importance for institutions, it is imperative that institutions of higher education provide quality online programs. Over the past decade, countless efforts have sought to integrate emerging Internet technologies into the teaching and learning process in education. When it comes to distance learning, you must prepare yourself for a whole host of

new considerations in order to deliver effective training. Educators who have taught in a traditional classroom are often surprised to discover that online teaching requires a different instructional strategy, and even the use of a different set of skills, when they first become acquainted with a virtual learning environment. The transition can be fairly easy for some educators to make, and much more challenging for others, especially if they have become accustomed to teaching in a particular manner and have not needed to change their approach to classroom instruction. Online teaching is not just about learning how to set up an online classroom and adding learning resources; it is a matter of how the class is taught and the manner of instruction used. To become an effective online instructor there must be thought given as to how the technological tools will be used, how to translate traditional communication into digital communication, and how to evolve from an instructor who stands in front of a class and directs the flow of conversations and interactions to someone who can facilitate and guide the learning process, while keeping students interested and engaged in the course. Learning to teach online requires having an open mind and a willingness to learn, along with making an allowance for the time needed to implement new methods - while monitoring instructional effectiveness until excellence is achieved. The successful *virtual classroom* arms you with a proven approach, tools, techniques, and exercises to create the engaging, interactive, and memorable learning experiences. Gone are the days when students used to memorize the lessons through traditional textbooks and teaching methods. The online environment allows you to communicate content in other ways, so that you can capitalize on the features of the electronic medium and address different learning styles. For instance, visual learners will benefit from content interpreted visually. Images, graphics, animation and video can, in some cases, communicate an idea or concept more efficiently than words. It is important to understand that online teaching presents its own unique opportunities and challenges. So, moving from the traditional classroom environment to online instruction requires more than merely converting course material to an online platform. In fact, the resources, skills, and tools needed for successfully teaching students online vary considerably from those of the *traditional classroom*. In the *online classroom* teaching techniques must be updated rather than reproduced. As you plan your online course, it is helpful to remember that in any environment “*good teaching is good teaching*”. [4] Experienced online instructors stress that teaching online is less about the mechanics of distance education and “*more about what makes for an effective educational experience, regardless of where or when it is delivered.*” [4]

Online teaching and learning can take place as it does in face-to-face classroom *synchronously*, that is in real time, or *asynchronously*, whenever it is participants choose to interact. Both of these teaching modes require conceptualizations of time that are quite different from traditional meet-four-times-a-week planning and participation structures. At the beginning design stages, the development of online instructional elements is time consuming. In the long term, however, the fact of having all materials and structures in a single place is a time saver. In regard to the actual teaching/contact time with students, online teaching is often viewed as requiring more time than face-to-face as instead of having contact with students three to four times per week, one is having contact every day. *Synchronous learning* typically involves tools such as:

- Live chat;
- Audio and video conferencing;
- Data and application sharing;
- Shared whiteboards;
- Virtual “hand rising”;
- Joint viewing or multimedia presentations and online slideshows.

Asynchronous learning instruments use the time-delayed capabilities of the internet such as:

- E-mail;
- Threaded discussion;
- Newsgroups and bulletin boards;
- File attachments.

Asynchronous courses are still instructor-facilitated but are not conducted in real time, which means that students and teacher can engage in course-related activities at their convenience rather than during specifically coordinated class sessions. In asynchronous courses, learning does not need to be scheduled in the same way as synchronous learning, allowing students and instructors the benefit of anytime, anywhere learning. With overwhelming number of educational tools, teachers and students have enormous alternatives available. These tools have not only made the learning fun and engaging, but also it comes as a big relief to teachers who can now create a more student-centered learning environment. Whether it is to take students to a field trip or make students experience a distant part of the world, everything is possible with online educational tools. The real problem lies in choosing the right tool and the sheer number of these tools has made it challenging for the teachers to pick up the right one for their students, as, the digital tools are changing faster than we can describe them. You can have all the best tools in place, but without equitable access at home for all your students, and adequate training for yourself, it is tough to replicate a

traditional, in-person learning experience. This list assumes you have got those problems worked out and are focusing now on how to set up an effective virtual learning environment, either adapting your existing curriculum, or designing a brand-new one from the ground up. Effective educational tools should engage students at deeper level and offer differentiated activities to students at all levels. Besides, it should enable students to learn independently and proactively so that they can advance steadily at a pace comfortable to achieve their full potential. When students have a rewarding platform and the content is at the right level of difficulty, learning becomes enjoyable and more engaging. Choosing the right tool in the constantly transforming technology landscape is obviously a challenge. These tools must serve students, fostering an engaging and differentiated learning experience. Online learning can present challenges to educators, as the tools and opportunities to discover students' preconceptions and cultural perspectives are often limited by bandwidth constraints, which limit the users' view of body language and paralinguistic clues. Some researchers argue that these restrictions negatively affect communication efficacy. [6] Others argue that the unique characteristics that define online learning (appropriate combinations of asynchronous and synchronous voice, text, and video) can actually lead to enhanced or hyper communications. [5] From an Educator's perspective, the educational benefits of online teaching tools are:

- provide students with opportunities to represent and express their prior knowledge;
- allow students to function as “designers”, using tools for analyzing the world, accessing and interpreting information, organizing their personal knowledge, and representing what they know to others;
- multimedia applications engage students and provide valuable learning opportunities;
- empower students to create and design rather than “absorbing representations created by others”;
- encourages deep reflective thinking;
- create personally meaningful learning opportunities. [3]

As online teaching tools proliferate, educators have to decide which ones work well to teach a concept, whether using a particular tool is the best way to learn a topic, and in what way the tool is essential to the process. The American digital learning consultants Judith V. Boettcher and Rita- Marie Conrad provide some practical guidelines for choosing and using technology tools in online teaching:

➤ ***Pedagogy first -technology second:*** this guideline reminds us that learning designed decisions take priority over decisions about technologies. In other words technology should serve pedagogy. We know pedagogical choices are a key component in designing online learning. Teachers make decisions not just about what to teach, but also about how to teach. This opens up the role of teachers in designing learning and thoughtfully integrating digital technologies. The technology does not drive the learning. Technology is only useful if it is purposefully chosen to contribute to the quality of teaching and learning. [2]

➤ ***Keep it simple:*** the first time you teach in any new environment or with a new set of learners it is wise to keep it simple and use the basic set of tools. If you focus on the essential tools and build your course around those tools you can branch out later, as you teach a course the second or third time and gain experience, confidence and the sense of exploration. [2]

➤ ***Involve your learners and choices and new subdigital tools and resources:*** we often forget about another resource for tools that is available: our learners. Many times our students will have experience with a tool that is an excellent fit for the learning experience. Or you might not have much experience with one of the tools, so don't hesitate to ask your learners for help and let them help you. They will feel part of the process and proud to be part of your learning tool. Your students can also be sources for rich media materials and tutorials and websites that might be effective supplements or alternatives for core concept or choice learning experiences. Students can be very resourceful in finding free materials and even developing learning materials themselves. [2]

➤ ***Have choices and backups for when the cloud disappears:*** always have a plan B for when the technology you need the most fails. It is inevitable that sometimes technology does not work as it should, be ready to postpone or adjust a test, an assignment or an expert event until the technology is available. For example if a technology interruption is impacting assignment submissions allow students to submit their work later or in another way, by e-mail, text or blog. Assure students that their grades will not suffer because of the technology failure. Also, be open to solutions they may propose. This will help everyone relax and stay focused on the learning tasks not the technology glitch. Another element of providing technology choices is making certain that a central technology tools are available and affordable for learners. Sometimes it makes sense to let learners choose their favourite technology for producing important course products, so that they don't have to lose learning time using a course tool they will not be using again. [2]

➤ **Review your technology tool set every two to three terms:** after you have taught a course for two or three terms it is good to look out with a fresh eye using feedback from your students to see if their resources or tools that can energize or better facilitate your desired learning goals. It is always good to refresh your thinking about the expectations of your students and their experiences coming into your course. As technologies appeared that you think have possibilities for your course or for your students evaluate them in light of the learning experiences framework. It is wise to introduce new technologies slowly, to give you time to become comfortable with the tool, introducing one new tool other time is usually a good strategy. When using a tool for the first time it can be prudent to introduce it in the middle of the course, when course process is well established. This gives everyone a chance to try something new with minimal risk. Introducing new tools at the beginning of the course can interrupt the flow, affecting how well your course gets off the ground. [2]

There is certainly no shortage of tech-based tools to use in the virtual classroom. Hundreds of digital education tools have been created with the purpose of giving autonomy to the student, improving the administration of academic processes, encouraging collaboration, and facilitating communication between teachers and learners. Instructors are increasingly interested in leveraging technology for activities with students and many are modifying their instructional plans to incorporate more digital experiences during online teaching. In this article we will mention ten of the best online teaching tools, focusing specifically on those that are designed for encouraging, enhancing, and managing distance learning:

1. Edmodo

It is an educational tool that connects teachers and students, and is assimilated into a social network. In this one, teachers can create online collaborative groups, administer and provide educational materials, measure student performance, and communicate with parents, among other functions. Edmodo has more than 34 million users who connect to create a learning process that is more enriching, personalized, and aligned with the opportunities brought by technology and the digital environment.

2. Socrative

Socrative professes to be “your classroom app for fun, effective classroom engagement”. It is a system that allows teachers to create exercises or educational games which students can solve using mobile devices, laptops, or tablets. Teachers can see the results of the activities and, depending on these, modify the subsequent lessons in order to make them more personalized.

3. Google Classroom

Google Classroom is a powerful community based social tool for learning. It allows students to post questions and receive answers from their teachers and fellow students. It can also be integrated with other Google products such as Google Forms, which can be a great way to get feedback from students.

4. *Edpuzzle*

A big booster for flipped learning teachers. Customize regular videos with engaging interactive learning tools. You can even track students' actions and progress with this tool.

5. *Kahoot!*

Through this tool, teachers can create questionnaires, discussions, or surveys that complement academic lessons. The material is projected in the classroom and questions are answered by students while playing and learning at the same time. It promotes game-based learning, which increases student engagement and creates a dynamic, social, and fun educational environment.

6. *JeopardyLabs*

JeopardyLabs is an online service that enables you to build Jeopardy games without PowerPoint, by using a simple editor. You can also choose from ready-made games created by the platform users on such subjects as foods, cities, countries, books, and hygiene.

7. *Projeqt*

Projeqt is a tool that allows you to create multimedia presentations, with dynamic slides in which you can embed interactive maps, links, online quizzes, Twitter timelines, and videos, among other options. During a class session, teachers can share with students academic presentations which are visually adapted to different devices.

8. *Thinglink*

Thinglink allows educators to create interactive images with music, sounds, texts, and photographs. It offers the possibility for teachers to create learning methodologies that awaken the curiosity of students through interactive content that can expand their knowledge.

9. *Storybird*

Storybird aims to promote writing and reading skills in students through storytelling. In this tool, teachers can create interactive and artistic books online through a simple and easy to use interface. The stories created can be embedded in blogs, sent by email, and printed, among other options. In Storybird, teachers can also create projects with students, give constant feedback, and organize classes and grades.

10. *Edgames*

Edgames is an edutainment tool that provides educational activities, including board games, scrambled word games, sports-based games, and

cards. You can help your students learn and understand personal hygiene, nutrition, current affairs, and many other things through playing games.

We are able to conclude that technology is a trustworthy assistant that helps to make the teaching and learning processes more enjoyable and effective. With online teaching tools, the process of distance learning can become more goal oriented, more participatory, flexible in time and space, unaffected by distances and tailored to individual learning styles, and increase collaboration between teachers and students. Multimedia enables learning to become fun and friendly, without fear of inadequacies or failure. So, in the digital world we live in now, it is essential that teachers equip themselves with innovative educational technology tools. Compiling the list of online teaching tools, we aimed to take your classroom to the next level and transform passive learning into active exploration.

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