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Online synchronous communication in a blended learning course: an analysis of Webinars

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1 Introduction

In this contribution, we intend to investigate synchronous online communication within a blended master's degree course activated since the academic year 2016/17. Specifically, we want to highlight how the functionalities of the online video conferencing systems (OVS) have been adopted in order to promote active learning.

We refer to a specific definition of blended learning, according to which the introduction of technologies in teaching allows a differentiation of supports to offer information and contents, teaching strategies, online and face-to-face moments which must be wisely harmonized [1].

To overcome the emergency and the mendacious dichotomy between distance learning and face-to-face teaching, in the following academic year, blended learning was extensively adopted as a functional way to support the teaching and learning processes. As Limone argues, the balance of hybridization between face-to-face and distance teaching is the fundamental issue [2].

As formerly highlighted [3], in an online and blended environment one of the key-factors is the design activity, especially in its architectural dimension [4] that refers to the planning of the teaching actions, the choice of methods, tools, student's activities and e-tivities [5].

The macro-design, generally made visible in the syllabus [6], allows the students to have a significant orientation on the activities to be performed and the opportunity of situating oneself with respect to the overall path.

The importance of designing the microstructure of the courses in higher education has been recognized as one of the crucial factors that impacts on student achievement [7]. Moreover, the micro-design of an online session, reified in the lesson plan [8], responds to the need to clarify learning goals, teaching phases, strategies, tools in order to consider the cognitive load and the fluctuations in attention due to the online situation.

2 Webinars in a blended learning course

The research context is the blended master's degree in *Business management and consulting* of the Faculty of Economics at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of

Milan, launched in the academic year 2016/17 to better support working students. There are some distinctive features characterizing the designed blended model [9]:

- 6 modules per semester, spread over 13 weeks;
- balance between classroom and online activities (50%-50%):
 - intensive classroom activities (biweekly), with lectures, case studies, testimonials, simulations, group works;
 - webinar sessions, in the evening hours, for insights and troubleshooting;
 - video lessons;
 - forums;
- individual and group assessment and frequent feedback, in the logic of assessment for learning and as learning [10];
- e-tutors and e-teachers, which support guidance in the course and the learning process [11].

In a blended learning course, a strategic element to punctuate the progress of learning is synchronous communication, made possible by increasingly efficient and user-friendly online video conferencing systems (OVS). Researchers have founded that students generally perceive synchronous interactions positively, because of instantaneous feedback and because they feel more engaged in the online experience [12].

The main objective of the research is to focus the online synchronous teaching practices and students' activation: as provided by the blended model, synchronous interactions have been made possible within webinars, "a nearly face-to-face environment that increases participants' social presence and facilitates multi-level interaction" [13].

3 Method

Between the 2016/17 and 2019/20 academic years, synchronous online sessions delivered by Blackboard Collaborate Ultra were monitored by e-teachers and e-tutors.

About 700 online synchronous sessions of 27 courses of the master's degree carried out in four academic years were analyzed in order to focus on the teaching practices. The analysis was conducted on the data collected through an observation grid that includes a brief description of the session, technical quality of the video and audio transmission, adopted functionalities of the online video conferencing system, teaching formats, interaction [14].

A descriptive analysis will be carried out on the different items, supported by the framework outlined by Lieser et alii. to promote the 4Es Learning Cycle (engagement, exploration, explanation, and extension) through webinars, highlighting which OVS functionalities can support the learning experience dimensions [15].

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