

INTRODUCTION

Emerging research pathways about time in online learning

This special issue compiles the research work carried out by 1st and 2nd year PhD candidates from the eLC Doctorate Program in Education and ICT (e-learning) and their contribution to the eLC Research Program on the time factor in e-learning.

The papers included in this issue do not correspond to a thematic grouping and the time factor is not dealt with from a specific perspective, but in a broad sense as a variable to be considered, either centrally or tangentially, in different research studies in the field of online learning.

These articles are developed from different approaches and at different phases in the research process. Thus, from a structural perspective of research design, three different sections of contributions can be distinguished: the first section includes two articles focusing on the development of the theoretical framework and the conceptual clarification of the time factor in the research, in order to substantiate a possible framework of analysis; the three articles of the second section go a step further, considering the elements that should be incorporated in the methodological design of the research, to support the analysis of the time factor for a given context. Finally, the third section features a single article that, in addition to proposing a design methodology and a theoretical framework, develops an empirical study regarding the impact of the time factor in the field of e-learning.

The research topics addressed by the papers in this issue, and therefore the expected research results, are also diverse in nature and can be placed in the three study areas or dimensions of e-learning identified in the eLearn Center: 1) online teaching and learning processes; 2) online learning organization, management and policies, and 3) technological resources for online learning.

Thus, Llorens and Sangrà, from the first study area, develop a conceptualization of the impact of temporal aspects in shaping the functions and role of the online teacher.

Esposito, Sangrà and Maina, also in the same area of study, propose a theoretical model for the analysis of the configuration in time and space of learning trajectories followed by junior researchers, emerging from the formal and informal learning ecologies of which they take part.

The work of Arguedas and Daradoumis, can be located both in the first and the third area of study, as it proposes a theoretical model for the analysis of the role time plays in the emotional states of online students, while the goal of the research is the design of an affective virtual agent/tutor able to intervene and mediate in students' e-learning processes.

Usart, Romero and Barberà place their work in the context of the first area of study and develop a comprehensive literature review to determine the most appropriate methodologies and tools to measure two temporary variables, the time spent on tasks and the subjective perception of time in computer-based learning and game based learning situations.

The research of Franco, Barberà and Romero also focuses on the study of online learning processes. In this case, an extended literature review provides the basis for the proposal of a methodological design to analyze time regulation patterns and learning efficiency in collaborative online learning contexts.

Finally, the last article by Grau and Minguillón can be placed in the area of organization and management of e-learning processes. They address the issue of dropping out in online universities. Specifically, from a large data set showing students' enrolment at the UOC, they analyze the relationship between taking a break and the probability of dropping out from their studies.

These six research works, along with those to be included in the next issue, represent the first fruits of the eLC Doctorate with respect to the research program. We believe this is a good example of the many possible angles from which the relevance of time in online learning can be studied, which in turn opens new and promising pathways for future research.

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