ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series
EDU2020-0203
Athens, 09 November 2020

Understanding Personalities of Online Students:
Importance for Successful Teaching

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ABSTRACT

The creation of a psychological model representing student personalities in online communication serves the following purposes: understanding preparedness, boundaries of Zone of Proximal Development of a student, and understanding student's motivation to take the class. This basis gives us the opportunity to develop a style, or "language", for better and more effective communication with students in educational process.

Keywords:

Acquaintances

Classes in person and classes online begin with acquaintances. Students are trying to understand what kind of a person I am and what to expect from me, as their teacher.

They know that their success in class depends significantly on my skills and on my character.

In f2f classes students watch me – my facial expressions, my style of dress, how I talk, and what I say to them.

I know this and I am trying to help students to understand me better by explaining my rules in class and by pointing their attention to the rules I set up in the syllabus.

Sometimes they are trying to test me to see what my reaction can be in this or that case. *They are experimenting with me.*

When teaching f2f classes, I have a personalized syllabus. By this syllabus students judge how well is my course organized and how well I am organized.

In this process we exchange incredible amounts of information with incredible speed: hundreds of gigabits per second

In online communication the rate of exchange of information constitutes only megabits per second. This makes the processes of teaching and learning more difficult and sometimes, less effective.

How to make online education a little bit less formal, more attractive, and more effective?

With further development of information technologies and electronic methods of communications online education will become more effective than today, sometimes less frustrating, and more popular than traditional f2f education due to its greater flexibility.

How can we make our online classes more effective, not waiting until high technologies will come and do this for us?

In my view it can be done by improving the *quality* of information we exchange with students, (English, 2009). Quality of information can be increased using language with adapted and personalized semantics.

Making Models

In online classes, students and teacher are trying to understand each other and create models of personalities, but the methods and tools available to both sides are limited and quite different from that of f2f classes.

The visual and audio channels of exchange of information between students and teacher are minimized in online courses.

Students can get information about me through my Contact Information in the Course Shell, my Profile and the Bio posted in the Introduction discussion. They judge me by deciding how well my online course is organized.

When students read my information, they look for

a) My professional qualification,
b) What kind of a person I am,
c) How well I am organized to teach their class.

From my side I am trying to understand from online communication

a) How well my students are <u>prepared</u> for the class,
b) What are their <u>motivations</u>, and why did they decide to take my class?
c) What is there family status?

I also look at how good my student could be: smart, kind, hardworking, what his or her hobbies are.

I learn about my students while reading their posts in discussions, and first of all posts in the introduction discussion, reading their profiles in the Classist (not all students post their profiles here), and through emails they send to me.

The structure and linguistics of email carries very interesting information about the authors.

In the next section there are examples of emails from some of my students.

All texts are reproduced exactly as they are. Let us read them and see if we can get any ideas about the personalities of the authors.

Examples of Emails

Emails below are given in their original form.

Student 1.
Hi Professor,
I just got your response to my lab, you mentioned that I did not cite my work, I had the best intentions to cite my work, my lab top was going to die and I did not have my charger with me. What can I do to improve my grad for this class, all in all? This is my last semester for my *CC, so I would be beyond disappointed if I let this class keep me back.
Thanks,   *****
Student 2
Good morning Professor Maslov,
I must apologize for any perceived indignation of tone in my email prior correspondence. I was speaking from a place of frustration - of my myself. I couldn't sleep last night in light of the incident and have come to you this morning in complete humility. If possible, any grace that you may be able to extend in the light of the situation would be greatly appreciated. Alas, I do understand that it is my responsibility to submit my assignments on time, and that the fault is all my own for working up until the last minutes of the deadline. I have a heavy load, 20 credit hours of all science and math courses; however, I have really committed to my academics and especially this course. Apart from missing the occasional deadline for a few of the discussions, I hope my work indicates that.
Again, thank you for your consideration, *****

Student 3
Dr. Maslov, I completely understand; as an educator, I also have the same guidelines. More than anything, I just wanted you to be aware of the mistake so that you did not interpret my missing assignment as disrespect for you or your content. Thank you for your time and understanding.

Student 4.
Is there anyway to get any points back even late points? I need this class to graduate and I need all of the points I can get to pass.

Student 5.
Please call me at ***-***-****. I'm having major issues with the online site. Im available any time.

Student 6.
I signed in to see what others have commented on my post about cloning, but its no longer there. I was the first one to post on the morning the discussion opened. I saw it there a few days after I posted it, and now I can't see it. Maybe you can help explain this?
The Same student next day.
Disregard that last email. I was in the wrong discussion.

Reading each email, we can get a pretty good idea about personality of their authors.
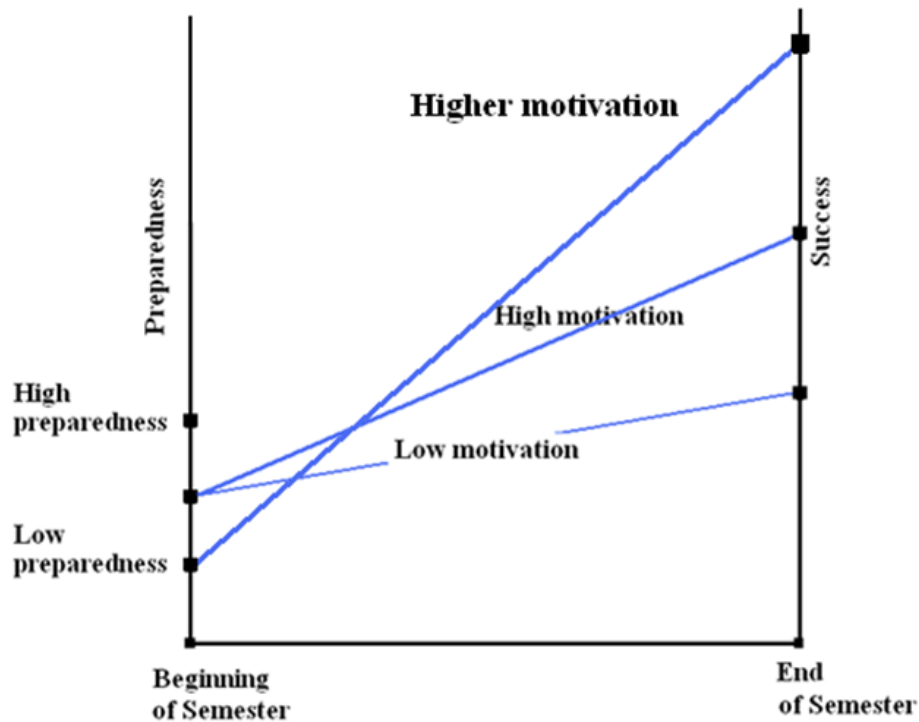
Developing Language

The mosaic of different data I am getting from sources mentioned above helps me to develop a psychological portrait of a certain student and to understand how to communicate with him or her in the education process.

In thinking about what "language" I can use with this or that student, how can I teach him/her more effectively, I pay attention to student's *preparedness* for the class, his/her educational background.

The second priority I give to student's *motivation* to take the class. Figure 1 illustrates these two notions graphically.

Figure 1. *Preparedness is a starting point in the education process, and Motivation_is the indicator how much efforts student can pay for gaining a success in class, slope of a line*
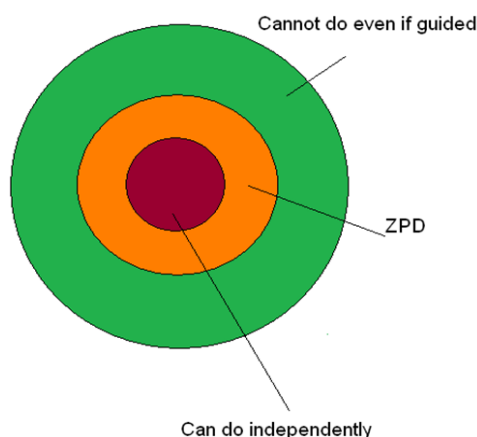

Preparedness and Zone of Proximal Development

Preparedness is represented by a point on vertical axis y-intercept point using College Algebra language, and Motivation is represented by a slope of a "line of learning"; it is not necessarily to be a straight line.

In a wider scope, preparedness is not just a point on a scale "high-low". In some abstract space of knowledge, it is an area of Zone of Proximal Development of a student. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) was developed by Lev Vygotsky in 1934 in Russia, (Vygotsky, 1986).

Figure 2. *Zone of Proximal Development*

Zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the area in which a student's success in gaining new knowledge depends on his/her preparedness, as well as the availability of instruction. In my f2f classes, to determine my students ZPD, I give them a nongraded test at the very beginning of the semester.

This helps me to see how well each student is prepared for the class and what "language" I can use for the most effective communication in the teaching process.

Teaching with adapted and personalized "language" from the Zone of Proximal Development of a student makes my work more effective and, for many students, less stressful.

Radius, or area of ZPD can serve as an initial point on vertical axis, Figure 1, characterizing quantitatively preparedness of a student.

Motivation and Hierarchy of Needs

When we set our life goals, we assign them certain priorities.

This set of goals with their priorities can be considered as a personalized Hierarchy of Needs developed by Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1943, 1962).

Education provides us all (almost, or many) the necessary means to achieve our life goals.
Education, like the roots of a tree, feeds our dreams, makes them to grow better, and blossom.

Figure 3. *Hierarchy of Needs and Tree of Education*

I am always trying to understand the life goals of my students, and what their priorities are in the Hierarchy (Pyramid) of Needs. In the online introduction discussion, I ask students to tell why he/she is taking this class. This gives me information about the student's life goals and, altogether with the other pieces of informational mosaic, helps me to develop a psychological portrait (model) of this student. In turn, this helps me to develop a "language" for effective communication with this student. On this level of communication, you can get emails like this one:

> *Hi Dr. Maslow,*
> *In your feedback, you asked if I enjoyed doing the simple machine-lever lab. I did. I was able to do it while at work and getting paid. Can't beat that!*
> *I'm becoming more certain that I will take the summer course if I can. I hope you're teaching it. It's nice to take a class with a professor you're already familiar with.*

> ****** *******
> I would like to attract your attention to this part of student's email:
> *It's nice to take a class with a professor you're already familiar with.*
> This student has created a model of me and has accepted this model as of his/her teacher.

Conclusion

The creation of a psychological model representing student personalities in online communication serves the following purposes: understanding *preparedness*, that is boundaries of *Zone of Proximal Development* of a student and understanding student's *motivation* to take the class. This basis gives me the opportunity to develop an adapted and personalized language, for better and more effective communication with a student in educational process.

Quantitative, Algebra-based approach developed in this work can be further used to modeling education processes.

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