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## EFFECT OF ONLINE DISCUSSION AS A FORM OF ORGANIZATION OF LEARNING ON STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION SKILLS

EFFECTO DE LA DISCUSIÓN EN LÍNEA COMO FORMA DE ORGANIZACIÓN DEL APRENDIZAJE EN LAS HABILIDADES DE COMUNICACIÓN DE LOS ESTUDIANTES

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### ABSTRACT

The introduction of distance learning may diminish opportunities for the development of communicative competence and skills of applied psychology students as their important professional quality. The study examines online discussion as a form of organization of learning and a means to improve the communication skills of applied psychology students in distance learning. A method of organization and conduct of online discussions is presented. The paper defines the types of discussions, their structure and conditions of success, and the order of constructing the statements of participants in the discussion. As part of the experimental section of the study, methodological tools for assessing the level of students' communication skills are selected and the initial level of students' skills is established. The authors develop a model for organizing online discussions with the Parlay app and conduct an experimental study on the use of the discussion method in distance learning. The authors conclude that the application of online discussions in distance learning will improve the communication skills of applied psychology students.

### Keywords:

Discussion, online discussion, information and communication technologies, Moodle, distance learning.

### RESUMEN

La introducción del aprendizaje a distancia puede disminuir las oportunidades para el desarrollo de competencias y habilidades comunicativas de los estudiantes de psicología aplicada como su importante cualidad profesional. El estudio examina la discusión en línea como una forma de organización del aprendizaje y un medio para mejorar las habilidades de comunicación de los estudiantes de psicología aplicada en la educación a distancia. Se presenta un método de organización y realización de debates en línea. El documento define los tipos de discusiones, su estructura y condiciones de éxito, y el orden de construcción de las declaraciones de los participantes en la discusión. Como parte de la parte experimental del estudio, se seleccionan herramientas metodológicas para evaluar el nivel de habilidades comunicativas de los estudiantes y se establece el nivel inicial de habilidades de los estudiantes. Los autores desarrollan un modelo para organizar discusiones en línea con la aplicación Parlay y realizan un estudio experimental sobre el uso del método de discusión en el aprendizaje a distancia. Los autores concluyen que la aplicación de debates en línea en la educación a distancia mejorará las habilidades comunicativas de los estudiantes de psicología aplicada.

### Palabras clave:

Discusión, discusión en línea, tecnologías de la información y la comunicación, Moodle, educación a distancia.

## INTRODUCTION

The provision of quality educational services remains a topical issue of educational policy. In the current epidemiological situation, the use of distance learning tools is a necessary measure to ensure the required level of student learning. The introduction of distance learning also creates a range of problems affecting the efficiency of the educational process. One of these issues is reduced opportunities for the development of students' communicative competence and skills given the involuntary isolation and the lack of direct communication.

During their student years, young people begin to actively build their present and future and assert themselves in society and an important factor in their adaptation to the new educational environment is communication skills (Polikarpov & Mikhaleva, 2020). Communication skills also serve as a prerequisite for the personal and professional self-actualization of future practicing psychologists, which attributes special importance to their development. There currently exist numerous techniques and methods of raising the communicative potential of a person (Istratova & Eksakusto, 2006). Yet for applied psychology students, it is worthy to distinguish the method of discussion, which in the conditions of distance learning transforms into online discussion, requiring the use of modern information technology.

For these reasons, of particular relevance is the analysis of the features of using the discussion method in distance learning as a means of developing students' communication skills.

Scientific literature presents several approaches to the definition of discussion. The philosophical approach describes discussion as a Socratic method, which consists in a dialogue between interlocutors, who have no ready-made answers to questions and seek the truth. During the dialogue, the problem is defined and the search for its solution begins. Psychology considers discussion among the methods of development of mental functions, personality traits, and creative abilities of a person (Kutbiddinova, 2014; Ying, 2020).

In pedagogical literature, discussion is recognized as one of the most active methods of teaching with great value for development and upbringing. In discussion, students learn to argue, justify, reason, and defend their views, evaluate themselves adequately, and respect the opinions of others (Nystrand, 2006).

Henning (2005), distinguishes the following types of discussion: discussion focused on the truth, self-identification, or self-assertion, discussion as an end in itself, and

discussion focused on victory ("my victory", "our victory", "victory for show").

A classification Bondareva et al. (2016), contains the following types of discussion: linear (participants typically debate among themselves, not with the audience); frontal (used after lectures as an element of knowledge assimilation and clarification of unresolved issues); managed (the teacher acts as an expert or host, taking full charge of the discussion); public (the teacher keeps order, gives the floor, controls speaking time, and summarizes and concludes the discussion but does not interfere with its content); group (discussion in subgroups as an element of the whole and concluded with a plenary debriefing); free (the teacher only defines the topic but does not intervene in the discussion process, observing the group in search for the solution to later discuss the process with participants in the discussion).

Abdulbaki et al. (2018), argue that the implementation of discussion in the educational process gives opportunities for equal, invested, and active participation of future specialists in the analysis of theoretical provisions, possible solutions, and their accuracy and validity. Aniskina (2018), states that discussions create a specific psychological background that forms in students the ability to articulate their thoughts in presentations briefly and precisely, to actively defend their views, argue, and refute the opponent's erroneous position. Furthermore, the researcher suggests that discussion provides creative cooperation and develops a sense of dignity and responsibility for one's own actions and thoughts and tolerance for others.

Efimova (2014), assigns importance to the preparation of questions, which can be classified into two types: *"those implying the reproduction of information memorized from the literature read in preparation for the discussion; those that require productive (creative) thinking ("why?"; "for what reason?"; "for what?"; "what follows from...?"; "what explains?"; "what does it mean?"; "with what and how can one argue, prove, etc.?"")*

Methodologists Matiash & Pavlova (2010), distinguish three main blocks of a discussion: concept (content, goal, objectives); the process of realization of the concept (a sort of interaction of the discussed information with the necessary information); the result of the discussion activity (solution of a problem or a step towards it, achievement of mutual understanding or clear distinction of positions, formulation of new problems).

The methodological techniques of holding discussions that university teachers should be equipped with, as suggested by Blinov et al. (2014), include: a body of knowledge that would facilitate the discussion and keep it interesting

for an extended period of time; the ability to ensure comprehensive coverage of the problem with questions, to prevent the discussion from drifting into a different issue or turning into a dialogue of two most active students, and to ensure broad and active participation of all students in the group; the ability to watch for students' erroneous judgments about the subject matter, engage them in discussion and in finding the correct answer, make sure that the subject of analysis is an opinion and not a student proposing it, compare different views, and engage students in their active and comprehensive analysis; the ability to draw summarizing conclusions at the end of the discussion, summarize the results of collective discussion, lead students to a constructive conclusion, assess the contribution of each participants in the discussion, and form tasks for independent research.

To the conditions for a successful discussion Safari et al. (2006), attribute: the readiness of participants in the discussion; each participant having clear statements about their position, a precise definition of objectives; the focus of the discussion on clarifying the problem and not the competition of its participants; the lack of reconciliation of opposing views; clarity of discussion remarks; refraining from commenting on participants' opinions. Moreover, as argued by Nicol & Boyle (2003), the teacher needs to explicitly communicate to students that the tool of persuasion is the logic of proof, which consists of a thesis, arguments, and demonstration as a means of argument.

Researcher Gushchin (2012), points out different sequences of the construction of statements by discussion participants: culminating (the strongest arguments are given at the end), anti-culminating (reversed; the statement begins with a strong argument), middle (the strong arguments are placed in the middle of the statement). The culminating and reversed order are found to be more efficient than the middle organization (with a slight advantage of the former over the latter) (Stengel et al., 2019).

However, in this case it is important to consider the content of the statements and attitudes of discussion participants. If there is little interest in the topic of the statement, the strongest arguments need to be laid out first to incite interest and attention. If participants are highly interested in the subject matter, the most compelling points are worth presenting at the end of the presentation. In this case, a gradual weakening of argumentation can somewhat disappoint the audience (Stengel et al., 2019).

Scientific sources on the problem of communication indicate that the method of discussion can efficiently promote the development of communicative competence in student youth. In particular, Gimpel & Veremeichik (2010),

believes that at the core of the development of communication competence in adolescence should be facilitative assistance through discussion. Discussion as a method of development of communication skills is also considered by (Mariko & Mikhailova, 2010; Shelestova & Zagidullina, 2014).

In light of the above, research into the effects of online discussions of the development of communication skills will not only provide a deeper understanding of the problem of forming students' communicative competence, which will directly allow them to learn to verbalize their own thoughts, views, and ideas, effectively perceive information, and show interest in interpersonal communication, but will also give an opportunity to optimize the professional training of applied psychology students in the conditions of distance learning.

In accordance with the aforesaid, the goal of the present study is to investigate the features of the effect of online discussion on the development of communicative competence in applied psychology students.

Research objectives are as follows:

- to select methodological tools to determine the level of communicative competence in students and to establish their current level of communication skills;
- to develop a model of organization of online discussions in the Parlay app;
- to conduct an experimental study on the use of the discussion method and draw respective conclusions on the dynamics of students' communication skills after the completion of online discussions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The established research goal is addressed through an experimental study. The research sample consists of 87 2nd year students majoring in Psychology, direction "Applied Psychology". The students were divided into two groups: the experimental (EG) including 42 people and the control (CG) consisting of 45 people.

Following the specified objectives, the diagnostics of students' communication skills were carried out using the KOS method (Communicative and organizational aptitudes).

The experimental study on the organization and conduct of online discussions using Parlay (<https://parlayideas.com/>) in the context of distance learning was conducted via a methodological experiment, which included:

- modeling of the organization of online discussions;

- diagnostics of the level of students' communication skills before and after conducting distance classes with the use of online discussions in the EG (in the CG, distance learning did not involve online discussions);
- analysis and interpretation of study results.

As part of the study, a total of eight discussions lasting 80 minutes each were held. The discussions were held two times a week.

The research hypothesis proposed is that the conduct of distance learning with online discussions will improve the level of communication skills of applied psychology students.

The reliability of dynamics in the level of students' communication skills before and after distance learning sessions with the use of online discussions was tested through mathematical processing of the results of diagnostics. Reliability of the indicators in the groups was assessed using the nonparametric Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test. Calculation of criterion values and confidence intervals was carried out at the significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ . Statistical processing of the data was performed with Statistica 7.0 software.

The formulated statistical hypotheses are as follows:

H0: no statistically significant differences are present between the groups by the level of communication skills after online discussions with EG students.

H1: there are statistically significant differences between the groups by the level of communication skills after online discussions with EG students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The model for organizing an online discussion in Parlay is presented in Table 1

Table 1. Model of organizing an online discussion using Parlay.

No.	Stage	Content
I	Preliminary	1. Presentation of the topic and goals of the class. A case on the topic of discussion is created and posted for students on the Parlay portal. 2. Division of the online audience into groups of four and the assignment of pairs within each group. 3. Presenting each group with two variants of educational content (one variant per pair), each presenting one of the opposing positions on the studied issue. Thus, the pairs defend opposing viewpoints. 4. Announcement of the task to compare the opposing positions on the problem in an online discussion, to reach an agreement, and to express the shared opinion in a written report and present it at the end of the class.
II	Debate of the parties	1. Studying educational content in pairs and independently searching the Internet for additional sources to support the position suggested in the given materials. 2. The pairs take turns presenting the results of the group study. 3. Direct discussion with a debate on the strengths and weaknesses of the opponents' positions. 4. Role reversal, which consists of defending the previously challenged opinion of the opponent. 5. Repeated debates
III	Debriefing	1. Preparation of group reports. 2. Presentation of the results and discussion. 3. Analysis of the efficiency of group work and conclusion

The dynamics in students' communication skills assessed by the KOS method before and after distance classes with online discussions are disclosed in Table 2.

Table 2. Dynamics in the level of students' communication skills according to the KOS method.

Group	Section	Level				
		low	below average	average	high	very high
EG (n=42)	before	19.05%	26.2%	35.7%	11.9%	7.15%
	after	2.4%	9.5%	50.0%	26.2%	11.9%
CG (n=45)	before	15.6%	31.1%	37.8%	11.1%	4.4%
	after	17.8%	33.3%	35.6%	8.9%	4.4%

Pearson's  $\chi^2$  test confirms the statistical significance of differences in the level of communication skills of EG students before and after online discussions ( $\chi^2=54.87$ ) and between the EG and CG after online discussions ( $\chi^2=61.32$ ).

Meanwhile, the calculations do not support statistical difference in the level of communication skills among CG students before and after online discussions in the EG ( $\chi^2=1.69$ ). Thus, the communication skills of CG students show no statistically significant change.

The implementation of distance classes with online discussions thus proves to be significant and efficient as an instrument of improving the communication skills of applied psychology students, as evidenced by the above statistical results.

Table 2 presents the indicators that testify to the efficiency of online discussion as a tool for raising the level of communication skills in the EG:

Prior to online discussions, 45.25% of students in the EG had low and below average levels of communication skills, whereas after the implementation of online discussions, the share of students at these levels dropped to 11.9%;

Before online discussions, 19.05% of EG students showed high and above average levels of communication skills, and after online discussions, their share rose to 38.1%.

The research findings demonstrate that after distance classes with the use of online discussions, the number of students with low and below average levels of communication skills fell by a factor of four, while the number of students at high and above average levels doubled.

It is also worth noting that after online discussions, students show greater self-confidence and more actively engage in contact with others and defend their views. Furthermore, students themselves report that distance learning ceased to be a negative experience for them and, on the contrary, started motivating them to establish new contacts, discuss various topics, and broaden their horizons.

The results of previous studies also prove that the discussion format of distance classes facilitates the development of not just communication skills (the ability to publicly prove one's view, choose one's own way of solving a certain problem and convince others of its expediency, listen and hear the partner, and empathize with other people and show solidarity) [10], but also intellectual abilities (critical thinking, the ability to draw logical connections between phenomena) [6] and research and organizational skills

(the ability to collect and analyze materials from a variety of sources, treating them critically) [16].

Importantly, the teacher themselves can ask several questions of different nature during the discussion, yet the teacher should be ready for students to ask them questions too, as a rightful participant in the debate. A frequent problem in discussions is that not every student participates in the work equally and there are some students who only observe the discussion rather than engage in it.

Examining the results of the study, we should pay closer attention to the possibilities of the employed app, which shows itself as an efficient instrument allowing university teachers to not only organize but manage meaningful discussions.

The opportunities presented by Parlay to students and teachers are disclosed in Table 3.

**Table 3. The possibilities of Parlay for the teacher and the student.**

For the teacher:	For the student:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- using the nine templates for organizing various forms of discussion;</li> <li>- an algorithm of organizing a discussion: formulation of the goals of the class; publication of the studied material; formulation of discussion questions, a manual for arranging feedback from students;</li> <li>- an opportunity to give students recommendations for commenting on others' speeches using a sentence-starting template, which will make it easier for students to phrase their own comments;</li> <li>- the possibility of making up to 12 discussion boards in the free version.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- opportunity to study the educational materials;</li> <li>- access to other's comments;</li> <li>- engagement in the discussion by means of the provided comment writing templates;</li> <li>- opportunity to post not only test comments but to use the same instruments as the teacher.</li> </ul>

Using Parlay, teachers can more efficiently utilize problem-based learning technologies. Furthermore, the app provides both quantitative and qualitative indicators of each student's contribution to the discussion, since it also enables feedback from students in addition to encouraging them to cooperate and teaching them the culture of discussion. After the completion of the discussion, the teacher receives a detailed report on the engagement of each student in the discussion, which enables them to evaluate each participant's input. We believe that the app can be effectively used not exclusively in distance learning but in blended learning as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

Modern didactics and pedagogical experience recognize the great educational and pedagogical value of discussions and the indisputable expediency of using

this method in the formation of various competencies of students.

Online discussion as a remote public debate on a controversial issue is a significant means of cognitive activity, which not only promotes the development of students' critical thinking and enables them to deepen their knowledge on the problem discussed but also contributes their communicative competence and allows forming the necessary skills of argumentation and defense of their own position.

The experimental findings indicate that the application of online discussion in distance learning will enhance the communicative competence of applied psychology students.

In further research, it is planned to define the didactic capacity of other distance technologies for their further implementation.

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