THE ROLE OF THE ONLINE LEARNER:
ONSITE STUDENTS BECOMING ONLINE LEARNERS

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Abstract

As universities are offering tuition through online learning environments, "onsite students" in higher education are increasingly becoming "online learners". Since the medium for learning (and teaching) online is a digital environment, and at a distance, the role taken by students and teaching staff is different to the one these are used to in onsite, traditional settings. Therefore the Role of the Online Learner, presented in this paper, is key to onsite students who are to become online learners. This role consists of five competences: Operational, Cognitive, Collaborative, Self-directing, Course-specific. These five competences integrate the various skills, strategies, attitudes and awareness that make up the role of online learner, which learners use to perform efficiently online. They also make up the basis of a tutorial for would-be online learners, going over the Role of the Online Learner by means of concepts, examples and reflective activities. This tutorial, available to students in the author's website, is also helpful to teaching and counselling staff in guiding their students to become online learners.

Keywords

Online learner, role of the online learner, estudiante virtual, estudiant virtual, self-regulated learning.

"Onsite students" becoming "online learners"

University "onsite students" (who attend in-campus courses for instruction), are increasingly becoming "online learners" (undergoing instruction through an online learning environment), as more and more universities are providing online tuition through complete programmes, entire courses or parts of courses by means of an online learning environment (OLE). This is common to higher education institutions around the world, as they strive to cater for one or more of these main needs (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006):

- scattered population over large, extended geographical areas,
- limited facilities for too large a population with access to the institution,
- enable access to adult learners with family and professional responsibilities,
- match preferences of a new generation of students who expect ways and contents coherent with information and communication technology (ICT),
- increase income through diversification and new segments of students.

Moreover, onsite graduates are likely to get involved in a sustained cycle of lifelong learning, where most likely online instruction will increasingly be the medium of instruction. Therefore, onsite students' expected role in a traditional setting, with the lecturer's/professor's role being a "sage on the stage" who transfers knowledge, is no longer valid in an online learning setting (Murray, 2001), where the lecturer/professor is more of a guide and a facilitator or "guide on the side". In turn, not only onsite students cannot simply apply, when learning online, the same skills and strategies they are used to for learning in an in-campus classroom or setting, but also they do not have the means to

cope effectively, until gaining plenty of experience, with learning online. Students are expected to put into action a number of skills and competences which, although existing in onsite learning as an option or an asset for onsite students, they become a must for online learners. Some of these are:

- Responsibility for, and high involvement in, own learning.
- Pro-active performance expected from students (and fostered by teaching staff).
- Self-regulated learning.
- Engage in regular and effective communication.
- Learning in collaboration (also fostered by teaching action).
- Informational skills: search, selection and analysis, production, and dissemination of information and knowledge.

At the same time, this is reinforced by a shift in paradigm: teaching as transfer of knowledge turns into teaching as guiding and providing conditions for learning and for competence acquisition, with the move towards the European Higher Education Area being one where one of the goals of teaching is precisely to help develop competences (González & Wagenaar, 2003).

In this scenario, where both the role of teaching staff and the role of learners go beyond a traditional one, a structured proposal on the Role of the Online Learner is felt necessary. This role, understood as a "set of expected actions and observable behaviour, based on appropriate skills, which online learners should internalise and apply in order to succeed when learning online" (Borges & Appel, 2007), is aimed at students, be them onsite students occasionally engaged in online learning, be them online learners in a full programme of online tuition, and also at teaching and counselling staff. Therefore, students should develop a number of competences in "the role of *online learner*" (Scarafiotti & Cleveland-Innes, 2006); conscious, individual effort is required on the part of the online learner to go beyond a traditional role to a new role, one that fits within what is expected (and desirable) when learning online. This role will be a valuable general competence for life, a competence both desirable and expected in citizens in the XXI c.

The Role of the Online Learner

Although online learners' traits, together with what is expected from online learners, have been described and studied by a number of scholars, for instance Levine & Sun (2002), Pallof and Pratt (1999, 2003), Piskurich (2003, 2004), Flores (2004), there seems to be no theoretical construct which accounts for the role of the online learner as such. In an attempt to structure and systematise scattered knowledge on the online learner and the way to best learn online, the Role of the Online Learner is put forward as explained below.

The Role of the Online Learner consists of a number of skills and competences which are not a birth gift, but have to be acquired and practised purposefully, knowing that the skills and competences applied in a traditional setting, as onsite students, should be either replaced, reinforced, or reoriented, when learning as online learners. Borrowing Peter Strevens' much celebrated thought that "it takes better teachers to focus on the learner" (Oxford, 1990), it could be said that it takes a better learner to focus on collaboration, on communication, on self-monitoring and on building knowledge, that is, on the competences which make up the Role of the Online Learner. This is based initially on the list of competences for successful online learners by Birch (2001), encompassing a set of traits, skills, and attitudes which make up the competences required to learn successfully online. As outlined below, the role is a structured, dynamic combination of five competences:

Operational, *Cognitive, Collaborative, Self-directing* and *Course-specific.* This is so because the concept of the role of the online learner implies that knowledge building is not enough, and that competences in relation to reasonable expertise in the use of ICT, to effective management of information and resources, to communication and collaboration skills, to time management and self-regulated learning, and to strategic use of knowledge and information, are just as important as knowledge itself (Badia & Monereo, 2005).Competences in the role are understood as invisible traits which are efficiently manifested in performing a task, or a combination of them, (Monereo, 2005). These tasks can vary in complexity, and the student is competent in a way that s/he uses a repertoire of strategies and skills, together with all that the student *is* and *knows*, e.g. former knowledge, recent knowledge, feelings, adjustment to context, former experience, motivation, attitude, initiative, goals, and others.

These are the competences that make up the Role of the Online Learner:

1. Operational competence
Efficient use of ICT tools for learning, communicating, collaborating and self-direction.

It should be noted though that proficient use of these tools does not automatically result in a higher level of overall proficiency as an online learner. Main skills are:
- Adequate expertise in the use of ICT tools for communication and collaboration.
- Adequate expertise in the use of ICT tools for information search, retrieval, analysis and dissemination.
- Knowledge of how to use tools, facilities and navigation throughout the OLE.

2. Cognitive competence
Efficient learning of course content, applying own knowledge, and asking for help if necessary.

Main skills are:
- Know how to access course info such as course plan, course programme or study guide.
- Know how to go about course materials and get the most of them.
- Know where other resources are, and how to retrieve them and use them.
- Know where help is available, and ask for it if necessary.
- Provide help to classmates or teacher, and at the right time.
- Learn in a reflective way and with critical thinking.
- Prepared to apply knowledge or to look for ways to apply own knowledge.
- Connect to OLE regularly.

3. Collaborative competence
Efficient communication and collaboration with classmates and teacher in OLE.

Main skills are:
- Be willing to communicate, and to express one's ideas, opinions, feelings.
- Write efficiently for comprehension and communication.
- Capable of engaging classmates in learning or in group work.
- Participate in class discussion and class activities.
- Be prepared to negotiate meaning and to strive for consensus or agreement.

- Be prepared to seek feedback and learn from it.
- Be prepared to give feedback in order to learn.
- Be aware of the classroom or the OLE as a community of learners.

4. Self-directing competence

Efficient self-management, self-monitoring and self-appraisal when learning online. What a learner is, what s/he does, how much thinking puts into learning, her or his feelings and emotions are just as important as skills directly applied for learning contents or how to use ICT tools and course resources.

Personal traits for learning online:
- Be prepared to take into account classmates' and teacher's ideas and criticism.
- Be prepared to learn from teacher and classmates.
- Be prepared to learn from one's or other classmates' mistakes.
- Be responsible for one's own learning, which means being autonomous and proactive rather than reactive.
- Originality of one's work, without cheating or using someone else's work.
- Resilience to failures, disappointment and uncertainty.
- Tolerance towards other learners' opinions, their ways of expressing themselves and working.

Strategies for learning online:
- Organize and manage one's resources adequately, particularly time.
- Negotiate or agree about time and amount of dedication to learning with family (spouse) or with workmates (boss).
- Set own learning goals.
- Set up own learning plan or learning contract.
- Self-discipline: adhering consistently to one's goals and one's time scheduling.
- Self-motivate, giving treats to oneself if necessary.

Thinking and reflection that learning online entails:
- Be informed about what to do to prevent frustration.
- Self-monitor one's efforts, actions and progress.
- Learn from mistakes (own and others').
- Check out own efforts against one's goals, learning plan, learning contract and time schedule.
- Think of ways to improve one's organization and management of learning.

5. Course-specific competences

Efficient assimilation or use of terminology, processes or know-how specific to the course, subject, degree or field of knowledge in an OLE.

These could include:
- Use the language learnt in communication with classmates and teacher.
- Read classmates' contributions to class discussions and class activities.
- Make a note of new or interesting expressions and vocabulary used by the teacher or classmates.
- Participate with ideas, opinions and experiences in class discussions, going beyond being a mere reader.
- Prepare beforehand synchronous sessions to be attended.

Figure 1 below shows a model representing the five competences in the Role. It serves as the basis for orientation guidelines to students and also a valuable contribution to onsite lecturers / counsellors advising their onsite students as to how best tackle online learning, as well as online lecturers who are required to provide orientation to novice online learners. As well as literature on the role of online teaching staff, where clues and advice are given as to what changes and how for online teaching staff (see for instance Goodyear et al., 2001), such a model, and the tutorial developing its skills and competences as explained below, can help to give orientations to onsite students who are likely to become online learners.

Figure 1. Model of the Role of the Online Learner.
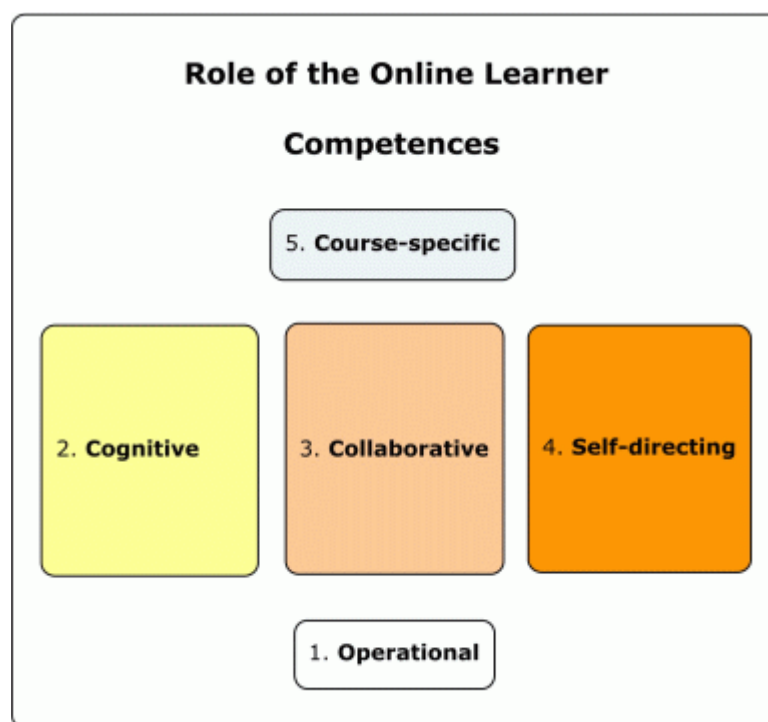
Operational competence is at the bottom to represent the set of ICT skills that every online learner has to know about and apply daily; it is on this competence that the rest of competences are built on, namely the one applied to learn course contents (*Cognitive*), for communication and collaboration (*Collaborative*), and the one put in practice by the learner internally (*Self-directing*) to put into action personal traits and skills with metacognitive strategies. At the same time, desirable or required skills and strategies specific to course contents, degree or even field of knowledge (*Course-specific competence*) exert an influence on self-directing, collaborative and cognitive competences.

A Tutorial for training on the Role
It is all very well to present a model which may contribute to researchers' and academics' understanding of how to learn and perform in an OLE or how learners should learn and perform in an OLE. However, there is the need to go beyond a theoretical approach and contribute to improve the quality of learning and teaching in an OLE by means of the actual application of some principles. These principles can be the skills and

competences that make up the Role of the Online Learner. Similarly to the way teaching staff think about their tuition delivered online "*What am I supposed to do with my students when we are online?*" (Borges, 2006), onsite students may not know how to tackle their learning online and would benefit from guidelines on how to perform as an online learner based on the Role of the Online Learner.

It is with that need in mind that a Tutorial on the Role of the Online Learner has been designed and implemented, after the model above, and is offered to be freely used by students and counsellors. This tutorial is available at www.online-learner.net / www.estudiante-virtual.net with versions available in Catalan, Spanish and English; its workload is light (around 2 hours), and it's been designed for easy reading and reference. By taking this tutorial, onsite students are expected to become better online learners, equipped with concepts and reflections which will help them to perform online satisfactorily from the outset; also by means of its contents and activities, students will begin self-regulation adapted to an OLE. In addition, this tutorial can become a useful account of concepts and advice for teaching staff with counselling responsibilities in providing help to students about online learning and their role as online learners.

Conclusions

Onsite students who become online learners, either occasionally or in complete courses or programmes, should be aware of what it takes to learn online, what is expected from them, and what to reasonably expect from others in an OLE. In such a learning environment both teaching staff and students perform a specific role, somewhat different to the one taken in a traditional, onsite setting. It is for this reason that knowledge on the Role of the Online Learner can be of benefit to both onsite students, who are expected to become highly involved in their own learning and need to become effective online learners, and to teaching staff, who are expected to guide and help students to build knowledge by themselves, to acquire and practise a set of competences, and to perform effectively in an OLE.

This paper presents the Role of the Online Learner as a theoretical construct, together with the link to a free-access version of a tutorial which goes over the concepts that make up this role, i.e. skills and competences, including activities to increase reflection and awareness.

It would be a gross mistake, however, to regard the Role of the Online Learner as necessary only for *digital immigrants*, that is, adults who grew without the Internet and without ICT tools (Prensky, 2006), and as unnecessary for onsite students becoming online learners, *digital natives*, who have grown up used to ICT tools and processes such as e-mail, the Internet, mobile media, videogames, instant messaging, blogging, virtual identity, online communities, multitasking, and so on. This is so because despite digital natives' familiarity with ICT, still guidance and orientation are required as to how best learn and perform online in terms of attitudes, communication, learning strategies, self-monitoring, self-regulated learning and collaboration with others. Technological expertise therefore is not all, as seen in the five competences that make up the role of the online learner

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Possible points for discussion
- What are the differences between the role of onsite student and the role of online learner? Will these mingle in the future?
- To what extent is knowledge on or awareness of the role of online learner useful to onsite students?
- Are the role of online learner and the role of online lecturer/professor related?