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Online Communities in Web 2.0 – Blended Learning Communities

By

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Abstract

In this dissertation we are going to try to examine the online communities in the digital era. What is really a community? Where does this definition coming from? We are going to give answers to some of our questions and especially we are going to give a definition of an online community. Also, we are going to examine the types of online communities, advantages and disadvantages of e-learning communities, the sense of community, social presence in a learning community and the interactivity. The purpose is to give a general idea of what an e-learning community is exactly. E-learning in our era has a direct connection with blended learning that is a mix method of e-learning and face to face learning methods. This is what really interests our survey in this dissertation.

Generally the following research hypotheses will be tested:

a. Students’ awareness of social presence in online subjects are related to their perceived learning and satisfaction with their instructor.

b. Students’ awareness of social presence in online subjects are a predictor of their perceived learning.

That’s why we are going to give a questionnaire to some students of the Master program “MA in Digital Media, Communication and Journalism” to examine further the phenomenon and if they feel social presence being members in a blended learning community. This is connected with how satisfied are they with the program and if blended learning is an efficient way of educating students.

Chapter 1

Literature Review
1.1 The derivation of the term “Community”

Community is one of the most important words in our history. The word "community" derives from the Old French comuneté, which comes from the Latin communitas "community", "public spirit" (from Latin communis, "shared in common") (Plant, 2004). Communis comes from a combination of the Latin prefix con- (which means "together") and the word munis (which has to do with performing services). (Plant, 2004).

Hence the word community has a long history because its roots of its common English usage are derived from two latin derivations. The first one is the trisyllabic comunete that means the common fellowship and the second one is the four-syllabic co(m)munite that means fellowship community of relations or feelings.

The word was used also in Medieval Latin so as to be used in the same perspective as universitas to show a body of fellows or fellow-townsmen. The term has become synonymous with the rebellion and assembly revolt and that has to do with the Revolt of the Comuneros of 1520(Plant, 2004). The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d’Alembert regains its guild meaning, defining it as the “union of individuals exercising the same art or occupation under certain common rules, forming a political body,” a definition that prepared the extension of its use during “the century of revolutions” to mean any form of local preeminence supported by systems of shared ownership (Robert Plant, 2004).

Cabet called the egalitarian colonies as communities and therefore he gives a definition of a social system that is based on them as communism (Robert Plant, 2004). However from the thirties some sociologists as Tonnies and Weber in field of sociology and Adler in that of psychology, tried to give a definition of the word community as “Gemeinschaft” (Robert Plant, 2004). This definition gain power in the eighties and that is to say it has reached political science and history as real community (Robert Plant, 2004). Describing this definition, a community is any group united by interpersonal relationships where all members know and
recognize others in an equal belonging that implies personal and collective rights (Robert Plant, 2004).

We have also to mention that knowing that as religious identity was connected with the feature of belonging within North American culture, the word community was truly connected with the good neighborliness that is connected also with voluntary and charitable work organized by churches (Robert Plant, 2004). Whoever shares a physical or social space had to do with the term community that meant a set of people, regardless of whether they knew each other (Robert Plant, 2004). Universities, developments, organizations, companies of all kinds, and more recently, online networks, became defined as communities with their own “standards,” which were now only explicit rules of coexistence and collaboration (Robert Plant, 2004).

As we can notice, the term community has evolved and has been utilized in several ways. So when the conversation became global “community” started to mean almost anything, from community of goods to community of interest etc (Robert Plant, 2004). Community can take many forms and has many types but in this survey we care about online communities. Online communities will be examined further in the coming chapters.

1.2 Defining online communities

The internet and generally the web, have an increased interest in studying communities. It seems that it is important how they act, what is their purpose and how companies can take benefit of them.

Groups of users have been created by software companies in order to be tested with new programs and experimentations. Online or virtual communities have been born of these experimentations in the early years of the internet. Online communities provide members of the community with knowledge, opinions, and experiences with other users. That’s why online communities are characterized in the beginning of its career as spontaneous events.

First ingredients of communities have been created by the increase of the access to the internet and this led to new groups, chat rooms, newsletters and multi-user domains. Users felt the sense of belonging and this fact made them work like social entities, like a social unity that unites users that were looking for support and to exchange information.

Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004) recognized some of the main features of virtual communities. Online or virtual communities have been created by the human
desire for connection. We have physical communities and online communities (Dholakia, 2004). In the first one people meet face to face and then they develop a relationship. In online communities users develop first online relations and then there is a possibility of evolving this relationship into a face to face relationship. So there is a main difference.

Generally there are not many people and scientists that agree in one definition of the online communities. There is not a consensus. Despite that fact online communities are really important in people’s life and daily routine. In that way there are many definitions from different fields. We have to mention that online communities have been studied from different perspectives and from many fields as psychology, computer science, sociology, economics, politics etc.

However one of the most widely used definitions today is Rheingold’s (1993, p. 6), which says: Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace [. . .] is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.

There is also another definition that was offered by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002): social spaces, accessed by computers, where intentional actions occur and members create content through continual communication processes. Later, Dholakia et al. (2004, p. 248) refined their definition. They said that online communities could be characterized as “a specialized, geographically dispersed community based on a structured and dynamic network of relationships among participants sharing a common focus.”

Thorbjornsen, Supphellen, Nysveen, and Pedersen (2002) have added that dialogue happens in real time and/or asynchronously, since users can use chats, forums or news boards. Preece (2000) has established that, in addition to sharing a common interest, virtual communities must create shared resources, develop internal governmental politics, demonstrate reciprocity and share cultural norms.

As for online communities and its main concept, there is a variety that depends on some contradictory characteristics. Hence we can notice that there are social topics of interest on the one hand and commercial interest on the other hand (Preece 2000). In the second case one characteristic is that users are consumers that interact online. Some authors support that it is essential to include businesses or companies in online or virtual communities. In that way online communities contain not only individual users but companies also. However the term online brand communities in some specific products have been born the last decade with the rise of companies in different fields like computer science.

The features of virtual communities vary and there are many perspectives. However we are going to present some examples beginning with one from Whittaker, Isaacs
and O’Day( 1997). First of all we have to mention that members share some same interests, a fact that has a direct connection with the important need of belonging to the community. Truly, users develop a **participatory behavior** and attitude which often make us understand that there are some shared emotions. There are also shared resources.

There are some guys that moderate and control these resources by controlling the access. An other important fact is that information is reciprocal and members-users participate in the same context having common protocol and language (Isaacs. O’Day, 1997).

**Additionally, it is crucial to emphasize the fact that there are not geographical barriers.** This means that members’ place of residence doesn’t eliminate participating and joining. **Hence online communities differ from traditional ones in the fact that they are more adjustable and lasting and that is because of the continual nature and their multi-leveled communication structure.**

Another important fact is that geographical barriers are blurred or there are not in fact barriers. A member-user can stay wherever he or she wants and this fact doesn’t eliminate participating. As we can see we discern a main difference from traditional to online communities. Online communities are more adaptable and lasting because of the fact that they a have continual nature and a continuous communication base and structure (Isaacs, O’Day, 1997).

Typaldos (2000) has given twelve more constitutive components of online communities

1) **Purpose**: A common objective or interest between users defines the existence of community. We have to mention also that these interests unite users.

2) **Identity**: Members have the ability to identify one another and build relationships.

3) **Reputation**: Members build a reputation based on the opinions expressed by others.

4) **Governance**: the administrative work is split between members, allowing them to create a community.

5) **Communication**: members must be able to interact with one another.

6) **Groups**: subgroups are created according to specific interests or topics.

7) **Environment**: a synergetic environment permits members to achieve their goals.

8) **Limits**: the community knows why it exists: this reason defines who is outside the community and who is within it.
9.) Trust: building trust between members and the administrators increases efficiency and aids in problem resolution.

10) Exchange: the community recognizes way of exchanging things of value, such as knowledge, experience, support, bartering or money.

11) Expression: the community has its own soul and personality. Furthermore, members are in touch with what other members are doing.

12) History: the community must analyze its past events and must react and change in response to them.

According to Bagozzi and Dholakia there are five characteristics that all online communities have in common. First of all it is the interest of the community that organize most online or virtual communities. And this interest may be in different topics, products, knowledge or a common passion. It is important to refer to class awareness that a community also has. This defines the options and behavior of the group, as well as the intent to participate, share information and resources with other members and believe the community’s goals (Walther, 1996; Wellman, 1999). In addition, most virtual communities create and share protocols and vernacular, maintain social roles, establish limits and rituals, exhibit confidence in the common goals and follow norms of interaction (Walther, 1996; Wellman, 1999). This renders them able to provide the same benefits as traditional communities, despite their geographic dispersion and having to meet on the Internet (Shirley, 1995). Media are actively participated in and consumed. This defines the community’s character and determines the influence and status of both the community and its individual members (Werry, 1999). Finally knowing that communication has especially a written form, non-verbal codes and social characteristics become commonly known between group members and this increases engagement in the community (Werry, 1999).

Finally, Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier (2002) reduced the number of basic elements and constituent parts of virtual communities down to three:

1) Virtual communities as places or settings. The community is a setting in which users maintain social or economic relationships and explore new opportunities: they are perceived as social organizations centered around common social patterns.

2) Virtual communities as symbols. Similar to what happens with other social entities or constructs, virtual communities present a symbolic dimension (Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier 2002). Thus, when a community is created, individuals can feel symbolically attached to it: a sense of belonging emerges, and the community takes on special meaning (Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier 2002).
3) **Communities as virtual environments.** Virtual communities, like traditional or physical communities, have value systems, social norms, etc., but they differ from traditional communities in that communication takes place, totally or partially, through the Internet or other networks (Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier 2002).

Knowing that the interest in studying online communities has increased in the last ten years in the economic and business field, it is subsequent that online communities **have a large economic business potential** (Wang, Yu, and Fesenmaier 2002). Hagel III and Armstrong (1997) noted that they could enable consumers to develop relationships, exchange information on specific topics and to buy and sell products. This fact has a true connection with the expansion of market communities on the web.

Generally online communities are useful for businesses for many reasons. To begin with, companies understand the customers’ needs in a more qualitative way. Furthermore communities give the appropriate space every company needs in order to grow WOM (word of mouth) communication system. Through the web a company is able of many things. First of all it can find the potential customers, identify their needs and what they really are searching for and gain information which is crucial for the product development.

**1.3 Types of online communities**

There are different types of online communities that can be divided by the purpose and characteristics of their members-users.

First of all we have **communities of practice (or CoPs)**. Community of practice is a group of people who share a craft or a profession (Lave & Wenger 1991). A CoP can evolve naturally because of the members’ common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created deliberately with the goal of gaining knowledge related to a specific field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop personally and professionally (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Secondly there are **communities of circumstance**. A community of circumstance is similar to a community of practice, except that it is driven by position, circumstance or life experiences rather than a shared interest. Examples might include cancer sufferers using a support newsgroup or the members of gay/lesbian newsgroups (Wikipedia).

Additionally, there are **communities of purpose**. Communities of purpose are communities of people who are going through the same process or are trying to achieve a similar objective. Such communities serve a functional purpose, smoothing the path of the member for a limited period surrounding a given activity (Lave & Wenger 1991). For example, researching a topic on Wikipedia.org, buying a car on
autobytel.com. Members of the community assist each other by sharing experiences, suggesting strategies and exchanging information on the process in hand (Wikipedia).

We can add to the online communities, communities of interest or interest-based communities, which are communities of people who share a common interest or passion. These people exchange ideas and thoughts about the given passion, but may know (or care) little about each other outside of this area. Participation in a community of interest can be compelling, entertaining and create a community where people return frequently and remain for extended periods (Wikipedia).

An other category of online communities are corporate communities that can be divided in business to business communities (b2b) to build relationships with suppliers and partners, business to consumers communities (b2c) to build relationships with new and existing customers and business to employee communities (b2e) to build relationships with employees.

**1.4 Sense of community – The experience of belonging**

Belongingness is the human emotional need to be an accepted member of a group. Whether it is family, friends, co-workers, a religion, or something else, people tend to have an 'inherent' desire to belong and be an important part of something greater than themselves (wikipedia). This implies a relationship that is greater than simple acquaintance or familiarity (wikipedia). The need to belong is the need to give, and receive attention to, and from, others (Wikipedia).

We all know that human nature and belongingness are two factors that are combined each other. Belonging is a main characteristic in human nature as a strong and inevitable feeling. It seems that is really difficult for someone to define himself or herself without the sense of belonging. This sense can be found in different cultures, societies and types of people. There are some mechanisms that belonging uses in order to create social presence between its members. These mechanisms are shared mythologies, shared stories of origin, shared symbols.

This sense of social presence has a true connection with the bond that members have in order to identify themselves within a group or a community. The most important things in a community is the creation of events and ritualized experiences that make members feel that they are truly connected each other. In other words belonging has a direct connection with the creation of social experiences that are truly active and simultaneously engaging to the users.

McMillan and Chavis (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) support that there are four dimensions that work together in order to develop an overall sense of community.
First of all, we have membership (MEM). It is important to refer to membership cause it provokes emotional safety, sense of community and identification with the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In that way a user-member of a community can make something like a personal investment in a community and this bond him or her even better. To conclude there is a common symbol code which creates unity in the community.

Secondly, another dimension is influence (INFL) that means a reciprocal relationship between individuals and the community in terms of their impact on one another (McMillan and Chavis, 1980). Every member in a community must feel that can influence others and especially the community. For a group to be cohesive, community has to influence its individual members (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). So, we conclude that this is a bi-directional concept (McMillan and Chavis, 1980). McMillan and Chavis (1986) state that pressure of conformity from community members actually comes from the needs of individual members for consensual validation. In turn conformity serves as a force for cohesiveness (McMillan and Chavis, 1980).

Thirdly, we have Integration and Fulfillment of Needs [IFN]. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986) members must perceive the association to the community as rewarding for the individual (like status of membership, or the possibility to share in the success of the community, and the perceived competence of other individuals in the community who might help the member with her/his own issues).

Finally the last dimension is Shared Emotional Connection [SEC]. This factor has a true connection with the interaction. Close relationships between members demand a positive interactivity. The more positive interactivity is the stronger the bond formed (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

Generally McMillan defines sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together,” (as cited in McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p 9). The space for this shared faith is provided by social networks that help to turn a group of users into a community (as cited in McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p 9).

Both Thoits (1982) and Maslow (1954) agree that sense of belonging is a basic human need. Lambert et al. (2013, p. 1419) explains that “having a meaningful life depends, at least in part, on a sense of belonging.” In that way it seems that he ties sense of belonging with social relationships and finding meaning in life (Dean, 2013). The impression that life has meaning is important because those who feel life has meaning are more likely to be in good physical and mental health (Dean, 2013). This fact makes social capital reach a higher rate because those with a good physical and mental health are more likely to participate (Dean, 2013). So, there is a circle that
goes on. As social beings, those who use the Net seek not only information but also companionship, social support and sense of belonging (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 6).

Only collaboration, participation, storytelling and exchange of information can reinforce the sense of belonging and moreover the sense of community (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 6). One factor that reinforces the sense of community is the building of trust and the identity issue. Trust and identity are essential tools in the formation of an online community.

Chapter 2
Online Learning Communities

2.1 Defining online – learning communities

In order to understand what is an online learning community we have to know what is in general online learning.

Online learning takes places over the internet and it has to do with education. It is also called as e-learning. Furthermore online learning is one type of distance learning that is the umbrella term for any learning lesson that takes place over distance and not in a traditional classroom that has face to face project (Derek Stockley 2003). There is a long history about distance learning and there are many types available today.

There are correspondence courses that are courses through mail with a little interaction. There are also telecourses where content is delivered via radio or television and we have also CD-ROM Courses where the student interacts with static computer content and generally there is online learning that is an internet based course offered synchronously and/or asynchronously (Derek Stockley 2003). The last category is about mobile learning that has a connection with devices such as phones, PDAs and digital audio players like ipods, mp3 players (Derek Stockley 2003).

In other words e- learning is the delivery of a learning, training or education program by electronic means (Derek Stockley 2003). E-learning involves the use of a computer
or electronic device (e.g. a mobile phone) in some way to provide training, educational or learning material (Derek Stockley 2003).

2.1.1 What is online learning communities?

An online learning community is a public or private destination on the Internet that addresses the learning needs of its members by facilitating peer-to-peer learning. Through social networking and computer-mediated communication, or the use of datagogies while people work as a community to achieve a shared learning objective. Learning objectives may be proposed by the community owner or may arise out of discussions between participants that reflect personal interests (Herrington and Oliver 2000, Palloff and Pratt 1999, Squire and Johnson 2000). In an online learning community, people share knowledge via textual discussion (synchronous or asynchronous), audio, video, or other Internet-supported media. Blogs blend personal journaling with social networking to create environments with opportunities for reflection (Wikipedia).

Online learning communities (OLC) are a growing feature in the landscape of educational technology. These group-oriented counterparts to technologies for individual learning trace their roots to social constructivism as well as to the availability of appropriate technology (Herrington and Oliver 2000, Palloff and Pratt 1999, Squire and Johnson 2000). Recently, the expansion of a social view of learning, in addition to advances in the Internet and other communication technologies, has powered a paradigmatic shift to collaborative pedagogy in distance education (Ke and Carr-Chellman 2006). In this approach, learning is conceptualized as a collective and participatory social process in which a series of multistranded interpersonal transactions mediate the exchange of knowledge (Cole and Engestrom 1993). This conception of learning has been well integrated into the notion of the online learning community—‘‘a learning atmosphere, a context providing a supportive system from which sustainable learning processes are gained through a dialogue and collaborative construction of knowledge by acquiring, generating, analyzing, and structuring information’’ (Carlen and Jobring 2005, p. 273).

In practice, online learning communities are increasingly used for professional development of teachers, in knowledge-sharing settings (such as medical support groups or corporate helpdesks), and for students in formal schooling (Chang 2003; Pearson 1998). At their best, these communities can be effective online communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) or knowledge-building communities (Scardamalia et al. 1992). At their worst, they can impede groups of users or lead to
persuasive but unproductive ideas if group interactions are disrespectful or unequal (Linn and Burbules 1993).

The online learning community is an extension of the physical learning community to the electronic one (Russell and Ginsburg 1999). Definitions of the term learning community vary. Contexts in which the phrase is currently applied include any or all of the following: a site for learning’s fulfillment (Tu & McIsaac, 2002), a collection of people with a shared will to learn (Kowch and Schwier 1997), an emotional foundation for the learning process (McMillan and Chavis 1986), an instructional design model (Romiszowsky and Mason 1996), and a naturally occurring sociological phenomenon (Johnson 2001).

For example, Tu and Corry (2002) stated that, when learning activities and interactions occur electronically, the resulting environment is referred to as an online learning community. The online learning communities are online learning environments in which there is not face to face interaction (Tu and Corry 2002). In contrast there is only online interaction (Tu and Corry 2002). However, some have argued that environments are not necessarily learning communities (Tu and Corry 2002). To them, for a community to emerge, a learning environment should at least comprise “collections of autonomous, independent individuals who are engaged by influencing each other within a learning process” (Kowch and Schwier 1997, p. 3). In addition, an OLC must allow learners to cultivate increasing levels of commitment in the transaction of knowledge (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In other words, online learning communities evolve from simple cohorts when learners elevate their engagement with each other to an emotional sense of community—“a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan and Chavis 1986, p. 9).

Generally there is a large confusion over the definition of an online learning community and what it is. In this confusion we can add the uncertainties that have to do with the way a community is structured. So a community is emergent in nature or created by design? Although much has been written about the ability of online communities to evolve “spontaneously” out of the Internet (e.g., Steinkuehler 2004; Hiltz and Turoff 2002), another view holds that a learning community is created by design (Johnson 2001). Some scholars (Lock 2002; Palloff and Pratt 1999; Swan 2002) have described the online learning community as “a complete system or systematic model for improving teaching and learning online,” or in other terms, an instructional design model for e-learning (Romiszowsky and Mason 1996, p. 446).

**Whether it is emergent or designed, the online learning community is an incremental development (rather than a static entity) that is fluid in nature and evolves through nurturing conditions** (Renninger and Shumar 2002; Rheingold 2000). For example, Palloff and Pratt (1999) define four stages of virtual community
development: (1) the initial phase, (2) the conflict phase, (3) the intimacy and work phase, and (4) the termination phase. A learning community emerges only in phase 3—when language, learning practices, collaboration customs, and resources in the setting develop into an ideal state (Haythornthwaite et al. 2000).

In this review, we adopt a broad and readily accessible characterization of an online learning community as a developed activity system in which a group of learners, unified by a common cause and empowered by a supportive virtual environment, engage in collaborative learning within an atmosphere of trust and commitment (Engestro¨m 1993).

2.2 Advantages of e-learning

E-learning has a lot of advantages in higher education and given its several advantages, e-learning is considered one of the most effective methods of education.

Some studies support that e-learning is effective in the needs of individual learners. For example Marc (2000) in his book review on e-learning strategies for delivering knowledge in digital age noted that one of the advantages of e-learning in education is its focus on the needs of individual learners as an important factor in the process of education rather than on the instructors’, or educational institutions’ needs.

We can summarize the advantages in those benefits below:

First of all, e learning is really flexible when we have to consider time and space. Every student has the ability to select the time and space that suits him best. According to Smedley (2010), the adoption of e-learning provides the institutions as well as their students or learners the much flexibility of time and place of delivery or receipt of according to learning information.

Secondly, e-learning supports the ease of knowledge via direct access to a huge amount of info. A simple connection to the Net can give you the ability of coming close to the knowledge every single moment.

In addition, via e-learning learners can develop relations among them by discussing in forums. In that way e-learning help students interact and develop each point of view without the fear of judgment. Wagner et al (2008) note that e-Learning makes available extra prospects for interactivity between students and teachers during content delivery.

E-learning is also cost effective in so many ways. First of all you don’t have to travel to get to the university. In other words every single step can be done through the net. It is also cost effective in the way that can accept a large number of students without the need of extra building (wagner et al 2008).

It is crucial also to mention that e-learning respect each student’s individual differences. Some learners, for instance prefer to concentrate on certain parts of the
course, while others are prepared to review the entire course (Wagner et al. 2008). There are many ways that a student can use in order to learn a course.

The use of e-Learning allows self-pacing (Wagner et al. 2008). For instance, the asynchronous way permits each student to study at his or her own pace and speed whether slow or quick (Wagner et al. 2008). It therefore increases satisfaction and decreases stress (Codone, 2001; Amer, 2007; Urdan and Weggen, 2000; Algahtani, 2011; Marc, 2002; Klein and Ware, 2003).

The above-mentioned advantages of e-learning has been summed up by Holmes and Gardner (2006) by noting that the ability of e-learning to assess the students or learners as they learn, and at the same time increasing their experiences in education, by way of interactivity suitable to community education, cultural diversity and globalization, and eradicating boundaries of place and time. To them the most vital characteristics as well as advantage of e-learning in education is that it centres on the students or learners (Holmes and Gardner, 2006).

Through e-learning, according to Raba (2005), objectives can be accomplished in the shortest time with least amount of effort. The impacts of e-learning on educational ethics according to Khan (2005) are ensured. This is because the environments for e-learning are tolerant, so they are a good ways of offering equal access to the information world irrespective of the locations of the users, their ages as well as ethnic origins, and races (Khan, 2005). **Students or learners are helped by the environment of e-learning in that they depend on themselves. Instructors are not anymore the only knowledge source.** They instead become advisors and guides (Alsalem, 2004). E-learning also aids in the preparation of the society to globally communicate and to dialogue with others (Zeitoun, 2008). However according to Algahtani (2011), the likely benefits of e-learning are greater than the benefits of traditional learning if e-learning is used and applied in proper ways.

Authors such as Zhang et al. (2006) and Judahil et al. (2007) gave the positive impacts of e-learning from the perspectives of the students or learners. Zhang et al. (2006) stresses that e-learning permits the exploration of much flexible learning ways with much reduced need for travel to go to classes. E-learning, according to Zhang et al. (2006), via interactive video facility permits learners to watch all activities that are conducted in the classroom and also listen to instructors as many times as needed. This according to Brown et al. (2008) and Judahil et al. (2007) offers teachers with several ways of interacting with learners and to give them instantaneous feedback. However, according to Judahil et al. (2007), it is essential for those who embrace the advanced technology during the process of teaching and learning has a variety of skills in Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Other studies (Singh, 2001; Hemsley, 2002; and Sadler-Smith 2000) also give the advantages or benefits of e-learning to students. For instance, according to Singh (2001), e-Learning systems enable improved communication between and among
students and between students and faculty or instructors. Hemsley (2002) have stated the opinion that full time and part time students can participate in their degree courses chosen from any place or location, offering people who are relocated or travel, an easily accessible resource for learning and experience (Hemsley, 2002).

Sadler-Smith (2000) and Brown et al (2001) note that, the adoption and implementation of e-Learning provides disabled people the chance to further their education from any location.

2.3 Disadvantages of e-learning

We talked about advantages. One could wonder if there are any disadvantages. There are several:

First of all, we have to mention the cost of using technology and the complexity. There might be different distance learning opportunities. However there are some inevitable costs that accompany the e-learning experience. We will give the example of video communication that requires equipment and facilities. If someone wants to do an e-learning program it is obligatory to have a computer, although there are many people that are afraid of technology and are technophobic (Hemsley, 2002).

Secondly, it is important for an e-learner to plan his or her program and have a certain and stable schedule. Maybe instructors and students have to do some sacrifices to get their work done and that means that they have to organize their time efficiently (Hemsley, 2002).

It is also crucial to refer to the feedback of online learning. In an online learning course a student is not able to take immediate feedback because as we know in a traditional class and in face to face communication a student can ask some questions and take answers. In distance learning it is more complicated. A student may have to wait for feedback. The instructor has to review their work and after that he or she will be able to respond to it.

In addition, online learning doesn't offer all the necessary courses online (Hemsley, 2002). That is to say, you can study a history lesson completely online but you cannot perform medicine online (Hemsley, 2002). In that case physical attendance and face to face attendance will be necessary to complete your studies (Hemsley, 2002). So, we can notice that you can’t perform all courses online. This is a real disadvantage for some fields.

Another important disadvantage we have to tell and mention is that distance learning diplomas may not be acknowledged by all employers cause it is an early phenomenon that takes place over the last five years (Hemsley, 2002). For sure, there are some that recognize some distance learning degrees but we have to say that there are some others employers that underestimate e-learning education. In that case an employee
has to be more skeptical and know his employer’s perspective about e-learning if he or she wants to work for the company.

In the end, distance learning does not educate students in oral communication abilities. Students in distance learning courses do not get the practice of face to face or verbal interaction with professors and other students (Hemsley, 2002). This factor leads to social isolation as most often you study alone and you don’t interact with another member. Certainly technology has evolved in a way that has created chat rooms and video conferencing but are they enough to make you social?

### 2.4 The power of interactivity

Interactivity has one ability, to make even bigger the sense of achievement among learners. So the level of interactivity shows in which degree an e-learning course has quality or not. In online courses, formal course interactivity can occur between student–student, student–instructor, and student–content (Anderson 2003). Anderson (2003), in his interaction equivalency theorem, **suggests that meaningful learning can occur when at least one of the three forms of interaction is present at a high level.**

When high levels of more than one type of interactivity are present, a more satisfying educational experience will be occur (Kim, 2003). Moore’s three types of interaction (Moore, 1989) may be the most frequently used typology. This framework, focusing on learning events, includes three types of interaction: (a) learner–content interaction, (b) learner–instructor interaction, and (c) learner–learner interaction (Moore, 1989).

#### 2.4.1 Interaction with content or learner-content interaction

We all know how much knowledge and information there is in the world wide web. Shank (1998), however, warns that information is not learning. Indeed, researchers agree that many computer-based educational offerings provide poor learning opportunities (Bork, 1986; Janicki & Liegle, 2001). A research on computer-based learning and multimedia design has led us to design the online learning experience (Bork, 1986; Janicki & Liegle, 2001). Janicki & Liegle (2001) have synthesized the work of a range of instructional design experts in these areas (Anderson & Reiser, 1985; Gagne et al., 1988; Hanna et al., 1988; Tennyson, 1989; Jonassen et al., 1995; Ward & Lee, 1995) to develop a list of 10 concepts they believe support effective design of web-based instruction. These are:

- instructors acting as facilitators;
- use of a variety of presentation styles;
- multiple exercises;
· hands-on problems;
· learner control of pacing;
· frequent testing;
· clear feedback;
· consistent layout;
· clear navigation;
· available help screens.

These are principles that support computer based learning. Generally Learner-content interaction is defined as “the process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes in the learner’s understanding, the learner’s perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner’s mind” (Moore, 1989, p. 2). It has to be mentioned also that in the current literature there are not many references about this type of interaction (Moore, 1989, p. 2). This happens because different contents may require different pattern of interactions (Moore, 1989, p. 2). That’s why it seems difficult to discuss about such interaction.

2.4.2 Interaction with instructors or learner-instructor interaction

The relationship between student–teacher interactions and learning outcomes has been well documented in traditional classrooms (Madden & Carli, 1981; Powers & Rossman, 1985). In face to face classrooms it is important to refer to teacher immediacy and immediacy behaviors. ‘Immediacy’ refers to the ‘psychological distance between communicators’ (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968). Educational researchers have found that teachers’ verbal (i.e. giving praise, soliciting viewpoints, humor, self-disclosure) and non-verbal (i.e. physical proximity, touch, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures) immediacy behaviors can lessen the psychological distance between themselves and their students, leading (directly or indirectly, depending on the study) to greater learning (Kelley & Gorham, 1988; Gorham, 1988; Christophel, 1990; Rodriguez et al., 1996).

To conclude, interaction with instructors plays also a major role in online courses. This has led certain researchers to suggest that asynchronous media, because they support fewer affective communication channels, are less capable of representing the ‘social presence’ of participants in online courses (Short et al., 1976). Researchers experienced with online teaching and learning, however, contest this view, arguing that rather than being impersonal, computer-mediated communication often seems to be ‘hyper-personal’ (Walther, 1994). Participants in computer-media communications, they argue, create social presence by projecting their identities and building online communities through verbal immediacy behaviors alone.
Picciano (1998), for example, found that instructors’ activity was related to students’ perceived learning in online education courses. Jiang & Ting (2000) found correlations between perceived interactions with instructors and the average numbers of responses per student that instructors made and the average numbers of responses students themselves made in course discussions. Richardson & Ting (Richardson & Swan, 2003) compared the perceptions of two groups of students involved in asynchronous learning. They found that students learning through written correspondence with instructors were more concerned with instructor feedback, whereas students learning online felt that all interactions with instructors mattered (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Generally Learner-instructor interactions establish an environment that encourages learners to understand the content better (Richardson & Swan, 2003). This type of interaction is “regarded as essential by many educators and highly desirable by many learners” (Moore, 1989, p. 2).

### 2.4.3 Interaction among students or learner-learner interaction

Interactions among students through course discussions seem to be one of the most influential features of online courses (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Many researchers note that students perceive online discussion as more equitable and more democratic than traditional classroom discussions (Harasim, 1990; Levin et al., 1990). Asynchronous discussion affords participants the opportunity to reflect on their classmates’ contributions while creating their own, and on their own writing before posting them (Harasim, 1990; Levin et al., 1990). This tends to create a certain mindfulness among students and a culture of reflection in an online course (Hiltz, 1994; Poole, 2000). However, as Eastmond (1995) reminds us, computer-mediated communication is not inherently interactive, but depends on the frequency, timeliness, and nature of the messages posted.

Ruberg et al. (1996) found that computer-mediated communication encouraged experimentation, sharing of ideas, increased and more distributed participation, and collaborative thinking, but also found that for online discussion to be successful, it required a social environment that encouraged peer interaction facilitated by instructor structuring and support. Hawisher & Pemberton (1997) relate the success of the online courses they reviewed to the value instructors placed on discussion, and Picciano (1998) found that students’ perceived learning from online courses was related to the amount of discussion actually taking place in them. Likewise, Jiang & Ting (2000) report correlations between perceived learning in online courses and the
specificity of instructors’ discussion instructions and the percent of course grades based on discussion responses.

As we can notice interaction among students matter in online courses and in online learning. Indeed, Rourke et al. (Kim, 2003) identify the development of social presence, the perceived interaction with others, as one of the cornerstones for the development of online learning communities. In any case, research thus far indicates that online courses that are both well structured and easy to use and that take advantage of increased access to instructors and more equitable and democratic discussion are the most successful (Swan et al., 2000).

Generally learner-learner interactions take place “between one learner and other learners, alone or in group settings, with or without the real-time presence of an instructor” (Moore, 1989, p. 4). Many studies show that this type of interaction is a valuable experience and learning resource (Bull, Kimball, & Stansberry, 1998; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). Empirical evidence shows that students actually desire learner-learner interactions, regardless of the delivery method (Grooms, 2000; King & Doerfert, 1996).

2.5 The role of social presence in e-learning

Social presence is a construct that has its base in the telecommunications literature (Short, Williams, Christie, 1976). Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) developed social presence theory as a model for analyzing the social - psychological dimensions of mediated communication from a “social cues perspective” (Cobb, 2009). They defined social presence as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (Short, et al., p. 65).

They viewed social presence as a quality of the communications medium itself and hypothesized that “communications media vary in their degree of social presence, and these variations are important in determining the way individuals interact” (p. 65). According to Homer, Plass, & Blake (2008), a general finding of the body of research into social presence and learning is that when information is presented in a way that increases social presence, it is better remembered by learners and the learning process is considered more engaging.

Short et al. (1976) described social presence as a construct comprised of two concepts: intimacy (Argyle & Dean, 1965) and immediacy (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Intimacy has a really true connection with the factors of physical distance, eye contact, smiling, and personal topics of conversation (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Short, et al. (1976), suggested that social presence
be added to the list of factors that contribute to intimacy of a communication medium. Wiener and Mehrabian (1968) conceptualized immediacy as a measure of psychological distance that a communicator puts between himself and the object of his communication. Immediacy enhances social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Immediacy is conveyed through speech and associated verbal and no verbal cues (Walther, 1992).

Social presence has been defined as "a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment" (Tu and McIsaac, 2002). Other researchers have defined social presence as the awareness of others in an interaction combined with an appreciation of the interpersonal aspects of that interaction (Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976; Rice, 1993; Walther, 1992).

2.6 The dimensions of Social Presence

Three dimensions appear to be particularly important in measuring social presence according to Tu (Tu & McIsaac, 2002):

(a) social context, (b) online communication, and (c) interactivity. (Tu, 2000, 2001)

Social contexts involve task orientation (Steinfield, 1986), privacy (Steinfield, 1986), topics (Argyle and Dean, 1965; Walther, 1992), social relationships (Walther, 1992) and social process (Walther, 1992). It has to do with the psychological attitude toward technology.

Online Communication has to do with the attributes of the language that is used online. That is to say it has to do with the applications of online language. Online Communication contain some skills like keyboarding and accuracy skills, use of emoticons and paralanguage, characteristics of real time discussions and discussion boards and of course language skills (writing and reading) (Tu, 2000, 2001).

Interactivity has to do with the communication styles that users use. Immediacy is a component of interactivity. Communication styles may influence social presence. Norton identified eleven communication styles – impression leaving, contentious, open, dramatic, dominant, precise, relaxed, friendly, attentive, animated and communicator image- that are associated with online communication (Tu, 2000, 2001). Gunawardena (Cobb, 2009) differentiates interactivity and social presence, arguing that social presence requires users to add one more step to awareness of interactivity.

Chapter 3

Blended Learning
3.1 Blended Learning - Definition

Blended learning is an education program (formal or non-formal) that combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods. It requires the physical presence of both teacher and student, with some element of student control over time, place, path, or pace (Wikipedia).

Generally face to face classroom techniques are combined with computer mediated activities. We have to mention also that blended learning is called hybrid learning. Blended learning is a difficult term to define and that’s why we don’t know exactly its effectiveness in classrooms (wikipedia).

If we want to describe and define what is blended learning we have to refer to its types according to some researchers and educational think tanks (wikipedia). As Wikipedia notes we have five blended learning models. First of all we have face to face driver where the professor or the teacher leads the instruction using some digital tools. Secondly we have rotation in which there is a combination of online study and face to face classroom time. Thirdly there is the flex model in which most of the content is in a digital form and professors are available for face to face meetings with the students (wikipedia). We have to mention also the Labs model in which all of the instruction is delivered via a digital platform (wikipedia). However the lesson is delivered through a physical location. Students usually take traditional classes in this model as well and It is crucial to mention also the self blend model in which students choose to enhance their knowledge and the traditional learning through online course work (wikipedia). In the end we should mention the online driver in which the course is delivered only through a digital platform. Scheduled face to face meetings are organized if necessary.

We have to say that all these models can be blended together. There is not a mutually exclusive model. On the contrast a professor can use and blend different types of these models in order to make his classroom efficient in gaining knowledge (wikipedia).

There are also many components and elements that a blended learning model may contain including instructor-delivered content, e-learning, webinars, conference calls, live or online sessions with instructors, and other media and events, for example, Facebook, e-mail, chat rooms, blogs, podcasting, Twitter, YouTube, Skype and web boards (Wikipedia).

3.2 Advantages and disadvantages of blended learning
Blended learning has some pros and cons. In this case we are going to examine the advantages for students of using blended learning.

First of all blended learning enhances students interest. That is to say, when technology is combined with school lessons students are more able to be excited about their courses they are studying. Another benefit is that it keeps students focused on their subject for longer. When you are searching info via internet you save time. Generally it is more interesting to make a research all by yourself. This fact increases your interest because it helps develop learning through exploration and research.

There is an interaction with the information and this fact makes student to be more interested in searching info and conducting research.

We have also to mention that blended learning provides students autonomy and that is because e-learning makes a student to take charge of his or her own learning (wikipedia). This means that a student can learn depending on his own power that internet gives to him. In conclusion students become even more responsible because they are aware of their own achievements. This fact makes them feel that they have a sense of self-advocacy. In other words it is the feeling of student ownership over learning that promotes student ownership.

Generally blended learning is so flexible and the ability to access internet resources allows students to learn at their own pace (wikipedia). In that way the professor or the teacher can give further information and speed up the learning point if necessary. Another benefit is that blended learning covers all learning styles and this fact helps student be more open to knowledge.

Blended learning also allows students to take information home without the anxiety over time. They have their own time to get the knowledge without the pressure of keeping up with the rest of the class.

In conclusion in blended learning learner is more engaged using a variety of content types. Pictures are easier to understand. One picture equals 1000 words and practical examples work great. Also different learners have different learning rules. Diversifying the teaching process and methods is a good way to approach the problems that arise when you offer an online course. Blended learning also improves feedback that is valuable for a trainer and for a learner (Robert Plant, 2004).

On the other hand we have some disadvantages of blended learning that we have to mention. Blended learning requires a high level of self-discipline. That means that students that have bad habits in learning process are more probable to fail in the blended learning method (Robert Plant, 2004). There is also an absence of learning atmosphere in e-learning systems. In other words a student isn’t a student with the classical meaning. He or she has to be adjusted with the new digital era.
Additionally, if students are unaware of using the appropriate technology, they won’t get the results they’re willing to take. There is also a classical resistance in new technologies that doesn’t help the situation. That’s why learners must have basic technology knowledge and the willingness to learn. We have also to refer to the fact that high technology set up and maintenance costs (wikipedia). For those who want to create a blended learning subject purchasing the learning technology such as devices and infrastructure setup, can be costly (wikipedia). However these are short term expenses.

As we can notice blended learning classes move from a teacher focused learning model to a student focused learning model. The teacher or the professor seems to be a couch and a guide that motivates students to take charge of their own learning (Robert Plant, 2004).

**Chapter 4**

**Methodology**

In this research we used a mixed methodology of quantitative and qualitative approach. We use a mixed methodology in order to explain and interpret, to explore a phenomenon and generally to serve a theoretical perspective.

Our main goal is to understand the perceptions of satisfaction of students in blended learning courses on the one hand and on the other hand to see how instructors adopt these changes and which their opinion about blended learning is. We want to notice
how these two main perspectives are combined and which the conclusion is. In which level are these two perspectives converging? Finally are they converging?

Specifically the main target is to see if students of the master in Digital Media from the department of Journalism and Mass Communication of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki are satisfied from the blended learning courses of the master and which the level of social presence they feel is. Do they feel part of a community?

In that way we have a more complete utilization of data than do separate quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. In other words we can say that we use a multimethodology or multimethod research.

So, we made some interviews in order to deepen our knowledge in hybrid learning programs. Through interviews you have the chance to understand in a better and more exact way the feelings of students during hybrid courses from their instructors. Instructors can give you the general idea and the rhythm of the classes that students cannot. Instructors can show us from their own perspective if blended learning is efficient. This is our qualitative analysis.

Additionally, we made also a quantitative research using a questionnaire about satisfaction in blended learning courses. The questionnaire was chosen because it could include a number of questions of different types, measuring different aspects. The scales incorporated were needed in order to determine personal characteristics of the individual that could be affecting the satisfaction of the students. Students that answered the questionnaires are all students of the English taught master program of department of journalism and mass communication and from both sexes. They are intermediate in the use of computers and in the majority their age is between 18-25 years old.

The questions were separated in the following thematic sections: General Information, Satisfaction and Social Presence. Each one of the sections was an important part of the creation of a whole picture and of reaching the goal of the research that is to understand how satisfied are students from the blended learning courses in the master in Digital Media, Communication and Journalism. So the research tool is the questionnaire in this quantitative research.

Chapter 5

Findings
5.1 Interviews

As we mentioned before our essay combines qualitative and quantitative research methods. That is to say, in the qualitative research method we made interviews with two professors, mr Dimoylas and mr Kalliris.

These two professors are teaching in the master program “MA in Digital Media, Communication and Journalism” of the Aristotle University in Thessaloniki. Their courses have to do with digital media production and content production (photograph, video). We interviewed them so as to make some conclusions about blended learning classes.

We will start analyzing Mr Dimoylas interview in the first hand and secondly we will analyze further Mr Kalliris’ speech.

What Mr. Dimoylas told us in the interview?

Mr Dimoylas said that his courses have a direct connection with blended learning because of its main subject that is digital media. For example if someone wants to explain what is sound or a wave in digital media you have to show him some more interactive examples. Technology changes dramatically day by day. The most important thing for a student is to understand the example. For the understanding a professor may show a video in a class in order to make the example more interactive.

Is it difficult for the professor to get ready for the presentation in the class?
As Mr Dimoylas said it is a little difficult for a professor to prepare a presentation in a blended learning class because it demands a lot of time. The first time that he tried to do a presentation it was time consuming. However from the time they made the online presentations it was easy enough to handle them. Generally the professor urges students to communicate through mail and forums. In 1998-1999 Mr Dimoylas was a trainee in a program in Aristotle University. It was an interesting experience because they were communicating through mail and in the end of this program they have seen each other for the first time. It was a blended learning program that combined mail communication with face to face class.

Which are the difficulties in the blended learning classes according to Mr Dimoylas?

The difficulty is that professor teaches technological classes in students that follow theoretical pathways like students in the department of Journalism. Mr Dimoylas support that it is really efficient when a student passes through some stages in order to pass the lesson for example: in Dimoylas’ courses there are many stages for a student to pass the lesson. First of all there are written assignments, group projects, presentation and oral exams. In that way there is a wide use of digital media that support a hybrid lesson and that’s why students are able to understand more things in a better way.

What supports Mr Dimoylas about teaching technological lessons in students

In technologic subjects and courses, a professor must use digital media in order to combine in an interesting way practice and theory. There must be the happiness of joy and practice for a student to understand the subject. When you give the practical integration of something or of a theory you make the lesson way more efficient. For example you can show slides, videos (for animations or not) and computer software.

Which sites make Mr Dimoylas class more interesting?

There are sites like Howstuffworks.com that give interactive examples in students (examples about the sound and decibels) and Animagraffs (for example how a speaker works, what a speaker does). For example mr Dimoulas puts technology in real scenarios and in that way the student is able to understand in a more clear way the example. This is something that Mr Dimoulas is using in open courses of AUTH. In other words he gives the ability to a student to combine interactive examples through technology.

What is the conclusion of the interview with Mr Dimoylas?

The images, videos, digital equipment and interactive examples matter. The understanding is the real issue. A professor must have a real connection with the class asking some questions. So online courses are really helpful but they cannot replace the traditional face to face teaching method. For example in open Hellenic university one time per month there are some consulting meetings with students. In face to face
courses a teacher can understand the feelings of students, if they are satisfied or else if they are disappointed. On the other hand digital tools are really helpful and blended learning is something like unidirectional.

Now we can note what mr Kalliris told us in the interview.

Mr Kalliris tells us that in open Hellenic university professors see their students five times per year. There is communication through skype, mail and forums.

What is the role of the professor in blended learning courses?

Generally the professor is kind of consultant or instructor and has a role of psychologist in the class. The professor must deal the culture of each student. The basic thing is to find ways to communicate with students. The ideal for Mr Kalliris would be to see the student every week but this is not possible every week. The professor gives us an example about a student that he had in open Hellenic university that he couldn’t see the professor because he was working and that’s why they used the facebook messenger to communicate. A professor must burn out every single way that there is in order to communicate with the student.

Mr Kalliris told us that forums are really meaningful in hybrid courses.

Do students have difficulties with new technologies?

Students do not confront difficulties with new technologies-it is a rare phenomenon.

What about Open Courses of Aristotle University?

Open courses are a useful experience that has started from United States in MIT. In Greece open courses are funded by a program three years ago. The main goal is to be created courses that will be open in the net and the material to be available for everyone. In that way university made an opening in the society. In the department of Journalism there are some courses in a digital edition . These courses are really helpful for the students that can’t go in the class because they live in another city or they have some moving problems or they work. Mr Kalliris says that he is satisfied with this program because it is easy for a student to find the courses there. We have to mention that the university bought some equipment and this platform is really successful.

It is more difficult for a professor to teach blended learning courses?

It is not so difficult for the professor to prepare digital courses and combine it with traditional methods. It is a matter of experience.
5.2 Analyzing Questionnaire

Students were asked to complete this questionnaire in order to know their satisfaction about blended learning courses and how this satisfaction is combined with social presence. There was not right or wrong answer for each question.

Gender issues

What is your gender

As for the gender I decided to put three columns, male, female and the option “prefer not to say” for those who don’t want to show their gender or they don’t want to be characterized by their gender. We can notice that female are most with the 58.8% and male have the 41.2% of the pie. The third column “prefer not to say” has no answer.

Age issues
Students are from all ages. I decided to put in the questionnaire four columns of ages. In the first column we have students from 18-25 years old that has the most answers (about 64,7%), in the second we have students from 26-35 years old (29,4%), in the third we have students from 36-45 and in the last one above 45 that has no answers.

**Level of computer expertise**

In the third question we had to estimate the level of computer expertise. So I decided to put 4 columns. The majority answered that are intermediate (76,5%). After that, we have some people that chose the expert column (11,8%) and some others that chose the beginner column (11,8%). So, we can notice that the beginner and the expert column have the same percentage. No one in this questionnaire has no experience of
computer expertise and this is logical as the survey has to do with computers and blended learning in general.

In the fourth question we ask from the people that answered the questionnaire to tell us how many blended learning courses have they taken so far. Firstly we give the definition of blended learning courses. We are describing what a blended learning course is. Specifically I write that blended learning is an education program (formal or no formal) that combines online digital media with traditional classroom methods.

The majority answered that they have taken 3 courses (37,5%). One of them took 10 blended learning courses from the English taught master in the school of journalism and mass communication. Generally we can notice that most of the answers show that all of them (except one) have taken blended learning courses.

Now we move on the section two of the questionnaire that has to do with the satisfaction of the learners. The scale has 5 options.

The first option combines with the answer strongly disagree and the fifth one with the option strongly agree (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3—neither disagree nor agree, 4-agree, 5-strongly agree).
The question is really simple and has to do with the ability to learn from the blended learning courses and subjects. The majority of them agree that they were able to learn. Only two answered that they strongly disagree with the ability to learn from blended learning courses. We have also to mention that a percentage of 25% strongly agree that they are able to learn.
In this question learners had to answer if they were encouraging to do extra readings or research on subjects discussed in digital forums. That is to say, if they had to answer if the subjects urged them to read something more in other subjects that has a connection with the subject given. The majority of them agreed that they were stimulated (45.8%). The 25% answered that neither agree nor disagree with the question. So we can notice that students in that case are a little suspicious.

Discussions assisted me in understanding other points of view.

In that question students-learners had to answer if discussions that have done in the courses helped them in understanding other perspectives.
The majority of students answered that they agree that discussions assisted them in understanding other points of view (62.5%) while the percentage of 16.7% answered that neither agree nor disagree with the question (16.7%).

In this question students had to answer if as a result of their experience and their knowledge with these courses, they would like to take another blended learning course in the future. The majority answered that they agree with the question and they would take another blended learning course in the future (50%) and generally we can notice that they are positive of taking another blended learning course. This is a very positive new for our survey.
In that question students had to answer if these courses were a useful learning experience. The majority of them either agree (37,5%) or strongly agree (41,7%) with that. So, we can notice that blended learning courses help students to learn in a better and more efficient way and get the knowledge quickly.

The diversity of topics in these courses urged me to participate in the discussions.

In this answer students had to answer to the question if the variety of topics in these courses encouraged them to participate in the discussions. The majority answered that they agree that the diversity of topics encouraged them to participate in the
discussions (60.9%). This fact let us think that blended learning courses make students participate actively in the discussions.

In this part of the questionnaire students have to answer questions about computer mediated communication (CMC). Computer mediated communication include e-mail, threaded discussion and real time chat. Email is the electronic messaging system that permits communicating (wikipedia). Threaded discussion is a computer based environment in which messages are posted and read by users who may or may not be logged on simultaneously (wikipedia). It is required that the users must access the discussion to participate. Real time chat is a computer based environment in which users communicate simultaneously (wikipedia).

We had put this part of explanation inside the questionnaire in order to give to the students direct information about the questions that are below.

And now let’s see the results of the questions about computer mediated communication.
In this question we can notice that students answered in all possible ways. The majority (29.2%) answered that they disagree with the fact that it was difficult to learn the CMC system to participate in these courses. However there is a 25% that answered that it was difficult to learn the CMC system. So they agree with the question. We have different opinions in this case. There are students that found difficult to learn the CMC system and other students that managed to learn the CMC system in an easy way. There is also the 20.8% that neither agree or disagree with the difficulty of the CMC system.
In this question students weren’t sure about their answer. So, the 54.2% of them answered that they neither agree nor disagree if their level of learning that took place in these courses was of the highest quality. However we have the 29.2% of students that agree with that and this is something important for our survey.

Overall, the learning activities and assignments of these courses met my learning expectations.
In this question students answered in the majority (50%) that they agree that the learning assignments and activities of these courses meet their learning expectations. This fact let us think that they are appropriately ready for the courses in the first place.

In this statement students answered in the majority that they agree that the instructors for these courses meet their learning expectations. This fact shows us that the instructors are appropriate for the expectations that a blended learning course has. That is to say that the students are satisfied with the instructors’ skills.
In this question the majority of the students answered that overall, the courses meet their learning expectations in 58.3% of them. That is to say, they were able to participate in these courses in the first place.

In this question we have a very positive result. The majority of the students answered that they strongly agree that they feel part of a learning community in their group. This is really important because we want to give our focus in learning communities and as we described in the theory part communities are emerging nowadays. So, students seem to respond to blended learning communities and be part of them. After all, students are responsible of creating these communities.
In that case we have three same answers as for the percentages. Students gave many possible answers. Specifically they answered that the strongly agree or agree on the one hand with a 29.2% and on the other hand they neither agree nor disagree. So in this example we have no accurate answer. However there is a positive emphasis while answers “agree” in general with the question.

Now we are going to move in section 3 “what is social presence”. In order to make students understand what social presence is there is a column in the questionnaire that describes exactly the term.

Social presence has been defined as "a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment".

In this statement the questionnaire asks if CMC messages bring and carry feeling and emotion. The majority (33,3%) answered that neither agree nor disagree with that. The second most voted answer was the fifth choice that they strongly agree that cmc system conveys feeling and emotion. That means that messages create a sense of community in their members-students.
In that case students answered that they agree (41.7%) with the fact that using CMC is a pleasant way to communicate with others. That means that students find interesting this kind of communication. They think that communicating via CMC system makes them more active.

In that case we have different possible answers. On the one hand the majority (33.3%) neither agrees nor disagrees that it is easy to express what students want to communicate through CMC system. On the other hand there are students that agree with that and students that disagree. We can’t have a conclusion in that case. However
students seem to be confused about their answer. So there is a difficulty in expression through CMC system.

I am comfortable participating, even though I am not familiar with the topics.

In this question students had to answer if they are comfortable participating, even though they have not a good knowledge of the topics given. So, students answered in the majority (37.5%) that neither agree nor disagree with that on the one hand. On the other hand there are students (33.3%) that agree with that. So we can notice that students are restrained in participating in topics that don’t know. They want to be more certain about what they are talking about.
CMC is technically reliable (e.g., free of system or software errors that might compromise the reliability of your online messages reaching ONLY the target destination). *

In that case students-learners had to answer if CMC system is technically reliable (e.g., free of system or software errors that might compromise the reliability of your online messages reaching only the target destination). The majority (37.5%) neither agree nor disagree and simultaneously agree that CMC is technically reliable.

CMC allow relationships to be established based upon sharing and exchanging information.

In this statement students had to answer if CMC permit relationships to be set and established based in sharing and exchanging information. In that case we have a
definite result. Students agree in the majority (58.3%). There are also some students (8.3%) that strongly agree with that. So, we can notice that there is a sense of community among students. This is exactly what we want to show through this survey.

CMC allows me to build more caring social relationships with others.

![Bar Chart]

In that case students had to answer if they agree or disagree with the fact that CMC allows them to build more caring social relationships with others. The majority of them (54.2%) agree with that. On the other hand there is a percentage of 25% that disagree with that. We can’t leave it without commenting.

Where I access CMC (home, office, computer labs, public areas, etc.) does not affect my ability/desire to participate.

![Bar Chart]

Students in that case had to answer if the place the access CMC (home, office, computer labs, public areas, etc.) affects their ability/desire to participate. The majority disagree with that (37.5%). It seems that it strongly affects their ability to participate. It has a connection with where you feel more comfortable to communicate.
Students in that case had to answer if CMC allow the building of trust relationships. In this quest ion I thought that the majority would disagree. However they agree (45.8%) with that and this is really interesting because trust relationships create a sense of community and social presence.

In the last question students had to answer if they felt like they were members of a group during these blended learning courses. The majority agrees with that (45.8%) and there are also students that strongly agree with that (20.8%).
Chapter 6

Conclusions

First of all we have to say that data including some general characteristics of participants were analyzed to examine whether age, computer knowledge, number of blended learning courses and amount of collaboration in groups were related to the perceived levels of satisfaction, collaborative learning and social presence.

We have to mention that the majority of the students that completed the questionnaire are female (60%). It is also important to say that the target group is about 18-25 years old. The majority also have taken up to 8 blended learning courses in our master program. So it seems that most students have the same perception about what a blended learning program is.

In our master program we had more than 3 blended learning courses including Mr Dimoulas and Mr Kaliris’ courses about digital production and digital storytelling. Students of this master thesis know exactly what a blended learning course is if we tell that the majority answered that they have taken up to 5 blended courses.

As Mr Dimoulas said in our interview students are enjoying blended learning courses because there are much more examples in the teaching process. That statement seems to agree with the statement of the questionnaire “I was able to learn from blended learning courses”.

So the conclusions of the first section of the questionnaire shows us that students have understood exactly what a blended learning program is and this was our purpose. As for the level of computer expertise it seems that the majority have an intermediate level of expertise. This is really positive if we estimate that blended learning courses include digital knowledge with traditional learning.

Generally students are familiar with new technologies and this makes blended learning even more important. The new age has changed the data and learning and teaching have to be adjusted to the new data. Professors on the other hand have to adjust their teaching method to the new data and the new technologies. It seems that this process is part of the new age with all this evolution of the new technologies. From the questionnaire and the section 1 we made the conclusion that the majority of
students are familiar with the new technologies. This fact urges professors to embrace this change. As Mr Dimoulas told us students have no problem with new technologies.

In the question if students were able to learn from blended learning courses the majority agreed with that. That means that blended learning courses are efficient in education and in universities. Additionally students were stimulated to do extra readings or research on topics discussed in digital forums. That is to say digital forums help students deepening their knowledge in many sectors. There is a variety of knowledge in digital edition and this fact makes students learn easily. Generally information is easily found on the net.

As we see the sector 2 has to do with the satisfaction of students about blended learning courses. Another conclusion is that as a result of their experience with these courses, students would like to take another blended learning course in the future. This means that these courses were a useful learning experience for the students. Both the blended learning and traditional courses effectively presented material and enhances knowledge level of the students.

This is something that Mr Kalliris and Mr Dimoylas also said in the interviews. So we see that interviews results are combined with the questionnaire’s results. They have the same conclusion about knowledge. Professors said that in the first place it is difficult to prepare something in a digital edition. However if you learn to do it then it is very easy and very efficient for students. On the other hand students are satisfied with the blended learning courses. This argument is being strengthened by the fact that the students agree that the diversity of the topics in these courses encouraged them to join in the discussions. The diversity of the topics is something normal in these courses cause in the digital era there is always a big variety of information.

We also have to mention that these students are basically millennials. So we conclude that millennials are more close to this kind of hybrid courses.

As for the difficulty in learning the Computer-Mediated Communication System there was a variety in answers. Some students answered that this system is difficult if you want to learn about it. Other students answered that it is not difficult. There is not a clear answer. When I asked from the professors to tell us if they think that students find it difficult to learn the computer mediated communication system they answered that students have no problem in this and they easily learn it. However from the answers we see that there are some students that find it difficult. That means that professors maybe have to give more clear information about this system.

Additionally the level of learning that took place in these courses is not sure that is of the highest quality. Students neither agree nor disagree with that. On the other hand students agreed that overall, the learning activities and projects of these courses met their learning expectations. Also, both the instructors and the courses met students’ learning expectations. So it seems that students are satisfied with the hybrid courses in
this master and are satisfied with the way these courses are being taught by the professors.

The satisfaction scale of this questionnaire makes us think and conclude that students in their majority are satisfied with the blended learning experience. This is something really important for our survey because we are interested about that. Students of the master seem that are really satisfied with the professors and the courses too.

And now we are going to examine the role of community in the groups. In the questionnaire we have one statement “I felt part of a learning community in my group”. Students strongly agreed that they felt part of a learning community.

The sense of belonging involves the feeling and the expectation that one fits in the group and has a role there, a feeling that someone accepts him in a group. It is important to mention that when you are part of a learning community it is easier to exchange information, knowledge.

Generally distance education courses lack the sense of community that is found in face to face courses and this lack of the sense of community leads students in failure (LaPadula, 2003; McLoughlin, 2002). In other words it leads students in failing to successfully meet the objectives of blended learning courses (LaPadula, 2003; McLoughlin, 2002). As we said before in our theory student’ success has been influenced by a number of factors, which include activities within a learning environment that promote a sense of community (LaPadula, 2003; McLoughlin, 2002).

Knowledge is constructed when an individual is engaging in activities and participating in interaction (Henning, 2004). Interaction influences learning and knowing, and it is especially important in distance education (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005) because it helps reduce feelings of isolation and contributes to the student success in online environments (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004).

The development of a community depends on the interaction among community members (Brown, 2001). Members of a community generally share something in common and it is through interaction that similarities are found and that thoughts and feelings (Brown, 2001) along with understandings are exchanged. This argument is being strengthened by the statement in the questionnaire “I actively exchanged my ideas with group members”. The majority of students agreed with that. So they share something in common.

**Students’ perceived sense of community in online courses is important to students’ overall learning experience in online courses** (LaPadula, 2003, McLoughlin, 2002). The results show that there is a positive relationship between students’ sense of community and their learning success in online courses.

Now we are going to make some conclusion for the section 3 of the questionnaire that has to do with social presence and the computer mediated communication system.
Students neither agree nor disagree with the fact that CMC messages convey feeling and emotion. That means that the level of social presence is not high in that case. As we said in our theory social presence is a construct that has its base in the telecommunications literature (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976). Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) developed social presence theory as a model for analyzing the social - psychological dimensions of mediated communication from a “social cues perspective” (Cobb, 2009). They defined social presence as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (Short, et al., p. 65).

On the other hand students find it pleasant to communicate with others using CMC system. Certainly, they answered that they are not sure if it is easy to express what they want to communicate through CMC. We can notice a contradiction here. **On the one hand students feel the sense of belonging inside a learning community. On the other hand they can’t feel the social presence through Computer Mediated Communication System. It seems that it is more difficult for a student to express what he or she wants through a laptop and to feel social present. Additionally they are not sure if they are comfortable participating, even though they are not familiar with the topics.**

We explained what CMC is Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), including email, Threaded Discussion, and Real-Time Chat.

**E-Mail:** Electronic messaging system that permits communicating (Wikipedia).

**Threaded Discussion:** Computer-based environments in which messages are ‘posted’ and read by users who may or may not be logged on simultaneously. It is required that the users must access the discussion boards to participate (Wikipedia).

**Real-Time Chat:** Computer-based environments in which users communicate simultaneously (Wikipedia).

**Students seem to be suspicious about CMC and its reliability something that affects the level of social presence. However CMC permits relationships to be set based upon sharing and exchanging information.** It seems we have another contradiction here. This contradiction is becoming clearer in the next statement of the questionnaire. Specifically students agree that CMC allow them to build more caring social relationships with others.

Research has demonstrated that social presence not only affects outcomes but also student, and possibly instructor, satisfaction with a course.

**Generally the following research hypotheses were tested:**

a. Students’ realization of social presence in online courses are related to their perceived learning and satisfaction with their instructor.
b. Students’ perceptions of social presence in online courses are a predictor of their perceived learning.

Another conclusion we can make is the fact that where students access CMC (home, office, computer labs, public areas, etc) affect their ability/desire to participate. That means that probably they don’t feel comfortable to participate in discussions in all places. Maybe it’s simpler if we think that the easiest way to participate in a discussion is from home where you can feel comfortable. Probably public areas make the communication more difficult because it is a matter of convenience.

Now the most important conclusion is conducted by the last two statements in our questionnaire. First of all students agree that CMC permits the building of trust relationships. Trust is something that is combined with social presence. When you feel social present in a digital discussion you feel also that there is trust. Students of this master think that there is trust between them. That fact affects the quality of the lesson and probably makes the learning more efficient in all ways.

As we said before social presence is how we establish ourselves (instructors or students) as individuals and build interpersonal relationships that can have a positive impact on engagement in learning activities. So trust is a main ingredient of social presence (Robert Plant, 2004).

The main question is whether the class is going to cultivate an appreciation for the diversity of the learners enrolled and welcome them to a community in which they each are encouraged and expected to give and take (Robert Plant, 2004).

From this conclusion we can notice that there are some ingredients of a rich community-oriented blended learning experience.

The first ingredient in developing a community-oriented online class is instructor presence. This ingredient requires an instructor who is visible, actively engaged in the flow of the learning and demonstrates an awareness and sensitivity to the diversity of student needs.

Instructor presence plays an important role in motivating and engaging online learners week after week.

The second ingredient is social presence. In its most simple essence, social presence is the opposite of the feeling of being alone (Robert Plant, 2004). When a student experiences a high degree of social presence in a blended learning class, he or she associates himself or herself as being part of a group, experiences a sense of belonging and is aware that other real people with their unique own thoughts, feelings and perspectives are involved in the learning process (Robert Plant, 2004).

Perhaps what is most interesting in social presence is the demonstrated impact it has on improving the online learning experience (Robert Plant, 2004). When social
presence is fostered, student satisfaction increases, the voluntary interactions between students improve and students identify an increase in their own depth of learning as well.

When a learner engages purely through Computer mediated experiences, that digital landscape must be designed to create socialization. That is what our professors told us in our interviews. The most common way of creating socialization is by giving examples that are connected with experiences. For the understanding, a professor may show a video in a class in order to make the example more interactive. In that way a student engages affectively in a class and especially in blended learning classes that interest us.

For example as mr Dimoulas told us he puts technology in real scenarios and in that way the student is able to understand in a more clear way the example. This is something that Mr Dimoulas is using in open courses of AUTH. In other words he gives the ability to a student to combine interactive examples through technology. This kind of interactivity strengthens the engagement of students and in that way they feel more social present.

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