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# **Evaluation of the “Second Instructor Application” in Synchronous Discussions in an Online Course: A Case Study at Anadolu University, Turkey**

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*Abstract: Anadolu University is one of the universities which serve online courses in Turkey and the course of “Instructional Planning and Evaluation” is one of the graduate level online courses given at Anadolu University. The students of this course were those attending any PhD program in Turkey. This course has three main components as self-study part, synchronous group discussions and asynchronous group discussions in each week of the term. For synchronous discussions a team-teaching approach which we call as “second instructor application” was implemented in this course. In this study, it is aimed at evaluating the “second instructor application” in synchronous discussions in the online course based on the views of the students and the instructors. As the result of the study, generally students enjoyed this application more than the instructors and agreed on continuing “second instructor application” in the online course of “Instructional Planning and Evaluation”.*

Keywords: Online Teaching, Online Learning, Synchronous Discussions, Collaborative Teaching, Team Teaching

## **Introduction**

**T**HE EFFECTIVENESS OF the online learning environments, becoming used widely in higher education, should be taken into consideration as much as the effectiveness of face-to-face learning environments. During the teaching-learning processes of the online programs, instructors should direct the learning experiences of students effectively, give students feedback regularly and be in interaction with students. These tasks are quite difficult for the instructors. If the instructors share their experiences in a collaborative team teaching, the effectiveness of the teaching-learning processes of the online courses might increase.

In this study, a team teaching based on a more interactive team teaching approach was planned, implemented and evaluated based on the views of the students and the instructors taking part in the online course of “Instructional Planning and Evaluation” (IPE). This course belongs to the program of “Instructional Development Program for Faculty Candidates” (Kurum, 2007), applied as an online program for PhD students from different fields at Anadolu University in Turkey. The online course of IPE includes three main components for all students: Individual studies for the units of the course, weekly synchronous discussions for an hour per week and weekly asynchronous forum discussions. The learning management systems used for the online course were WebCT and Adobe Connect Virtual Classroom. Since the course includes components that require high level of interaction and almost 40 students attended the course in each term, the whole group taking the course of IPE was di-

vided into three sub-groups and one instructor took the responsibility of one sub-group. In addition to the three instructors, another instructor took the responsibility of all of the three sub-groups. We call the former three instructors, each of whom was responsible just for one sub-group, as the “first instructors” and we call the latter instructor, who took the responsibility of all three sub-groups, as the “second instructor”. This study focused on the collaborative team teaching activities of the first and the second instructors during the “synchronous discussions” component of the course and this collaborative effort is called as “Second Instructor Application” (SIA).

## **Second Instructor Application through Collaborative Team Teaching**

Collaborative teaching, co-teaching or cooperative teaching are the terms used to refer to the team teaching approach (Parente, et al., 2007). Team teaching could be defined as the collaborative teaching process in which two or more instructors share the responsibility of teaching (Villa, et al., 2008). Team teaching approaches used for both online and face to face courses vary depending on the shared responsibilities of the instructors. In the more interactive approaches, instructors take the responsibility of teaching in a more equal manner and are in a strong collaboration in the teaching process (Parente et al., 2007; Helms et al., 2005; Strohschen & Heaney, 2000).

Collaborative team teaching approaches in online courses have been carried out in various formats. For instance, online courses could be combined for collaborative teaching and learning or collaborative teaching approaches could be used just for one online course to enable an effective teaching and learning process. In addition, collaboration of instructors from the same institution or different institutions could be seen. For example, in the study of Strohschen and Heaney (2000), an interactive team teaching approach was used to combine online courses given by two instructors with the help of the holistic learning plan. In another study, Parente, et al. (2007) introduced a collaborative team teaching scenario in which collaboration and coordination during the learning process were provided among three MBA courses. In the study of Wang, et al. (2005), there was a course development issue related to the cross-institutional faculty collaboration for one online engineering course.

In this study, “first instructors” and “second instructor” collaborated for each component of the course of IPE, especially for the synchronous discussion sessions. Although the roles of the first and the second instructors for the synchronous discussion sessions were different, two instructors in one synchronous discussion session shared the responsibility of maintaining effective discussions equally. In detail, nearly ten students and two instructors participated in the synchronous discussions sessions for 12 weeks of the term virtually and these discussions were carried out for nearly one hour per week. The roles of the first and second instructors were determined before the course of IPE. During synchronous discussions, based on these roles, the first instructor, with the main responsibility of one sub-group of the course of IPE, facilitated the discussions and gave students feedback via voice messages while the students were participating in the discussions by sending text messages. The first instructor directed the discussions by using question-answer technique mainly and provided the students with the opportunity to ask questions related to the discussion topics of the week. The second instructor, who took the responsibility of three sub-groups of the IPE course, followed the discussions and text messages on the screen sent by the students, listened to the first instructor and sent text messages when necessary. Since the flow of the messages on the message area

of the virtual classroom was too fast, the first instructor sometimes missed the students' answers or messages. In this case, the second instructor gave feedback to the students and reinforced the good messages by giving them star marks (\*).

Team teaching helps instructors to focus more on the process of learning (Shipley, 2006). In addition, collaborative teaching maximizes strengths in the curriculum and the instruction. Team teaching helps instructors develop their courses via discussing and sharing experiences. In collaborative team teaching processes, both students and instructors could have positive experiences (Rea & Cornell 2005, Bender, 2003; Jin and Abu, 2000). Therefore to raise the effectiveness of online learning, planning, conducting and evaluating different collaborative team-teaching strategies for the online learning environments such as synchronous discussions is needed. For this reason, in this study, to raise the effectiveness of the synchronous online discussions in the course of IPE, SIA which is a collaborative team teaching activity was applied. The main goal for applying the team teaching with a second instructor in synchronous discussions was to facilitate teaching and learning.

## **Aim of the Study**

The aim of the study was evaluating the SIA in synchronous discussions based on the views of the students and the instructors to determine the effectiveness of the SIA. To reach the aim of the study, the following questions were asked:

1. What were the views of the students and instructors related to the roles of the second instructor?
2. What were the views of the students and instructors related to the problems arising from the SIA?
3. What were the suggestions of the students and instructors about the SIA?

## **Method**

### ***Research Design***

In this case study, SIA which was implemented during the synchronous online discussion component of the online course of IPE constituted the case. A case study might take just an individual, classroom, school or a program as a case to study in depth (Patton, 2002, s. 447; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003).

### ***Participants***

Participants of this case study were the students and the instructors of the online course of IPE in the fall semester of 2007-2008 academic years. Among 35 students of the course of IPE, 10 students and four instructors participated in the study through interviews and 15 students expressed their views by writing on the questionnaire.

### ***Data Collection***

In this study, data was collected from the students and the instructors via interviews and a questionnaire.

#### **Interviews**

The interview guides were used for the interviews (Patton, 2002). Three interview guides, one of which was for the students, one of which was for the first instructors and one of which was for the second instructor, were developed by the researchers in order to be used at the interviews.

The interview guides included questions related to the roles of the second instructor, motivation, feedback, reinforcement, communication, problems, if any, aroused because of the second instructor, and suggestions related to the SIA.

#### **Questionnaire**

A questionnaire with an open ended question was applied to the students after the final exam of the course. Students were asked to write down their views on the questionnaire. The question was related to defining the roles of the second instructor. 15 students brought back the questionnaires voluntarily.

### ***Data Analysis***

#### **Analysis of the Interviews**

The interview transcripts produced by the researchers were checked by another researcher to find out any errors made. In terms of the interviews with the instructors, a different way was followed to control the transcripts. The researcher sent the instructors their interview transcription documents back and asked whether the documents reflected their thoughts and they had any additional ideas to give.

In the first stage of the analysis process, all the transcriptions were read by the researchers. Then based on the research questions, interview questions and general information gained from the first overall reading of the interview transcriptions, two researchers defined the main themes together. In the second stage of the data analysis, one of the researchers coded the views of the students and instructors into the sub-themes by descriptive analysis and used Nvivo 8 programme. For the reliability of the findings, the second researcher examined the whole data set and checked the theme set and codes produced by the first researcher. The reliability of the findings derived from the interviews was measured by using check-coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and found 94% for the interviews with students and 93% for the interviews with the instructors.

#### **Analysis of the Documents**

The analysis process of the documents was similar to the analysis of the interviews. The reliability of the findings derived from the documents was found 91%.

## Results

### ***Results Derived From the Views of the Students***

#### **Results of the Document Analysis**

Some of the students indicated their general views of the SIA as shown on Table 1.

**Table 1: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Documents Related to “Summative Evaluation of the SIA”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Documents</i>
Second instructor application was useful	D1-D2-D3-D5-D10-D12
Second instructor application should continue	D5-D12
<i>D1: Document No 1</i>	

Six students found SIA useful and two of the students indicated that this application should have continued as it was shown on Table1.

**Table 2: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Documents Related to the “Roles of the Second Instructor”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Documents</i>
Facilitating the instruction	D1-D6-D7-D8-D10
Giving star mark to students who give the correct answer	D5-D8-D11-D14-D15
Being a control mechanism	D8-D9-D13-D14-D15
Increasing the level of comprehension by giving extra information	D1-D4-D14
Managing the discussions	D9-D10-D14
Increasing the motivation level of the students	D10-D11-D14
Making students take the course seriously	D1-D2-D5
Inspecting the first instructor	D3-D4-D6
Giving written feedback to the messages of the students	D6-D8
<i>*D1: Document No 1</i>	
<i>*6 sub-themes with one frequency derived from the documents were not shown on Table 1 and Table 2.</i>	

Students generally realized the roles of the second instructor in synchronous discussions. Frequently indicated roles of the second instructor according to the students were facilitating the instruction, giving star mark to students who give the correct answer, being a control mechanism as it was shown on Table 2. In addition to these roles, some of the students in-

dicated roles such as increasing the level of comprehension by giving extra information, managing the discussions, increasing the motivation level of the students.

### **Results of the Interviews with Students**

Results derived from the students' views acquired by means of interviews were presented on Tables 3- 6.

**Table 3: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Roles of the Second Instructor”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
Giving star mark to the students who answer right	S1-S2-S3-S4-S5-S7-S8-S9-S10
Giving written feedback to students	S1-S2-S3-S4-S5-S6-S7-S8 -S10
Helping students learn more easily	S3-S4-S5-S7-S8-S9-S10
Increasing the motivation level of students	S2-S3-S5-S6-S7-S8-S10
Managing the discussions	S2-S5-S6-S7-S8
Being a control mechanism	S1-S2-S5-S9-S10
Helping the first instructor	S6-S7-S8-S9
Concluding the discussion	S3-S4-S10
Making learners participate seriously in discussions	S7-S9-S10
Increasing students' active participation in discussions	S1-S7-S9
Following the participation of students	S1-S3-S7
Focusing on the messages of students	S2-S8-S9
Explaining the topic through examples	S7-S9
<i>*SI: Student 1</i>	

The results derived from the documents and the interviews about the roles of the second instructor were similar. As it was shown on Table 3, students thought that the roles of the second instructor were mainly giving star mark to students, giving written feedback, helping to learn, increasing motivation, managing the discussion, being a control mechanism, etc. Students identified a lot of roles for the second instructor. With regard to one of the most frequently indicated role of the second instructor, one of the students said the following:

*S10-[“Second instructor was giving star mark. Of course the main goal is learning but getting star mark makes person happy, we take a response to our learning.”]*

Another student pointed out the “written feedback giver role” as the following:

*S4-[“She (the second instructor) indicated to students who comment (on the discussed issue) that she/he is doing right or wrong.”]*

**Table 4: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Problems Arising from the SIA”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
No Problem	S3-S4-S5-S6-S7-S10
Having difficulty in following the text messages	S3-S4-S5-S8
The tenseness of second instructor in the environment	S1-S2-S3-S8
The afford of some students to show themselves to the second instructor	S4-S9
Technical problems that occurred while sending messages	S2-S4
Not understanding the roles of the second instructor	S2-S6
The notion of the second instructor to be checking the students	S1-S9
<i>*SI: Student 1</i>	

Six of the students indicated that SIA did not cause too much problems. On the other hand, there were some kinds of problems indicated by the students during the interviews, as shown on Table 4. Students mostly indicated problems about having difficulty while following the text messages and the tenseness of the second instructor in the environment. In terms of following the flow of the text messages on the screen, one of the students complained as the following:

*S3- [“...sometimes the second instructor tried to write with upper cases. This was difficult for me to follow because the first instructor was writing or telling something, the second instructor was writing, other friends were writing and at the same time I had to write something. This could make me panic.”]*

Another indicated problem of SIA was about the presence of the second instructor in the virtual discussion environment. One of the students said the following:

*S8-[“When our instructor (the second instructor) was in the virtual classroom, I got more anxious.”]*

**Table 5: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Suggestions for SIA”**

<i>Sub-Theme</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
First and the second instructors should play equal roles.	S1-S3-S6
<i>*SI: Student 1</i>	

Students' suggestions for the SIA were showed on Table 5. Three students suggested that first and second instructors should play equal roles. One of the students indicated her/his views as follow:

*S3-[“...The second instructor was passive and sometimes she took the lead and this made people anxious. I think that if the second instructor continues with the first instructor via equal positions, we may relax more.”]*

**Table 6: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Future of the SIA”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
Continuing the application	S1-S2-S4-S7-S8-S9-S10
No need for continuing the application	S5-S3

\*S1: Student 1  
*\*18 sub-themes with one frequency derived from the interviews with students were not shown on Tables 3-6.*

Students indicated their opinions about the future of the SIA as shown on Table 6. Students agreed upon continuing the SIA in synchronous online discussions. One of the students especially specified the the need for one more trial group for the SIA and said the following:

*S2-[“I think we were the trial group. One more trial group is needed.”]*

### **Results Derived from the Views of the Instructors**

#### **Results of the Interviews with Instructor**

The results derived from the interviews with instructors were showed on Table 7-9.

**Table 7: Themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Roles of the Second Instructor”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
Facilitating the instruction	FI 1-FI 2-FI 3-SecI
Following the participation of the students	FI 2 - SecI
Helping students be motivated for the course	FI 3-SecI
Providing reinforcements to the students	FI 1-FI 3

*FI: First Instructor; SecI: Second Instructor*

The instructor did not mention roles as many as the students mentioned as seen on Table 7. On the other hand, all of the instructors indicated the role of facilitating the instruction. One of the first instructors explained this role as following:

*FI 2-[“...We do many things at the same time and therefore some of the points related to the topics could be missed. The second instructor focuses on these points ...this makes my job easy.”]*

The instructors of the course of IPE defined other roles of the second instructors as follows: Following the participation of the students, helping students be motivated for the course, providing reinforcements to the students.

**Table 8: Sub-themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Problems of the SIA”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
The first instructor’s feeling of herself/himself anxious.	FI 1-FI 2-FI 3
The second instructor’s effect on the implementation of the first instructors’ plans	FI 1-FI 2-FI 3
The second instructor’s negative effect on following messages on the screen.	SecI –FI 1

*FI: First Instructor; SecI: Second Instructor*

As it was presented on Table 8, all of the first instructors indicated more than one problem of the SIA although the second instructor indicated just one problem. One of the problems the first instructors defined was the first instructor’s feeling of herself/himself anxious. One of the first instructors expressed her/his views as follows:

*FI 2-[“...I thought that I would suddenly make a mistake. When the second instructor was not on the system, I felt more relaxed and less anxious...”]*

The second problem of the SIA was related to the implementation of the plans made by the first instructors. The first instructors complained about the second instructor’s effect on the implementation of the first instructors’ plans. One of the first instructor’s statements about this problem was as follows:

*FI 1-[“...when I saw the capital letters of the second instructor, I thought what was happening, if we passed to another question, if I missed anything, ... This prevented me from implementing my discussion plan.”]*

The second instructor’s negative effect on following messages on the screen was the only one problem indicated by the second instructor. One of the first instructors also focused on this problem. The second instructor said the following related to this problem:

*SecI – [“For example, when I was sending a feedback to a student, students’ other messages intervened between the student’s message and my feedback message to that student. Therefore students sometimes got confused and could not understand the direction of my message.”]*

Instructors put forward different suggestions to increase the effectiveness of the SIA. The suggestions of the instructors for the SIA were indicated on Table 9.

**Table 9: Themes and the Codes of the Interviews Related to the “Suggestions for the SIA”**

<i>Sub-Themes</i>	<i>Codes of the Interviews</i>
The first and the second instructors should be at the same academic level.	FI 1-FI 3
The first and the second instructors should plan the course together.	FI 2-FI 3
The first and the second instructors should be equal in terms of their roles.	FI 1
The roles of the second instructors related to the motivation should be highlighted.	Secl
The first and the second instructors should evaluate the team-teaching activity regularly.	Secl

One of the suggestions of the first instructors was related to the academic levels of the instructors as it was showed on Table 8. One of the first instructors said the following:

*FI 1-[“...I think the most appropriate method is that instructors with equal academic levels should manage the system.”]*

Another suggestion of the first instructors was about the instructors' cooperation in planning process of the synchronous discussion sessions. One of the first instructors said the following:

*FI 3-[“The first and the second instructors could manage the process by planning the process cooperatively.”]*

The second instructor proposed that the second instructor's roles related to the motivation should be highlighted and the first and the second instructors should evaluate the team-teaching activity regularly.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Interactivity and interactions are important factors in the success of online education and the variety of interactions help students enhance meaning making and deepen understanding (Juwah, 2006). Therefore to increase the quality and the quantity of student-student and student-instructor interactions, the students of the course of IPE were assigned to three sub-groups. In these sub-groups 10 to 15 students meet in the synchronous learning environment instead of arranging a discussion session for the whole class. Although the population of the synchronous discussion groups were decreased, managing the discussion was still a very difficult task for just one instructor at a certain time. Yet, the recommended number of students for the synchronous conversation is at most 5 (Bender, 2003). According to Bender (2003),

if the number exceeds the recommended one, the synchronous conversation might be confusing and some information might be missed. Before the SIA, Bender's caution came to be true in the synchronous discussions of IPE course and then instructors discussed about this problem and began the SIA. For the course of IPE, there was no alternative for smaller discussion groups because of limited number of teaching staff and the heavy workloads of the instructors. Arranging a lot of synchronous discussion sessions with limited number of students requires an instructor to deal with more than two discussion groups per week. Since this was not possible, more than one instructor could have participated in synchronous discussions in order to deal with each student. Therefore, instead of assigning more than six instructors to at least six discussion groups, five students participating in each group, four instructors took the responsibility of the course with the help of team teaching. The SIA was the solution for effective discussions in the synchronous virtual classroom including at least 10 students in the IPE course.

Helms et al. (2005) indicated that use of various teaching skills and styles in team-teaching applications has many advantages because of the different learning styles and preferences of the students. During the synchronous discussions, students from very different subject fields came together to discuss the same issue at a time. For these students, teaching styles and experiences of two instructors were more useful than just one instructor's experiences and teaching styles. Encouraging feedback is also very important to be responsive to each student (Bender, 2003). SIA increased motivation levels of the students because of the increased effectiveness of the feedback giving mechanism, communication and interaction during the synchronous discussions.

Despite the raised benefits of the SIA, it had some disadvantages to take into consideration. Mainly the difference between the titles or the academic levels of the instructors caused problems. The limited collaboration between the instructors before the discussion sessions also resulted in interruptions during the implementation of the discussion plans. Piechura-Couture et al. (2006) indicated it is important to know the learning and the teaching style of the team-teaching partner. The problem of not becoming aware of the teaching style of the partner caused the first instructors to be anxious about when and how the second instructor would express her views during the synchronous online discussions.

To increase the effectiveness of SIA, the following recommendations were put forward:

- The instructors of the collaborative team teaching activity should feel themselves more relaxed during the synchronous online discussions. To accomplish this, the plans of the discussions might be prepared with the cooperative work of the first and the second instructors. As Fier (2009) indicated, bringing together the instructors who could work together well was important. The first and the second instructors might be selected from the teaching staff who know each other and could work together without any hesitations.
- Alternating the team-teaching strategies might be planned for the classroom (Letterman & Dugan, 2004). For SIA, some of the discussions might be directed by the second instructor via voice messages while the first instructor follows the flow of the messages and gives feedback, reinforcements, extra examples, etc. In other words, the roles of the first and the second instructor might change for some of the discussions. This kind of change might make the first instructors feel more comfortable because the first instructor and the students might not perceive the second instructor as a controlling mechanism if this change occurs.

- Both the first and the second instructor might send voice messages or text messages. In other words, the roles might be shared and both instructors could work as a first instructor. That is, more interactive team-teaching approach might be applied.
- For further studies, experimental design might be applied to test the effectiveness of the SIA. In addition to the qualitative or quantitative studies for the evaluation of the application, a mixed method study could be applied to test the effectiveness of the application.

## **Research Limitations**

This case study is limited to participants of one online course and one component of this online course. In case studies, a case might be limited to any particular situation (Lichtman, 2006). In addition, the main contribution of this case study to the online teaching literature is to put forward an example related to collaborative team teaching in synchronous online learning environments. Additional contribution of the study is discussing and clarifying the roles of the instructors for the collaborative team teaching.

## **Conclusion**

SIA is a new approach for team-teaching in the synchronous online discussion environment. In this study, two instructors followed and managed all of the voice and text messages during the synchronous discussions together. The main roles of the second instructor of SIA were to facilitate the discussion and help students during their learning process by increasing motivation through providing instant feedbacks, reinforcements, extra examples and directions. The results of this case study reveal that students generally enjoyed SIA and realized the roles of the second instructor although they were not informed about the roles of the first and the second instructors of the online course at the beginning of the term. Students took the advantages of working with two instructors. Students found this team teaching activity as a worthwhile experience. The instructors who tried team teaching found the experience challenging, enjoyable and worthwhile (Partridge & Hallam, 2005). This might be said for the SIA mentioned in this case study. Instructors found SIA useful though the first instructors faced some kinds of problems.

SIA achieved its main goal because it aimed to facilitate teaching and learning. Managing the discussion session became easier by means of the collaborative work of the two instructors at the same time in the same environment during the fast flow of the students' messages on the screen. SIA facilitated the learning process of the students because students were provided with more reinforcements, more immediate feedbacks and different experiences of the two instructors. All these motivated the students for doing pre-readings before the discussions and participating in discussions actively and voluntarily.

To conclude, the SIA increased the overall quality of the IPE course. Team teaching might be rewarding if the instructors work together in a good collaboration and they might become a model for students about good collaboration, as well as they could learn from each other (Bender, 2003). With revision of SIA, collaborative team teaching activity in synchronous discussion environments may enrich the learning environment and the outcomes for both the instructors and the students.

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