

# Online Instruction and Online Tutoring in University Contexts

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## Abstract

Due to the world-wide trend of digitalization in every sphere of human life and using social media on a daily basis, the current young generation can be characterised by permanent connectedness via digital devices and social media. Universities – as well as any organization providing services – must respond to the demands and needs of their customers – i.e. students. Therefore, in order to enhance their competitiveness, they must apply such forms of instruction, which are both attractive and efficient. The authors of the presented paper deal with the topical issues of online instruction in the context of university education with a special focus on online tutoring, which represents a highly individualized form of education.

## Keywords:

Digital technologies  
Connectedness  
Online instruction  
Online tutoring

## 1 Introduction

During the last two decades, due to rapid changes in the society, the educational reality has changed. One of the factors playing a crucial role in this process is the trend of digitalization in every sphere of human life including education. As a result, as Prensky (2001) claims, new cognitive abilities and learning preferences of students appeared, which must be taken into account in tertiary education as well. Universities should adjust their work to the needs, requirements, and expectations of students and apply such forms and methods of instruction, which are not only effective but also attractive.

## 2 Connectedness

One of the characteristic features of the current society and modern life is connectedness. As the young generation has already been born to the virtual era, digital technologies have a special and irreplaceable role in their lives – digital media and connectedness represent an integral part of their existence. The young generation attending universities spends a lot of time connected – young people aged between 15 and 24 can be characterized by the highest intensity of connectedness, i.e. they spent most time online and use the virtual environment with the highest intensity (OECD, 2012). It can even be stated that they are extremely attached to digital technologies. It is necessary to point out that it is not the devices or gadgets which grant connectivity, but the ability to be connected itself is important (OECD, 2012).

Although a variety of data on the ownership of digital devices was recorded in OECD countries and economies, the PISA 2015 survey findings showed that in 2015, the vast majority of students in OECD countries (95%) had a link to the Internet at home, 91% of them had a smartphone in their households, 74% of them had

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a portable laptop, 60% a desktop computer and 53% had access to a tablet with Internet connection (OECD, 2017).

This situation opens new opportunities for online instruction. Educators can give more personalized feedback and offer online tutoring. It can be assumed that connectedness changes communication to interaction (Barnová & Krásna, 2018), which is a positive finding and an encouraging piece of information in the context of the application of digital technologies and development of online instruction.

### 3 Digital technologies in university education

Universities are not isolated systems, to make their work effective, there must be a strong link between them and the world outside. They must anticipate and respond to the trends in the society, the students' interests, their behaviour on social networks and their preferences. It means that if universities want to know what to focus on, they must first find out about the direction of their target group.

The digitalization of the world has brought the need to make use of the benefits that the digital development offers in university environments as well – using virtual learning environments and social networks for educational purposes has become a necessity.

The current young generation, which has an almost unlimited Internet access and is permanently connected, can benefit from working with open educational resources and find information much easier than several years ago.

As proven by research carried out worldwide, most students spend a lot of time on the Internet and are active users of social networks – more than 2.3 billion out of 3.4 billion Internet users are active on social networks as well, which is more than 30% of the current world population.

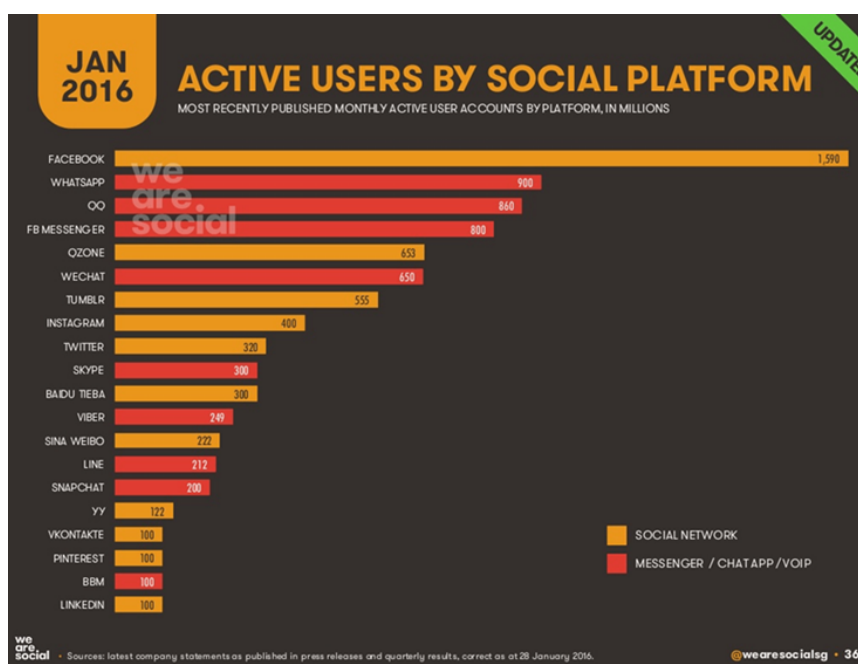
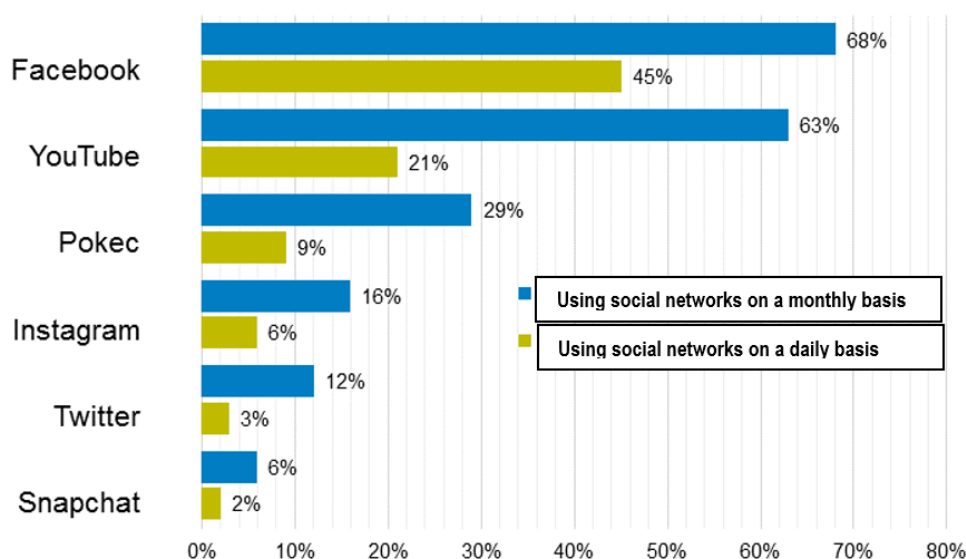


Fig. 1: Comparison of active users of individual social networks (Ďugová, 2016).

Using social networks can be considered among the most frequent online activities practiced by Slovak Internet users as well.



**Fig. 2:** Using social networks in Slovakia in the entire population (GFK, 2017).

This is reflected in the work of educational institutions as well – social networks with related technologies are becoming communication platforms (Ulrich et al., 2014; Nagy & Kölcsey, 2017; Csobánka, 2016). These platforms facilitate collaboration among students and promote the development of learning communities. Chatting can be considered an upgraded form of e-mail communication between students and teaching personnel which is more and more frequently used in their interaction.

## 4 Online instruction

Connectedness is not only important for creating and maintaining relationships with others, it is also a decisive factor from the aspect of finding, publishing, and sharing information. It enables students to access a huge number of information resources online, which can be a benefit but also a serious threat. From this point of view, the students' ability to actively deal with digital information and media and communicate with others in the virtual environment are decisive (OECD, 2012). In university contexts, searching for, selection from and the opportunity to work with Open Educational Resources play an important role.

Online instruction has brought new opportunities into the teaching and learning processes, and so, it can be stated that technology has transformed the whole system of education and revolutionized the way students learn. Even though educators tend to look at technology as a tool and students look at technology as an environment (Fryer, as cited by Turrentine & MacDonald, 2006) and despite the fact that young adults access, manage, create and share knowledge, but also learn differently than their parents and teachers, online instruction – if compared with traditional forms of learning – has several benefits. It is an effective and, at the same time, an affordable way of learning, which saves students' time, money and energy. They do not need to commute, there are no time restrictions and so, it is convenient as well. As the majority of students involved in university education are members of the virtual generation, easy adaptation to the online environment can be expected, so – even though generational stereotypes have their limits – it can be presumed that the application of digital technologies in university education makes instruction more attractive and effective.

## 5 Tutoring and online tutoring

In the context of the trend of highly personalized and individualized education based on every student's needs, requirements, and expectations, tutoring appears to be among the most suitable forms of education. With the development of new technologies, new opportunities for learning in the virtual environment occurred. Online tutoring is the process of tutoring in an online, virtual environment or networked environments in which teachers and learners are separated by time and space.

The history of online tutoring started when digital technologies were implemented into the educational practice. E-mail communication provided learners with the opportunity to submit their tutor questions and receive answers online. The problem of this form of contact lies in the fact, that students cannot expect immediate answers as there is a time gap between sending a question and receiving a respond to that question. This kind of the so-called asynchronous online tutoring has benefits as well – it gives the tutor time to think about the answer, to search additional information and formulate the answer. Tutoring via e-mail is especially suitable for reviewing writing or evaluation of written assignments.

With the ongoing revolution of technology, the synchronous form of online tutoring has been introduced, where both the learner and the tutor are online. Real online chats on social networks or in the applied virtual learning environment are used, which enables simultaneous interaction.

Tutoring can be characterized as a process in which a tutor accompanies students of any age in their process of personal development and studies. It includes any activity offering a learner guidance, counselling or supervision by an experienced and competent professional. The tutor supports the learner throughout the learning process (at school, in training centres or on the job). Tutoring covers the fields of:

- academic subjects – to improve educational achievement;
- career guidance – to ease transition from school to work;
- personal development – to encourage learners to make wise choices (Cedefop, 2008).

Not only children and adolescents but also adults often need a tutor for their professional advancement or personal growth and adult-to-adult guidance appears to be an effective form of adult education. In higher education, as for the number of participants, two forms of tutoring are used – e-moderating, in which the tutor works with a group of students and one-to-one tutoring. In this context, the tutor is an academic, lecturer or a professor, i.e. a professional from the academic environment.

The purpose of tutoring is to teach individuals how to help themselves, or to assist or guide them to the point at which they become independent learners, and thus no longer need a tutor (What is Tutoring?). It means that the job of a tutor does not lie in giving answers directly but in showing the students how to find answers, leading them towards knowledge and helping them develop skills, knowledge, competencies, and abilities. Both face-to-face and online tutoring presuppose self-motivated and independent learners.

Online tutoring is the optimal solution in contexts, in which regular face-to-face communication is difficult. If we compare these two types of guidance, online tutoring is a more open and convenient form of education for those who possess the motivation, sufficient competences, skills, and abilities to use digital technologies for learning, but also positive attitudes towards learning online. The main benefits of online tutoring are:

- reduction of travelling costs;
- the communication can be recorded,
- enables self-paced personalized learning;
- no time restrictions;
- the same topic can be discussed several times;
- 24/7 availability – anytime and from anywhere;
- learning is enhanced by using individualized tools.

## 6 Conclusion

It is not a matter of discussion whether the application of digital technologies for educational purposes and connectedness in general bring any benefits for university students and teachers (Várkonyi, Lajčin, & Sláviková, 2015). It must not be forgotten that the decision to use digital technologies in a particular context in university education must be made based on two criteria – convenience and efficiency. It has implications for online tutoring as well.

Tutoring is a highly personalized and individualized form of education, where the academic particularities of every learner must be taken into account. So, its online form can be used only with those learners, which possess the necessary competencies, skills and abilities, but also their interest in online interaction is important. Educators must be aware that using digital technologies should be purposeful and meaningful as they can increase but also decrease the quality of the teaching process (Prensky, 2010) and to become an obstacle in achieving the set goals (Harlick & Halleran, 2015).

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