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DISCOURSE OF EDUCATION: ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING

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Abstract

The study examines some features of educational discourse, including the concepts of online and blended learning within the context of high school. The object of research is high school, especially senior high school. The author looks into discourse markers for the use of concepts in the discourse of education. The features differentiate texts, which belong to the educational discourse and its genres as well as show the markers of contemporary discourse within the context. They study analyzes pedagogical literature and regulatory documents on online and blended learning to review the key concepts used in educational discourse on the topic within academic institutions. The research examines the pedagogical experience, the use of online learning technologies to support learning in high schools, and the principles for improving online and blended teaching of subject areas. In conclusion, the article lists challenges and formulates ways to overcome them on the way to sound solutions for strengthening the online and blended learning experience.

Key words: online learning; blended learning; discourse; high school; new media; social media; discourse analysis; educational technology.

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ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫЙ ДИСКУРС: ДИСТАНЦИОННОЕ И СМЕШАННОЕ ОБУЧЕНИЕ

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Аннотация

Рассматриваются признаки образовательного дискурса, в частности концепт «Online and Blended Learning» (дистанционное и смешанное обучение) (на материале средней школы). Объектом исследования являются старшие классы средней школы. Анализируются дискурсные характеристики использования данного концепта. Выделяемые признаки позволяют дифференцировать тексты как относящиеся к образовательному дискурсу и раскрывают маркеры совре-менного дискурса на рассматриваемую тематику. Проанализирована педагогиче-ская литература и документация, посвящённая смешанному и дистанционному образованию в России и за рубежом (в контексте дискурса средней школы). Отме-чена ключевая терминология и связанные концепты, которые используются в об-разовательном дискурсе. Описаны педагогические аспекты использования ди-станционных и смешанных подходов, а также принципы улучшения преподава-ния учебных дисциплин с использованием новых технологий. Исследование поз-воляет провести дифференциацию проблем и перспектив использования смешан-ного и дистанционного обучения в мире и в России. Намечены способы преодоления трудностей при принятии решений совершенствования обучения с помощью технологий на основе последних достижений в области образования.

Ключевые слова: образовательный дискурс; средняя школа; смешанное обучение; дистанционное обучение; анализ дискурса; социальные медиа; новые медиа; образовательные технологии.

Blended and online learning worldwide is increasingly stimulated by policy makers [2; 7, pp. 22-23; 11]; however, with various practical effects. A good example of this formal drive for digital learning are national laws, which lead school leadership to bring in more technologies into the classroom and beyond (for example, similar inspirations are reflected in sets of official documents in Russia [35] such as the National Program called Development of Common Learning Digital Framework (Федеральная целевая программа «Развитие единой образовательной информационной среды») [34] and instructions from the Russian Ministry of Education, for instance, on Information and Communication Resources for Educational Institutions [32]. Educational discourse takes shape in the form of discussions and frameworks for the strategy (short-term and long-term) [5, p. 16; 10, p. 23] – an illustration of goal setting in the field is the National Project of Integration of Learning Technology into the Russian Education System (Федеральный проект «Информатизации системы образования», ИСО) [20; 22].

A special place within the discourse is devoted to debates about the quality of digital learning, which reflect the position of both national and international experts in educational management and technology application. Online learning tools are meant not only to improve the quality of education within the high school framework, but also to raise the quality of human resources development, implementation and adoption of new technology across nations, and to provide guidance for students with aspirations to use varied technological tools for better learning. Great evidence of quality discourse can be found on the regional level looking into the discussions at teacher conferences. Indicators which show the degree of technology application across curriculum have turned into the success markers for schools, teachers and have entered the process of certification and accreditation for school profiles and teachers portfolios. Numerous international conferences regularly discuss quality aspects in the context of educational management of online learning; for example, Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference, 2015 [2; 27]. The discussion of quality is linked to research on strategic planning within the field. On the regional level, here belong conferences such as «Маркетинг образовательных проектов», 2015; «Новая школа: мой маршрут» 2014; «EdTech Russia 2014: Монетизация online-образования»; and «Современные технологии обучения в компаниях и учебных учреждениях», 2013).

High school is encouraged to offer effective online and blended courses, which implies that discourse must demonstrate lucid evidence that the digital learning activities are up to standards, comply with rubrics that assess the readiness of students and teachers for self-paced activities in digital environment, evaluate the electronic content of the curriculum and the learning objects for the class taught, describe pedagogical methods used as well as scrutinize the operational stages of online and blended learning. National educational policies, digital learning associations and consortiums, conferences, trainings, and publications rigorously invest into the discourse and put forward explanations and clarifications of digital terminology, which is of international and regional relevance, thus strengthening the conceptual frameworks. The open boundaries of the educational discourse provide an abundance of texts for discourse analysis of online and blended learning in general, and forecast the future of educational products and services on the market [1; 4; 13; 18; 19; 33; 36]. The predictions in the field and quality discussion within educational management support the discourse evolution.

The idea that schools and teachers should be accountable for their success in applying technology is linked to discussions of the market of e-learning and the factors for its development. Here comes the theme of professional development within the educational discourse [8; 12; 17; 23; 24; 27; 38], which can be illustrated by a multitude of projects, including national teacher competitions and contests like Online Teacher of the Year (Дистанционный учитель года). Within the competition teachers, for example, design Syllabus, Unit Plan, and Module. The required planning of online and blended activities for students encourage the learners to show talents using technology in school and beyond [3; 16], for example, online student competitions (дистанционная олимпиада) and conferences (ученическая конференция).

Efficiency parameters for quality of online learning give evidence on the level of training of graduates as well as assess their e-portfolio according to rubrics that consider professional goals and aspirations, credentials, which demonstrate that the individual has had professional and personal success and, consequently, will probably continue to do the good job in the future – in the world in crisis [21; 25; 37]. The student success in online and blended learning can be described

in terms of pedagogical characteristics such as student online productivity in a course; quantity and quality of sharing in online discussion forums (writing posts of various genres); self-assessment of learning progress; pedagogical mentoring for other students via e-mail, skype, forums or chats (newcomers who have just joined need peer advice), and peer review of final projects (mostly with a genuine creative component). The creative self-realization is a crucial constituent and the end target of online and blended learning. The learner's success (показатели образовательной деятельности ученика) are evaluated in terms of performance characteristics like productivity (результативность деятельности), display of trait qualities; that is, cultural, cognitive, heuristic, and communicative skills [6; 14; 15]. The development and implementation of standards and the design of the online learning models with solid structure and content based on rigorous organizational and pedagogical tools will stimulate students to participate in evolving online and blended learning opportunities on regional level and within the global online educational network and discourse.

Method

This analysis employed the Basic Interpretive Qualitative Study methodology to describe discourse of education with focus on online and blended learning in high school setting to see the prospects for further study of the discourse and to understand how transformation of traditional face-to-face learning model into blended and online models affects the features of educational discourse. Writing this outline I tried to describe and interpret experiences of high school stakeholders like school administrators, teachers, and students and to determine the key trends in the field of online and blended learning in the Russian high school and globally. I paid attention to recent changes, instead of examining and listing the historical facts and describing chronologically the developmental stages of online and blended learning. Discourse analysis is a multifaceted research activity, which turns to qualitative investigation when dealing with complex objects of cross disciplinary research in humanities and social sciences, exploring human and social problems of digital education [9; 28; 30]. This qualitative study has helped to draft an explanation of some principles of how the contemporary discourse of education functions and discover the concepts, which the discourse participants have constructed about the phenomenon on online and blended learning in high school. I apply elements of the Delphi method of inquiry for data collection and analysis to construct a holistic worldview with data retrieved from a range of sources and to inductively analyze and infer the stakeholders' perception of the themes, concepts and recurrent discourse features [26; 31]. The method also allows building forecasts in educational discourse planning, especially when we deal with innovative technology like online and blended learning and with limited research to clarify its influence on the discourse of education [29].

Results

The data from the research of online and blended learning in Russia doesn't diverge from major trends of educational discourse development globally in terms of common themes, concepts and categories. A great part of the discourse is devoted to students and their success factors, then, we have texts describing performance indicators of teachers and quality of content. Professional development deals with a number of categories like efficiency parameters of teachers and programs, preparation of teachers on bachelors and masters levels as well as monitoring teachers work in online or blended classroom. Forecasting in the field is another section of discourse, which represents innovations and international trends in K-12 online and blended learning.

National policies further develop the discourse by motivating the discussion of federal programs for online and blended learning as an educational experience with a strong cross-disciplinary ICT component (that is, various types of interaction of the discourse participants on the effective management of scientific and pedagogical potential, on creating conditions for switching to digital forms and implementation of standards and training competencies relying on information technologies). Online learning technologies are considered a priority for modern education, for example, according to the Law on Education of the Russian Federation (Закон об образовании РФ) and national policies across the world, and due to many objective factors such as remoteness of regions from the developed center, need to make education available for customers, who are not able to temporarily or permanently receive the educational services in a traditional school due to health issues or disabilities, students who travel with parents abroad, but willing to obtain a national or other international certificate of secondary education; students willing to take a course or receive education in a subject area not available at a close location, students of small schools with shortage of teachers in subjects, students placed in correction type institutions or unable to receive education due to military conflicts or other security crisis

affecting regular work of educational institutions in the area. Blended learning is used to support interaction with peers from other parts of the country or the world and to mentor and consult students facing challenges of both professional and personal nature. Online and blended learning experience offers variation of methods, provides access to information for the school administrators, teachers, students, their parents, and other participants of the educational discourse, gives new means to handle dialgogue and feedback between students and teachers, promotes independence and freedom for students, fosters democratization of knowledge and of education, and promotes the ideals of open education.

Despite the fact that terminology of online learning still requires systematization both in Russia and the world, the taxonomy of terms is taking its shape. Countries and educational institutions have motivation to implement blended and online projects, to use technology for educational and cultural programming, and to search for competitive edge in this sector of business in global competition. The importance of educational discourse and the changes triggered by the new technology shows the critical trend of the accelerated implementation of online and blended learning in the high school system. Efficient design and management of such learning systems is crucial to efficiency of modern high school and its discourse.

Discussion

The review of research of online education in high school raises a number of discussion points. First of all, the demand for digital learning is evident, for example, in the core subjects taught at high school; however, the methodical implementation of online learning should evolve rapidly to provide analysis for the emerging technologies and trends. With this comes the complex issue of professional development of online and blended teachers across curriculum and within each of the core subjects. The success of online subject teachers is also connected with the readiness of students to get involved in the uncommon learning process and be able to use the technologies, to team up with other peers and the mentor or facilitator of the learning climate. Here come challenges of curriculum, content, and assessment improvement, the development of subject area activities that would include rubrics for design of the digital materials for each subject. One more aspect for discussion is further motivation of high school students and graduates to continue practicing the new skills as the culture of lifelong learning. Rubrics or organizational guidelines should be provided and discourse of education should be further differentiated and described with attention to the clarification of its terminology related to online and blended learning.

Limitations of These Studies

I have looked into the discourse of education within online and blended learning primarily in the high school setting, ignoring the historical aspect of the emerging technologies, and briefly showing the global trends in the Eastern European region and globally. The description is limited to several factors which affect the online and blended learning, while the dimension of the phenomenon implies many features, models and approaches used in Russia and worldwide. This discussion should be viewed as a part of global discourse on the role of blended and online learning in high school and education in general, that contributes to understanding and interpreting vast data in the field.

Conclusions and Future Study

Our findings indicate that Eastern European and other participants of the discourse share common themes in online and blended learning. The innovations in Russia follow the basic global trends. The scope would probably change from region to region due to economic, societal, and cultural difference, though the current study provides evidence that trends and basic expectations associated with the digital types of learning are maintained, especially in terms of policy making, management, curriculum development, and student interest and potential benefit from the technological opportunities. I have mentioned a few current key points that change online and blended theory and practice; however, larger historical context could serve as a starting point for objects of further regional studies (for example, the description of trends in Eastern Europe, Russia, USA and other countries and regions of various economic status) and also of tendencies on the global level, for instance, in the form of open education, democratization of knowledge and democratization of education worldwide. Both regional studies and forefront transnational innovations should be examined from a range of perspectives as well as separately and in comparison. The discussion of the concepts should lead to active international discourse and new insights about how each of us can benefit from remarkable learning opportunities brought to students and teachers by the new technologies. Ongoing research is required to gain understanding of the regional and international discourse on online and blended learning in high school setting and beyond.

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