FEATURES OF VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

The specific software platforms are used for generating virtual classrooms (Hofmann, 2004). The virtual classrooms have their features with the help of these software platforms as mentioned below. Besides, the developments on the hardware and software technology are probably affecting them positively. This means they will have extra features with the developments of their platforms.

An important feature of the virtual classrooms is the session delivery types. Usage types of the Internet in distance education can be separated as synchronous sessions and meetings, asynchronous ones and a mix of these types. Although the virtual classrooms have a capacity to use the third type, the dominant type is synchronous meetings in these kinds of e-classrooms (Hoffman, 2004). Moore and Kearsley (2005) explain synchronous communications with their interactive constructions as same time interaction is called synchronous interaction. Hofmann (2004) highlights that synchronous refers the training that is delivered to a geographically dispersed group of participants at the same time. In the past, using synchronous communications in the Internet were very limited in any kind of aims which also covered e-learning because of technological boundaries. Considering historical order, text-based communications were the first step. The developments of the Internet-based technology have allowed e-learning workers communicating with further approaches. Audio-based connection is a choice whereas using video with audio is another choice. Virtual classrooms allow video, audio and text-based instantaneous communications between communication workers (including online educators and distance learners).

Another feature of virtual classrooms is the interfaces of them which are used by communication workers, content part producers, management team and instructors. All of these workers use specific interfaces.

For instance, content part providers use an interface characterized to place the content easily for a virtual classroom session in a software platform. They can add presentation slide parts, question parts, white board parts, motion video parts, image parts or Web page director for a lesson session. Instructors use an interface characterized for using some properties during the synchronous lesson. Turning on and off the voices of the clients, separating the content parts, allowing the distance learners to use the text-based chats for asking questions, answering or giving comments during the synchronous meetings are the examples.

Management team uses another interface in software platform which allows them to open a session, assign instructors' names to the sessions, add the distance learners to the relevant sessions, and have some reports about sessions, instructors and distance learners. Besides, distance learners have their own interfaces to join the synchronous session and interact with the instructors and the other participants. Their interfaces also have some extra characters. For instance, they have a hand raise button to warn the instructors and the others about a question, an answer, or a comment during the meeting. Although there are many interfaces which perform different duties in a platform, Virtual Eye Contacts concern with only the instructors' and the learners' interfaces during a synchronous meeting. Screen parts on a monitor during the meetings are also important features. There are at least three main screen parts in the software platform-based virtual classrooms. One of them is presentation screen. The instructors show the distance learners the content parts with this screen part on the monitor. Besides, distance learners have some interactions with the help of presentation screen parts. For instance, they can answer the content parts which have questions like multiple choices or

fill in the blank styles. There can be only one question, a test or a survey on the presentation screen which covers one content part. Second part is chat-box part.
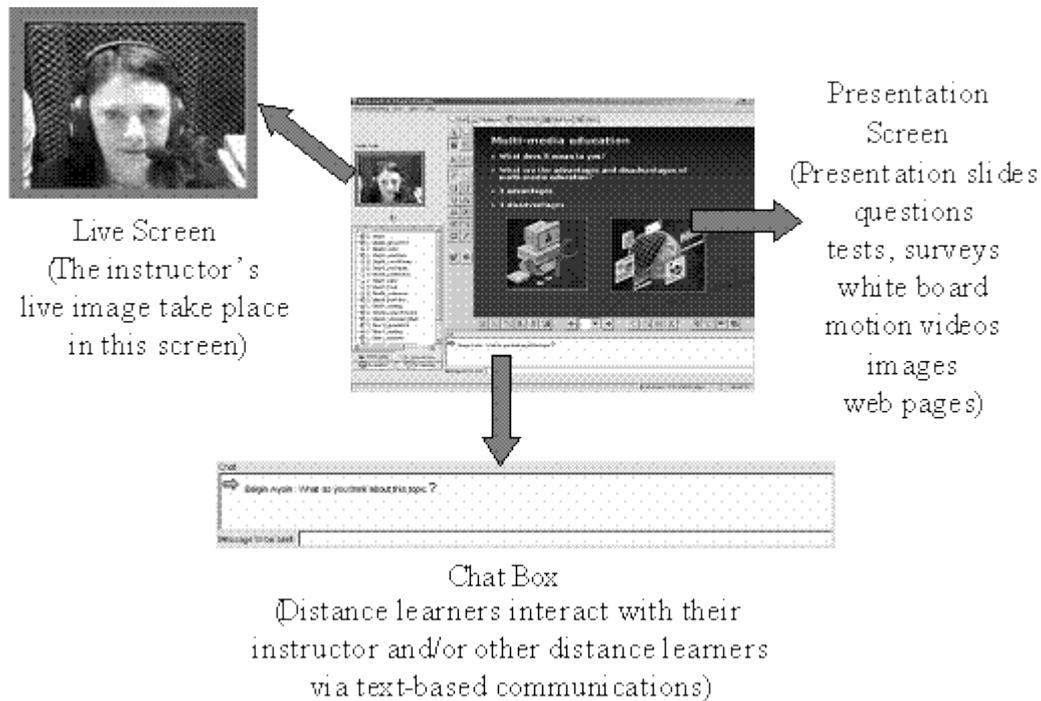

Figure: 1
An example of screen parts on a computer monitor from VisiClass [1].

Distance learners interact with other participants during a meeting as well as they communicate with the instructors. This part resembles a classical IRC (Internet Relay Chat). The last part is live screen part. The clients can see their instructors with this part on their monitors. If Internet lines have enough capacity to carry the data, the instructor may show one of the clients live motion picture on this screen part when this client is speaking. If it is not possible, the instructor and other clients only hear the voice of this client. Figure 1 shows an example of these screen parts on a monitor.

Although each screen part performs very important issues in the virtual classroom environments, live screen parts have a critical and indispensable importance to create synchronous virtual eye contacts in the virtual classroom applications.

REFERENCES

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