

## **ACTION PLAN ON COMMUNICATION PRACTICES: ROLES OF TUTORS AT EMU DISTANCE EDUCATION INSTITUTE TO OVERCOME SOCIAL BARRIERS IN CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The research involved an action plan for the improvement of the quality of the Distance Education Institute of Eastern Mediterranean University and based on EUA norms. This research is part of a work based learning process to enhance the contribution of online pedagogy and teaching process for online tutors. The research aimed to stress the importance of communication process and investigate roles of tutors in facilitating communication to overcome social barriers in constructing knowledge in online learning-teaching process. The research has an inductive nature and an action research approach was employed to change professional practices through collaborative activities. Therefore, focus group, trainings, in-depth interviews, and research diary were used as data collection techniques in this qualitative research. Content analysis was implemented to triangulate the data. The research results revealed that tutors were novices in online pedagogy and they had no prior knowledge on the importance of communication and socialization to help students construct knowledge in their learning process. The research puts forward an in-depth understanding on how to teach online courses based on Salmon's five stage model through the action research activities. The work-based project provided change and development which contributed to the professional development of the tutors in online pedagogy. As online pedagogy is one of the critical factors to reach out quality improvements, the research puts forward to filling the gap on the roles of tutors in facilitating communication to construct knowledge by practical and collaborative work of the professionals. In this respect, researcher and the participants gained reward of the professional learning and experiences from the learning cycle of the participatory action research.

**KEYWORDS:** communication, online pedagogy, roles, work based project

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As the quality refers having product or service differentiation within a competitive environment, higher education institutions need to be involved in quality improvements by service differentiation to gain competitive advantage. Higher education institutions have started to use distance education practices as an innovative approach by expanding their capacity and relations with multicultural, external environments to gain reputation. In this regard, distance education practices become popular for the universities who need to extend its capacity and standards inline with global agenda. As these practices have an impact on innovation and quality in higher education, there is intensified need to consider distance education institutes' performances by its both pedagogical and organizational aspects. In respect to worthwhile reality on the status of distance education institutes, proposing change-oriented actions for the development of working practice is crucial. Therefore, professional studies through work based projects put an emphasis for high-level practical action, resulting in significant change or development in an organization or community of practice (Lester, 2004). In this respect, bringing knowledge and practice in the workplace empowers the development of institutions. These practical action efforts help institutions to establish a culture of organizational learning. As action learning is types of work based learning styles as an educational strategy, it is used in a group setting to generate learning from human interaction arising from engagement in the solution of real-time work problems (Raelin, 2008).

The knowledge age is characterized by challenge and change. The impact of technology takes human beings in competitive arena and necessitates adapting the changes by increasing capacity to know and to do things for catching quality. Technology links people around, the globe is pulled together. Therefore human thought and actions change from the global, competitive, technological developments and shifted to the combination of flexible, lifelong learning (Roes, 2001). By these changes, education characterizes its future in the way of being interactive, real time, on-demand, learner-centered, authentic and learner constructed events (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, Zuacek, 2003). Universities have started to practice online learning and teaching in order to reach the contemporary standards of education context by the notions of quality.

In this respect, European University Association unites all educational institutions based on particular norms in order to be in harmonic picture for quality outcomes. Regarding the norms of EUA, universities has started to put forward distance education practices based on change and development. Therefore, action learning types of

work based projects are gained importance to reach out understanding on social construction of institutions based on change and development.

Quality is viewed as “transformative”, in terms of a qualitative change or form, to include cognitive transcendence, where in education is believed to be an ongoing process of transformation that includes empowerment and enhancement of the customer (Sahney, Banwet, Karunes, 2004). In this case, implementation of online learning and teaching practices is one of the crucial factors to gain value addition in educational institutions. Innovations of communication and information technology provide potential benefits on the practices of online learning and teaching in the education context.

The dynamic and interactive aspects of quality in education refer to quality education that educational cultures characterized by increased customer satisfaction through continuous improvement in which all employees and students actively participate. The continuous improvement by the dynamic and interactive aspects of quality in education relies on facilitating communication networks. Developing a culture within educational institutions is strongly related to the amount of communication and the manner in which this communication is exercised by the involvements of participants. Therefore, constructive communication climate is essential which refers to the atmosphere in an organization regarding accepted communication behaviour by focusing on information flow. Based on description of communication climate within educational institutions, it is to be expected that constructive communication climate will positively influence knowledge sharing and the construction of knowledge (Srikanthan, Dalrymple, 2004). As learner satisfaction based on their active participation is one of the proposed instruments to catch the quality, therefore it is crucial to examine satisfaction in e-learning by considering communication facilitation.

Communication plays an important role for the changes in the teaching, and learning experiences. Increasingly, changes in information technology and communication make the clear stance of distance education. It requires learning about teaching and learning in the online (Meyer, 2002). As online education relies on the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, it encompasses all technologies and supports the pursuit of life long learning (Gilbert 2001). The study of Tynjala, Hakkinen (2005) examines the importance of the developing innovative pedagogical practices by the efforts of engaging in deeper level learning and interaction. The increasing focus of creating powerful learning and communication environment by integrating collaborative learning makes the significance of the dialogue. Researches examine the challenges as the lack of personalization, the lack of collaboration, interactivity. The study enlightens to enhance both individual and organizational learning and the development of e-learning solutions by stressing the support both individual reflection and collaborative knowledge building, the integration of theoretical knowledge with participants' experience, encouragement of collaboration and knowledge exchange between different group of people and having a real dialogue (Tynjala, Hakkinen, 2005).

Online education is defined as an approach to learning and teaching that utilizes new technology to communicate and collaborate in an educational context (Piezon, Donaldson, 2005). The process of online communication enables the learners to actively construct their own perspectives which they can communicate to a small group. Learners engage in active, constructive, intentional, authentic and collaborative learning. Enabling the groups to socially construct knowledge through communicating and collaborating with others is an important element of constructivist-based online learning and teaching (Meyer, 2002).

Therefore, facilitating communication among participants in an online learning environment raises the importance of considering the capacity of the learning management to support interaction between and among learners and tutors to foster a collaborative approach to learning. In fact, the role of the tutor changes from transferring knowledge to students to being a facilitator in the students' construction of their own knowledge (Fung, 2004).

Engaging students in online communication has been the focus of many studies in the recent decade (Prammanee, 2003; Bryun, 2004; Hodgkinson, Mostert, 2005). Describing why this is so important, Harasim et al, (1995, p 29) say: “Active participation strengthens learning. Putting ideas or information into written form requires intellectual effort and generally aids comprehension and retention”. Hiltz (1994) concurs and argues that although students may derive some benefit from simply reading materials online, engaging students in online communication can only provide its full potential benefits if students actively contribute to a group learning experience. She also warns that “active participation is an objective that may be difficult to elicit from all students.”

The question of how to effectively engage students in online activities is complex and as not yet well understood (Mason, 2002). Investigating online interactions in three undergraduate courses in a university in Seoul, South Korea, Jung et al (2002, p 160) found evidence supporting the popular belief that ‘small-group activities are important in WBI [web-based instruction] to enhance learning motivation’. They found that the cohort involved in collaborative interaction ‘expressed the highest level of satisfaction with their learning process.’ The studies of Teles, Ashton, Roberts, Tzoneva (2001), Liu, Lin, Wang (2003), Sims (2003) also found that facilitating communication is a crucial success factor in order to enhance collaborative online learning that computer-supported collaborative learning allows students to become active and reflective learners. However, collaborative learning is a matter to make students comfortable with the teaching environment in online courses.

There are many studies in the literature highlighting the emerging importance of tutors in creating active and collaborative learning environments (Coppola, Hiltz, Rotter, 2002; Easton, 2003; Lim, Cheah, 2003; Sims, 2003; Pan, Sullivan, 2005). Laurillard (2002) says of computer-mediated communication CMC that ‘the pedagogical benefits of the medium rest entirely on how successfully it maintains a dialogue between tutor and students, or between students. This is determined to a great extent by the role the tutor plays’ (2002, p 148).

Indeed, this is the central point of Salmon’s (2002) book, *E-Moderating*. Laurillard (2002, p. 151) summarizes

‘With the appropriate planning and moderating, text-based computer conferencing offers and opportunity for articulation and for reflection on participants’ contributions, and helps to build a sense of a scholarly community. The success is totally dependent on a good moderator’

There are studies which emphasize the importance of student and tutor interaction in online learning (Swan, 2002; Prammanee, 2003; Bryun, 2004; Hodgkinson, Mostert, 2005). Webb, Jones, Barker and Schaik (2004) argue that e-learning dialogues between students and teachers enhance student participation and learning. Fung (2004) advocates that tutors facilitate students’ construction of their own knowledge through interaction. Although considerable researches have been devoted to understand the key roles of tutors in online learning (Teles, Ashton, Roberts, Tzoneva, 2001; Maor, 2003; Packham, Jones, Thomas, Miller, 2006), less attention has been paid to the role of tutors within online learning and teaching in facilitating communication to overcome social barriers for the enhancement of collaborative online learning.

As Salmon (2002) has framed the roles for online tutors which are understanding of the online process, technical skills, online communication and moderation skills, content expert, confidence and motivation to teach online, adopting these new roles is essential to catch quality online education regarding to facilitating communication to overcome social barriers and enhancing to construct knowledge for students (Salmon, 2002). This is, however, a field of research that has yet to produce further insights into the role of tutors in facilitating communication (between themselves and among students), overcoming social barriers in constructing knowledge.

The social interaction provides great insights for the development of distance education institutes in order to enhance quality in online learning and teaching (Srikanthan, Dalrymple, 2004; Frahm, 2006). In this respect, it is therefore important to learn continuously to become more dynamic in an adapted manner by concentrating on the consciousness and roles of tutors in facilitating communication. As EUA report put emphasis on the changes on distance education practices of Distance Education Institute by conducting research projects in the context of Eastern Mediterranean University, this work based project focuses on action learning process for enhancing teaching practice of online tutors. In this respect, it is significant to consider the roles of tutors to overcome social barriers in constructing knowledge through work-based project in order to contribute better working practice at work context.

## **2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH**

Work based research projects are the formats of preferences to establish an appropriate organizational culture. They enable process of organizational learning through change and actions. Through this way, knowledge transfer and competence development are enhanced (Railen, 2008). Educational institutions have practiced a process of organizational learning based on EUA norms through research projects. This work based research project aimed to investigate the impact of communication practices within organizational change and development in distance education institute at Eastern Mediterranean University which is the innovative and strategic unit of higher education to reach out quality and global standards. Significantly, the main aim of research project was to create an action plan for the development of Distance Education Institute based on European University Association Standards by focusing on the roles of tutors in facilitating communication to overcome social barriers in constructing knowledge.

As Distance Education Institute's practices need to be enhanced, in this project, current roles of the online tutors and changes on the roles after the training based on participatory action research were examined. Further to this, the impact of social presence and facilitation role of the tutor in the construction of knowledge was explored within the research. In this respect, the research process provided to develop working practice and at the same time academic agenda could gain insights from proposed action plan and process.

The research was significant by aiming to reach the following listed objectives;

- ✓ To provide in gaining awareness on the relevance of communication, organizational climate in Distance Education Institute and online learning and teaching in order to focus on social interaction
- ✓ To provide trainings on the roles of tutors and create a consciousness on their roles in online learning and teaching process
- ✓ To enhance online socialization of students by overcoming social barriers
- ✓ To increase professional development of tutors on how to teach online courses.
- ✓ To create an organizational culture to Distance Education Institute by focusing on communication practices between tutors and among students

### **2.1 Research focus and questions**

As Distance Education Institute puts an emphasis on change and development based on European University Association norms, this work based research project became a part of action plan for the quality improvement. In this respect, this work based project focuses on exploring the awareness of Distance Education Institute about relevancy of communication flow within organization and investigating the roles of tutors in facilitating communication in order to construct knowledge within online learning-teaching process. The following research questions were framed to reach out focus of research project depending on work based project and action research cycle.

1. To what extent, does Distance Education Institute perform relevant communication flow as an organizational climate within organization?
2. To what extent, do online tutors have awareness on their roles in online learning-teaching process?
3. To what extent, do online tutors perform their roles within online learning and teaching process?
4. How do tutors facilitate online socialization for active participation in constructing knowledge?
5. What roles do tutors play in facilitating communication in collaborating learning to overcome social barriers and thus contributing to construct the knowledge?

### **2.2 Research Context**

Eastern Mediterranean University is a state university, established in 1979. Eastern Mediterranean University offers programs fully recognized by Council of Higher Education in Turkey. The University owns unprecedented campus facilities, and creates a multicultural environment with students coming from 68 countries and highly qualified faculty members from 35 different nations. There was a rapid growth of the university that strives to be a pioneering force with all its innovative ideas. EMU initiated a series of university wide reforms aimed at developing its quality to the highest European standards in all area from research, learning, and academic programs, to management structures; at broadening and increasing its work in the service of and increasing its work in the service of local and regional development and quality. Eastern Mediterranean University prepared action plans within their institutions for its development. According to report of EUA, capacity for change of the Eastern Mediterranean University has stressed and major suggestions as actions were underlined for the institutional development of the university. The review team considered especially important for EMU to develop a university-wide research policy by defining the areas where research efforts should be concentrated. Especially EUA report stressed the importance of distance education. Conducting research projects about the developments of distance education practices becomes crucial to accomplish priority of strategic planning of the university. Therefore, this work based project was one of the research projects that is taken place in Distance Education Institute by stressing the communication and also in pedagogical implication in how to teach online courses for the benefits of tutors, institution and the university in relation to the requirements of EUA standards.

### **2.3. Limitations**

Although the research had the following limitations, the researcher successfully managed process to achieve research outcome that provide success in working practice.

- The research was conducted to Eastern Mediterranean University Distance Education Institute in 2008-2009 Academic Year.
- Being worker researcher created challenge to manage huge work loads within the research process.

- Participants had no prior knowledge and experience on online pedagogy which covers roles of tutors and online socialization.
- There were fourteen members as volunteer participants involved in research process.
- Researcher and participants involved in participatory action research as it was the first experience for the researcher and the participants.
- Within the research process, participatory action research covered series of activities that focus group, in-depth interviews, trainings, and the research diary were used as multiple data collection techniques.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The research project was involved in generating meanings, the collaboration of participants and the researcher by being familiar with context, subject, the inductive process throughout research that represented the project's nature in order to change policies in tutor roles' within online pedagogy for best working practices in distance education institute. Conducting research in educational practice which is united in the purpose of getting people to learn for institutional development and knowledge encapsulates professional practice of teachers as researchers as an instrumental activity in order to manage a situation, guide certain aims within educational institutions. As educational practices grasp a group of people to improve practices for the development and maintenance of institutional knowledge, understanding the interpretation of people which they give of what they are doing is important (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2000). Therefore, filtering the experiences of people by point out the importance of subjective interpretations for change oriented actions becomes heart of work based practices by inductive emphasis.

Qualitative research entails anti-positivist tradition by focusing on inductive process on research that emphasized subjectivity where there is personal involvement of the researcher. Qualitative research genres have become increasingly important modes of inquiry for the social sciences and applied fields such as education, social work, community development and management that is pragmatic, interpretive and ground in the lived experiences of people (Silverman, 2000).

As a qualitative research design deploy wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, it is justified to use this side of coin in this work based project in order to reflect sensitivity to the value of multi-method approach by being committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. In this respect, answering the question of "how social experience is created and given meaning emphasize the justification of using qualitative research design in this work based project as being practitioner researcher (Denzin, Lincoln, 2003). By the inductive reasoning based on qualitative research design, project aims to put an emphasis on development of online tutors in online teaching and enhance communication flow.

#### **3.2 Research Approach**

Action research approach was employed in this work based project as it allows the researcher to use as a method in setting where a problem involving people, tasks and procedures cries out for solution, or where some change of feature results in more desirable outcome. Action research is used as an evaluative tool, which can assist in self-evaluation for an individual or an institution (Johnson, 2002; Mills, 2003). It was thought that action research approach would make an environment of improving the rationality and justice of professional practices within self-reflective, self-critical context that relies on improving practice (Lomax, 1996). In addition, it is the tool to bring theory and practice for change and innovation (Cotton, Griffiths, 2007). As action research is the professional development process aiming to change professional practices through collaborative activities, intervention, group support and collection assessment (Whitehead, 2005; Williams, 2007). In this respect, action research was chosen in this work based research project to promote action learning within work based learning process of the research in order to broaden online tutors views on online pedagogy within online teaching process.

As action research approach is socially responsive, it is a popular method of professional development for teachers to improve the quality of teaching, learning process in specific work context, it was appropriate approach for this project through aiming at creating action plan for the development of Distance Education Institute based on European University Association Standards by focusing on the roles of tutors in facilitating communication to overcome social barriers. It was the relevant approach to improve institute's and colleague's practices within learning process which is finding a starting point, clarifying situation, developing action strategies, making teachers' knowledge public. As the Eastern Mediterranean University has its quality mission within its practices, considering the significance of distance education with the quality mission of university became apparent by the report of European University Association. Therefore, revamping the distance education practices of Distance Education Institute through online courses development and considering its organizational

structure became rationale stance of work based project. As the nature of this inquiry relies on organizational change and providing new actions about new approaches on the pedagogical sides of online education to online tutors and institution as a group of people, phenomenological stances of critical theory and interpretive paradigms with action research approach became essential for the research process. Conducting research to the group of people by using trainings in order to transform new knowledge to their pedagogical knowledge and to shape their behaviours through collaboration provided clear cut on research paradigm.

The focus of work based project and its actions are framed that research focus is about creating an action plan for the development of Distance Education Institute based on European University Association Standards. It was the participatory action research process to identify and change the working practices. Ledwith (2007) proposed emancipatory action research as it is participatory, critical reflective process for change. It is the experiential, practical process which is the alternative approach to investigate work context aiming at improvement (Beatty, et al., 2008; Moore, 2004; Williams, 2007).

### **3.3 Participants**

Fourteen tutors participated to the research project to establish change and development for Distance Education Institute through action learning process. Director of Tourism Hospitality and Management, five tutors from the School of Tourism Hospitality and Management, five tutors from English Preparatory School, one tutor from Economics Department, one tutor from Architecture Department, and one tutor from General Education Department became research participants. They participated to the research voluntarily that purposive sampling was used in the research project.

### **3.4 Data Collection Techniques**

Capturing the rich complexity of social situations relies on anti-positivist arguments. It mounts necessity to discover “details of the situations to understand reality or perhaps a reality working behind them (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2000). As qualitative research design focuses on interpretive, dense, rich data through human experiences within a pragmatic, constructive manner, employing multiple research techniques provides researcher to realize same phenomenon in different stand points (Denzin, Lincoln, 2003). Action research approach provides an environment of collectivity in the way of change and actions. Therefore, the action researcher takes an activist, critical and emancipatory stance to gain different views from different participants to set reflections on the action research (Marshall, Rossman, 1999; Mills, 2003). In this respect, having reliable and valid results in the research could be enhanced through multiple qualitative data collection techniques and triangulation based on inductive reasoning (Bogdan, Biklen, 1992; Denzin, Lincoln, 2003; Fraenkel, Wallen, 2000).

The data collection techniques chosen for work based project were focus groups, in-depth interview, trainings which all of these techniques were considered to be relevant to gain dense information about each action of research. Although using multiple data collection techniques provides rich and dense information about investigated research focus, each source of information from each action in the research provides to examine alternative interpretations of phenomenon by incorporating different forms of evidences from different actions.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the systematic elicitation process of incorporating the mass of collected data. Undertaking data collection and analysis in a systematic and well-planned manner, it is able to analyze data rigorously and to draw verifiable conclusions (Denzin, Lincoln, 2003; Marshall, Rossman, 1999).

Altinay, Paraskevas (2008) stated qualitative data analysis as:

“it is the conceptual interpretation of the dataset as a whole, using specific analytic strategies to convert the raw data into logical description and explanation of the phenomenon” (Altinay, Paraskevas, 2008, p.167).

As the roots of research project was stance on qualitative inquiry based on inductive reasoning based on meanings expressed through words, experiences, collected data was interpreted in inductive nature by the use of conceptualization and researcher’s categorization (Bogdan, Biklen, 1992; Denzin, Lincoln, 2003; Marshall, Rossman, 1999).

It was considered that action research improves quality of human interaction, is participatory which is methodologically eclectic by seeking to understand the process of change within system and using feedback from data in an ongoing cyclical process (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2000). Therefore collected data were

managed through triangulation that worker as researcher had a sufficient knowledge about qualitative analysis to consider data organization, theme development and interpretation (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2003). Researcher as worker has balanced efficiency consideration and design flexibility by focusing on series of action and data collection techniques in this project in order to reflect valid and reliable findings (Marshall, Rossman, 1999). This research project had series of actions that different forms of qualitative data were gathered from constructed feasible actions by multiple data collection techniques within research process. As triangulation is the classic sense of seeking convergence of results, it was considered to manage collected qualitative data to complement weaknesses of each data collection technique. In other words, worker researcher used data triangulation to better comprehend a phenomenon of being explored.

The multiple data collection techniques and triangulation were shaped with the nature of work-based project. Management and analysis of qualitative data process from multiple data collection techniques were accomplished using content analysis. As content analysis is the research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of texts in relation to the focus. Within inductive approach to a qualitative data analysis, coding, conceptualization and ordering were undertaken in this research project. Researcher as worker categorized the themes of each action in order to conceptualize and order collected data. Therefore, conceptual analysis was employed in this project in relation to themes of each action. Conceptual analysis can be seen as identifying in a text the existence and the frequency of concepts, whether in simple words or in phrases. In this type of analysis, researcher choose a concept for examination and then looks at the documents which researcher has available for analysis in order to identify the occurrence of terms related to this concept.

### **3.6 Ethics**

Qualities that make a successful qualitative researcher are revealed through sensitivity to the ethical issues. The researcher's role within research process became essential that researcher enters into the lives of participants and share participants' experiences. Therefore, stressing researcher's role by technical and interpersonal considerations enhances the degree of trust, access in the research. Having time to focus issues, considering resources are not enough to be qualitative researcher that qualitative researcher needs to be active, patient, thoughtful listener, have emphatic understanding and respect (Hubbard, Power, 1993).

In this respect, ethics in work based project is crucial that there is an intensified need to concentrate on conditions and guarantees proffered for school based research project. In this project, the principles which are remaining anonymous, treating with the strictest confidentiality, verifying statements when the research draft form, submitting final copy of final report, benefiting report to school were the initial considerations before making research into practice. Feedback was guaranteed by researcher in order to increase confidentiality and building trust between researcher and participants.

## **4. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Interpretations of Research Activities**

In this qualitative research, participatory action research was employed to promote change in working practices as an inductive process in relation to deliberate research activities. Research findings revealed that participatory action research as work-based project has significant role to propose change and development on the roles of tutors in facilitating communication to overcome social barriers in constructing knowledge during online learning process. The large amount of data was obtained from research activities that are focus group, trainings, in-depth interviews and the research diary. Gathered data was triangulated to increase the credibility of the findings.

In an inductive process, research firstly aimed to explore to what extent Distance Education Institute perform relevant communication flow as one of the element of organizational climate within organization. In this respect, focus group activity was implemented and fourteen participants as three focus groups voluntarily participated to the process. This activity revealed that tutors had no experience efficient communication flow within the institute. Focus group activity also provided to gain awareness on the importance of communication within work context.

Furthermore, in-depth interviews were conducted to online tutors to explore to what extent online tutors have awareness on their roles and perform their roles in online learning-teaching process. In other words, it was aimed to explore consciousness of tutors on online pedagogy, online socialization in online teaching-learning process. Twelve online tutors voluntarily became part of the in-depth interviews. In-depth interview findings showed that tutors are novice on how to teach online courses. In this respect, trainings were implemented to fourteen online tutors in order to extend their knowledge on online pedagogy, roles and online socialization for better learning

and construction of knowledge. Through the training feedback forms, tutors reported that training was the significant activity to internalize online pedagogy and Salmon Five Stage Model (See Appendix A). This activity also provided to involve in collegial activities through negotiation and discussion on the process thereby increased awareness on being critical friends for their professional growth. After the training, there was an action process to integrate gained knowledge and experience into practice. The research process and activities revealed that work-based project became efficient to reach out expected research outcome. The researcher diary confirmed the research outcomes that can be listed as different tutors from different departments and backgrounds gained pedagogical knowledge and reflection about online education; tutors gained consciousness on the roles through training thereby increase their personal and professional development; collaboration and negotiation were created among online tutors in order to develop their collegiality and critical friendship for organizational knowledge and development; strong communication flow was established within Distance Education Institute to create an organizational climate; process enhanced quality mission of the Eastern Mediterranean University regarding the Distance Education Institute practices based European University Association; project became beneficial to working context and it could be shared with other working practices.

#### **4.2 Self-Evaluation on Action Research**

Action research is an approach that relies on commitment, collaboration and actions for change. In this respect, work based learning and work based project can be enhanced and richness by action research practices. It is an approach that makes researcher and its context to be engaged with ongoing process and supports the development of research contexts. In this work based research project, action research was chosen to empower professional development of online tutors on online pedagogy and put emphasis on the role of communication in having organizational climate. As this work based research project supported the strategic plan of the Distance Education Institute based on EUA standards, research project became a part of action plan of the institute. Therefore, several activities were set for the work based research project that was aimed to make better working practice. While making effort to create better working practice through action research, researcher gained reflections on how to be a worker and researcher at the same time. Experience from action research practice provided work based learning through activities that learning by doing was enhanced.

During the research process, the researcher is involved series of activities (See Appendix B). Each activity made memorable experience for the researcher that both theoretical and practice knowledge on research methodology were renewed. Although researcher became a leader in action research, having different responsibilities in the research made a challenge on causing stress. Making mutual understanding also made the essential success factors in action research. Therefore, researcher made good flow of communication with the key players in the research. By the action research practice, researcher experienced various data collection techniques that all of them provided to construct knowledge. For example, in the implementation of focus group activity, managing cultural barrier of research participants enhanced the ability of researcher in crisis management, managing events and dialogues. On the other hand, empathic perceptions were used as researcher in order to understand others and interpret worlds of others. This perception was used to implement action research activities in a coherent way.

Action research provided to realize how significant to interpret “two plus two equals to five” that synergy in activities and among researcher and participants played great role to achieve research’s goal and objectives. Experiencing the action research process empowered the belief of life long learning and professional development of research. As action research practice provided advantages to researcher, it also made significant support to research participants. Research participants gained insights on how to teach online course through training and other activities that they learnt to negotiate and communicate with their colleagues and students. They enhanced their reflections for their professional developments.

Being researcher in action research provided great insights to interpret how to be worker researcher. It became a real sense of insider researcher by having responsibility to make better working practice. Researcher became self-reflective, persuasive, critical friend for colleagues, guide for students that negotiation, communication were enhanced. Further to this, researcher conducted professional study to extend professional knowledge and construct organizational knowledge to others. The abilities of setting priorities, reflection, managing time and networking were provide by being action researcher. Moreover, the researcher enhanced project and time management skills that scheduling events, being strategic were the basis of success for work based learning in this work based project.



## 5. CONCLUSION

The research aimed to investigate the role of the tutors in facilitating communication and active participation to construct knowledge in online learning and teaching process at Eastern Mediterranean University. The research regarding to research focus proposed collaborative, change oriented actions for the development of the working practice in distance education institute. In this respect, participatory action research was employed for the research project which confirmed the change and development in online pedagogy for better working practice.

The research project mainly covered investigation on the impact of communication practices as one of the critical element of the organisational climate for organizational change and development. In respect to this broader aim of the project, the research put forward to quality improvements that distance education institute is the innovative and strategic unit of university to reach out quality and global standards. In relation to that worthwhile reality, current roles of the online tutors and changes on the roles through participatory action research were examined. Additionally, the impact of social presence and facilitation role of the tutor in the construction of knowledge were explored within the study. Thereby, research provided to develop working practice and give insights to academic agenda that action plan and work based projects help higher education institutions improve their performances for the quality. In this respect, project covered to implement action plan for the development of Distance Education Institute based on European University Association Standards by focusing on the roles of tutors in facilitating communication to overcome social barriers in constructing knowledge. The research is significant with its action plan which provided success on creating awareness on the relevance of communication, organizational climate in Distance Education Institute; gaining insights on the roles of tutors in online learning and teaching process; enhancing online socialization of students by overcoming social barriers; creating an organizational culture to Distance Education Institute by focusing on communication practices between tutors and among students.

Higher education institutions have started to work on quality improvements by considering service differentiation to gain competitive advantage within competitive environment. In this respect, online education practices and the distance education institutes become innovative approach to expand service capacity and reach out multicultural and external environments to increase the reputation of the institution. Therefore, proposing change oriented actions for both pedagogical and organisational aspects of online education practices become inevitable to have better working practice and act for the quality (Sahney, Banwet, Karunes, 2004; McPherson, Nunes, 2006). This research project provided practical implementation on change and development within distance education institute regarding to online pedagogy for better working practice.

Developing a culture within work context is strongly based on the communication, the knowledge sharing and the interaction of the members. In this respect, it is significant to exercise communication and interaction within work environment to propose better working practice and contribute professional learning of each others. In other words, constructive communication flow in organisations positively influence knowledge sharing and better performance of the work (Srikanthan, Dalrymple, 2004). In this regard, this research project covered creating awareness on the importance of communication for knowledge sharing in better performance, thus increasing collegiality among institute's members. Therefore, focus group activity helped examine the awareness of the tutors as members of the institute about the role of communication and the dimensions of the organisational climate in better working practice as a base line measurement. This activity showed that tutors had no in-depth understanding and practice on communication within the work context that they gained in-depth insights on this focus through focus group activity based on negotiation and discussions. In other words, this activity provided them knowledge transfer and construction on the importance of communication within working practice.

Communication and the facilitation play also an important role in online learning and teaching process (Meyer, 2002). For deep level learning and interaction of the students in online context, considering innovative pedagogical practices is crucial (Gilbert, 2001; Tynjala, Hakkinen, 2005). In this respect, creating powerful learning and communication environment in online education through collaborative knowledge building, interactive learning and facilitation of the tutors becomes significant dialogues in academic agenda. As online education is an approach to learning and teaching that utilizes new technology to communicate and collaborate for constructing knowledge, the process of online communication need to help learners actively construct knowledge in small group through the facilitation of the tutors (Piezon, Donaldson, 2005). Leading and facilitating the groups to socially construct knowledge through communicating and collaborating with others is an critical success factor of the online pedagogy which propose a step for the quality in online learning and teaching (Meyer, 2002).

Therefore, facilitating communication among participants in an online learning environment raises the importance of considering the effective online pedagogy regarding to roles of the tutors in online socialisation and learning process (Fung, 2004). There are many studies in the literature highlighting the emerging importance of tutors in creating active and collaborative learning environments to help students construct knowledge by considering online socialisation (Coppola, Hiltz, Rotter, 2002; Salmon, 2002, Easton, 2003; Maor, 2003; Lim, Cheah, 2003; Pan, Sullivan, 2005). Additionally, Salmon (2002) has framed the roles for online tutors in online process as technical skills, online communication and moderation skills, content expert, confidence and motivation to teach online which these are essential to facilitate communication to overcome social barriers in enhancing construction of knowledge for students. Also, Salmon (2002) propose five stage model in online pedagogy that are access and motivation; online socialisation; information exchange; knowledge construction; development in order to create active and productive learning and teaching environment. Furthermore, Berge (1999), Maor (2003), Bryun (2004) provided a theoretical framework to the research by putting the emphasis on online communication, tutoring and social presence through defining the role of the tutors by simple metaphor as four hats including pedagogical, social, managerial and technical roles. This is, however, this research that has yet to produce further insights into the role of tutors in facilitating communication (between themselves and among students), overcoming social barriers in constructing knowledge by practical work.

In this research project, in-depth interviews were conducted to the tutors in order to explore the consciousness of the tutors on online pedagogy and their roles. This showed that tutors had no preliminary knowledge and sufficient experience on online pedagogy, roles. Furthermore, trainings on online pedagogy and the practice of the roles contributed tutors to internalize their roles and pedagogy. After the training, action process provided to practice transferred knowledge from the training. Researcher diary and the process showed the outcome of the research that tutors gained insights on online pedagogy, practiced their roles as managerial, technical, pedagogical and social. In addition, they promoted online socialisation and facilitation to the students which resulted in satisfaction and better learning of the students. Significantly, tutors demonstrated the practice of the Salmon's five stage model that contributed best practice on online pedagogy.

Regarding to participatory action research process, this research project resulted in success for change and development on online pedagogy. At the end of the project, different tutors from different departments and backgrounds gained pedagogical knowledge and reflection about online education, have consciousness on the roles of online tutors. In addition, collaboration and negotiation created among online tutors that help develop their collegiality and critical friendship for organizational knowledge and development. In a broader sense, the quality mission of the Eastern Mediterranean University regarding the Distance Education Institute practices based European University Association was reached out.

In summary, the research project revealed following conclusions:

- Communication in institute: Tutors gained in-depth insights on the importance of communication and knowledge sharing which this established collegial activities among them. In addition, tutors intensively interpreted the dimensions of the organisational climate in research process that contributed them to increase their professional learning on constructive communication and knowledge sharing for organisational change and development.
- The roles of tutor: Tutors internalized and practiced their managerial, pedagogical, social and technical roles in online learning and teaching process. They learned how to teach online courses by having deeper understanding on online pedagogy.
- Online socialisation: Tutors acted to promote online socialisation for students through group works and reflective activities to prevent social barriers in constructing knowledge.
- Facilitation: Tutors reflected facilitator role which promoted active participation to the course and resulted in constructing knowledge and satisfaction of the students.

Participatory action research is the stance of the research project that researcher and the tutors work together to promote better working practice. In this action learning process, research covered critical activities which help achieve success on the research. In this regard, participatory action research was implemented that bring brilliant achievements on how to teach online course and how to internalize online pedagogy based on practical work (See Appendix B).

### **5.1 Some Analytical Generalizations**

In relation to conclusions of the research project and insights from the participatory action, some analytical generalizations can be listed as following:

- Participatory action research contributes to change and development in working practice regarding to the roles of tutors in facilitating communication and active participation to construct knowledge. At the same time, it provides collegiality between participants which contributes professional development.
- The online education practices are the innovation strategy of the higher education institutions for quality improvements.
- Communication has great role to construct organisational climate within working practice.
- Online pedagogy is the critical success factor of the online education to reach out quality.
- Tutors need to attend regular trainings, seminars and conferences on online pedagogy to extend their knowledge and experiences.
- Tutors need to pay attention to social barrier which may create challenge in constructing knowledge.
- There are four hats metaphor that tutors need to perform pedagogical, managerial, social and technical roles in a harmony to help students construct knowledge in online courses.
- In online learning and teaching process, access and motivation; online socialization; information exchange; knowledge construction; development are the essential steps.
- In online learning and teaching process, students need to be encouraged for active participation by tutors as facilitators.
- Tutors need to develop learning community and encourage group discussions for constructing knowledge and online socialization.
- In facilitation, tutors need to have appropriate questioning, listening and feedback skills, the ability to provide direction and support to learners, the ability to manage online discussion, ability to build online teams, a capacity for relationship building and ability to motivate students.
- Preparing learning support agreement with students contributes to build trust between tutor and the students.
- Asking learning community expectations increase the quality of the online course.
- Thinking development process of the students through discussions, negotiations and group works is relevant for the assessment in online courses.

## **6. MAJOR IMPLICATIONS**

The research aimed to investigate the roles of online tutors in facilitating communication and active participation to construct knowledge within online teaching and learning process. In relation to that focus, it is significant by putting emphasis on change oriented actions by participatory action research for better working practice. As the online pedagogy is one of the critical factors to reach out quality improvements within online practices, the research puts forward to filling the gap on the roles of tutors in facilitating communication and active participation to construct knowledge by practical and collaborative work of the professionals. In this respect, it is the best practical work that researcher and the participants gained reward of the professional learning and experiences from the learning cycle of the participatory action research that resulted in success. In addition, research opens an academic debate on implementing practical work as participatory action research for online pedagogy and practices quality improvements which best practice models could be shared with other higher education institutions.

### **6.1 Implications for Practice**

- Research put forward to that participatory action research is a significant research approach to propose change and development for better working practice.
- The research project helped participants gain in-depth insights on pedagogical and organizational developments within online education for quality.
- The research process provided participants to gain consciousness on dimensions of organizational climate.
- Research participants gained in-depth insights on online pedagogy.
- Research participants extended their knowledge and experience on how to teach online courses by having awareness on the roles and online socialization.
- Research participants gained reward from action learning as professional learning and experiences.

### **6.2 Implications for Further Researches**

- For further studies, social barriers and online socialization could be investigated as research focus within specific context.
- Comparative case study could be implemented in further research to do comparison on the roles of tutors from different institutes.
- In addition, mixed approach could be used to complement disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative research design for the validity and reliability of the research.

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## APPENDICES

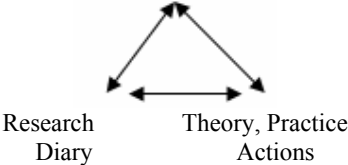
### APPENDIX A

#### Salmon's Five Stage Model

STAGE	STUDENT ACTIVITIES	TUTOR ACTIVITIES
Stage 1 Access and motivation	Setting up system and accessing	Welcome and encouragement Guidance on where to find technical support
Stage 2 On-line socialization	Sending and receiving messages	Introductions Ice-breakers Ground rules Netiquette
Stage 3 Information exchange	Carrying out activities Reporting and discussing findings	Facilitate structured activities Assign roles and responsibilities Support use of learning materials Encourage discussions Summarize findings and/or outcomes
Stage 4 Knowledge construction	Conferencing Course-related discussions Critical thinking applied to subject material Making connections between models and work-based learning experiences	Facilitate open activities Facilitate the process Asking questions Encourage reflection. Tutor is very active at this stage.
Stage 5 Development.	Use of conferencing in a strategic way Integration of CMC into other forms of learning Reflection on learning processes Students become critical of the medium	Support Respond only when required Encourage reflection Tutor is less active and hands over to the students

Salmon (2002)

**APPENDIX B**

Step of Actions in Work based Project	Action Research Cycle	Components of Action Research
<p>Action 1. Institute Members Technique: Group interviewing (Focus Groups) Focus: Providing consciousness on the role of communication Data Analysis: Content Analysis</p>	<p>1. Identifying an area of focus, asking Questions</p> <p>6. To what extend, does Distance Education Institute perform relevant communication flow as an organizational climate within organization?</p> <p>7. To what extend, do online tutors have awareness on their roles in online learning-teaching process?</p> <p>8. To what extend, do online tutors perform their roles within online learning and teaching process?</p> <p>9. How do tutors facilitate online socialization for active participation in constructing knowledge?</p> <p>10. What roles do tutors play in facilitating communication in collaborating learning to overcome social barriers and thus contributing to construct the knowledge?</p>	<p>Planning</p> <p>Discussing, negotiating, exploring opportunities, assessing possibilities, examining constraints in project-General Idea</p>
<p>Action 2. Online Tutors Technique: 60 minutes in-depth interview Focus: Providing consciousness on the changing roles of tutors Data Analysis: Content Analysis</p>	<p>2. Collecting data</p> <p>Focus groups, In-depth interview, Self-report-documents</p>	<p>Acting</p> <p>Step of Actions in Work based Project</p>
<p>Action 3. Action Process Training Focus Groups Online Tutors</p>	<p>3. Analyzing and interpreting data</p> <p>Content Analysis</p>	<p>Observing</p> <p>Monitoring actions Replanning, understanding and learning</p>
<p>Action 4. Online Tutors Technique: Focus Group Focus: Gathering data on the process Data Analysis: Content Analysis Action 5. Research Diary</p>	<p>4. Reflecting</p> <p>Research Diary</p>	<p>Reflecting</p> <p>Evaluation of Step of Actions</p>
	<p>5. Action Planning, plan action steps Trainings</p>	
<p>Action 6. Triangulation</p> <p>Data Collection Techniques</p> 	<p>6. Positive actions for change</p> <p>Trainings</p>	
<p>Action 7. Outcomes of Actions</p>	<p>Project Report</p>	