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ONLINE MARATHON – TECHNOLOGY OF MODERN EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a study of the possibilities of online marathon as a modern educational technology. The essential characteristics of online marathons have been studied, including: thematic focus, time constraints, providing answers on the completion of tasks, the presence of a community of participants. Possible grounds for the classification of existing marathons are indicated (topic, duration, availability, features of interaction between participants, venue, availability of payment / reward, etc.). As part of the study, a content analysis of online marathons presented on the market of educational services was carried out, including a study of the topic, duration, typology of tasks and other parameters of online marathons. The motives for participating in online marathons (the ability to communicate with like-minded people, deepening and specialization, organizing interesting leisure activities), characteristics that attract participants (uniqueness of content, formation of a community, the opportunity to receive an award, systematic work, etc.), as well as the reasons for leaving the marathon (difficulties in planning time, unforeseen circumstances, inconsistency of the content with the description of the marathon, etc.). are considered. Among the possible risks and difficulties in organizing online marathons, the following were noted: different levels of preparedness of participants, the formation of dependence on social networks and gadgets, entailing health problems, a false sense of expertise after passing the marathon, insufficient qualifications of the organizers (reliance on their practical experience).

1. Introduction

Recently, distance and digital education has become an integral part of educational systems. Elements of distance learning and the use of online technologies are widely used both in the formal academic environment and in the process of mutual learning in informal network communities, home schooling. It becomes obvious that the refusal to use information educational tools is not possible, or, at least, reduces the effectiveness of education in modern society.

In this situation, the issues of the methodological and methodical order come to the fore, allowing the search or development of effective methods, forms and technologies of online learning and expanding the possibilities of non-formal and informal education. One of the tools of modern education can be the online marathon technology, which is actively used in various areas of the educational space.

2. Problem Statement

Considering the online marathon as an educational technology requires, first of all, determining its place in the palette of educational forms and directions. In this case, the specified technology can be attributed to the areas of distance and digital learning, as well as non-formal education.

Studying the modern experience of the spread of distance education, including in the context of a pandemic, researchers often positively assess its effectiveness. In modern research, distance and online education is considered as the most flexible and democratic form of education (Ogannisyan et al., 2020), allowing "to overcome the temporal and spatial restrictions" (Hussin, 2020). According to Zhang et al. (2019) only open, flexible and distance learning allows us to meet the educational needs of the modern user.

According to Sklyarenko (2013), distance learning is turning from a tool of mass standardized education into an individualized way of acquiring knowledge, competencies and skills. Klyucharev (2020) writes that distance learning personifies the educational process and most fully implements the principle of lifelong education. The use of interactive technologies and information and communication tools changes the quality of the educational environment, updating the principles of cooperation, openness and personal focus (Astashova et al., 2020).

Speaking about online marathon as a technology of non-formal education, it is important to note that in modern realities, this type of education is becoming more and more popular. According to a study by Kicherova et al. (2021), more than 80% of respondents are involved in various non-formal education programs. The most popular are programs aimed at developing personal skills, less often – skills related to professional activities (Kicherova et al., 2021).

Researchers are actively studying the issue of validating the results of non-formal education (Talbot, 2015) and recognizing the competencies acquired in the course of non-formal education (Kicherova et al., 2020), which, according to scientists, can have a great impact on the development of the socio-economic well-being of the country.

Avramenko (2019) classifies the online marathon as a microlearning technology (organizing the educational process in small portions on an ongoing basis) and non-formal learning, which involves going beyond traditional educational institutions and practices.

However, in the variety of methods, forms and technologies used in the modern educational process, it is important to understand what essential characteristics of online marathons are important for the implementation of this technology, which allows not to lose the positive effects of distance learning and non-formal education, and what can be a risk when organizing online -marathon.

This study analyzes the existing online marathons, as well as research data to unleash the pedagogical potential of the online training marathon.

3. Research Questions

- What are the key characteristics of the online marathon as an educational technology?

- What are the pedagogical possibilities of online marathons?

- What are the risks and possible difficulties of using online marathons in solving educational problems?

- What are the parameters that improve the efficiency of using online marathons in the educational process?

4. Purpose of the Study

The goal is to study the essential characteristics of the online marathon as a modern educational technology, to identify the opportunities and risks of using online marathons in the organization of the educational process, to determine the parameters that contribute to the effectiveness of the use of online marathons to solve educational problems.

5. Research Methods

- To determine the essential characteristics and parameters of the classification of online marathons, the pedagogical literature on the research topic was studied, and a content analysis of more than 50 online marathons presented on the Internet was carried out.

- In order to identify parameters that contribute to the effectiveness of the use of online marathons, an online survey was conducted of 60 respondents who had experience of participating in online marathons.

- To determine the risks and opportunities for using the online marathon in educational technology, we analyzed the survey data, and also used the method of retrospective observation and analysis of the author's experience of two poetic online marathons.

- Analysis and synthesis were used to summarize the empirical data obtained.

6. Findings

6.1. Essential characteristics of the online marathon as an educational technology

There is currently no universally accepted definition of an online marathon. It should be noted that the term "Internet marathon" is also found in the literature and Internet sources, but the frequency of its use is much lower. In this regard, we have chosen a more common name for the technology under study.

Nemchikova and Nemchikova (2019) define an online marathon as a project conducted by one / a couple of people / organization, which consists of a number of tasks, the completion of which by the participants is the key to moving the marathon further (p. 302).

According to Pavlova (2016), a marathon is online learning in the form of a series of tests for participants using the technology of creative mindset based on conceptual mixing (p.113). The author focuses on such characteristics of an online marathon as load intensity, relevance of information, uniqueness of content and practice orientation.

Yeropova (2019) defines an Internet marathon as "a way of cognition based on dialogue forms of interaction between participants in the educational process; learning immersed in communication, during which students develop skills of joint activity" (p. 40).

As Pesha et al. (2020) write, the online marathon is based "on the metered transfer of knowledge through the use of information and communication technologies, a high level of self-organization of the participants for the practical training of skills and the development of skills within the framework of homework" (p. 78).

According to Avramenko (2019), "the idea of the marathon is the simultaneous fulfillment by the participants of the tasks set by the leader within the specified time frame and discussion of difficulties, ways to overcome them, as well as individual successes" (p. 54). The author notes such characteristics of marathons as structural conciseness, multimedia, interactivity, autonomy, accessibility, flexibility, and authenticity.

Based on a study of existing research (Avramenko, 2019; Bulkina & Emanuel, 2019; Pavlova, 2016; Pesha et al., 2020), as well as an analysis of online marathons presented on the network, the following characteristics have been identified, which can be considered key ones:

- completing tasks in strictly limited terms (real time mode), which contributes to the intensity and increase in the dynamics of the online marathon (hence the name of the technology);
- thematic focus (marathon tasks are united by a designated topic)
- a single platform for posting educational materials and completing assignments;
- submission of reports on the performance of tasks (often in a specific, designated form);
- mobility and activity of participants when completing assignments;
- community of marathon participants, communication in a group, interaction when completing tasks;
- support and feedback from the organizer (s) of the marathon;
- possible prizes and rewards.

Pavlova (2016) notes the importance of competitiveness and the introduction of elements of gamification in organizing online marathons, and Pesha et al. (2020) – the high role of internal motivation of participants.

Based on the listed characteristics and the studied definitions, we can conclude that an online marathon is an online learning technology that involves a group of participants performing a series of tasks, united by a specific topic, which involves the presentation of the results of work on the Internet in a limited time frame.

Among the goals of organizing online marathons, Bulkina and Emanuel (2019) highlight the formation and deepening of knowledge, the development of selected competencies, and the formation of behavior. According to the authors, the universal effects of the online marathon as an educational technology can be considered the development of skills in working with information, planning and time management, and systems thinking.

Research materials, as well as content analysis of materials presented on the Internet, allows us to classify modern educational online marathons on the following grounds:

1. *Thematic focus.* In this classification, first of all, it is necessary to separate online marathons of formal and non-formal education. In the first case, an online marathon can be devoted to a specific academic discipline or thematic block, as well as to areas of extracurricular activities: patriotic education, life safety, environmental culture, intellectual development, family education, linguistics (Bulkina & Emanuel, 2019), family education, and family values (Dronova, 2016). Non-formal education marathons cover a wider range of topics. Conventionally, the following thematic blocks can be distinguished:

- academic knowledge and skills (when using the marathon in formal education);
- professional skills (animation, marketing, programming, etc.);
- hobbies and creativity (reading, versification, photography, decor, etc.);
- self-development and self-knowledge;
- relationship (with a partner, with children / parents);
- a healthy lifestyle (nutrition, physical activity, weight loss, etc.);
- successful life (eco-habits, effective cleaning, makeup skills, cooking, etc.).

2. *Availability.* The online marathon can be built as an open or closed educational process. In the first case, the participant can join the work of the group at the beginning, middle or even the final part of the marathon. In this case, he is given the opportunity to complete the "missed tasks" immediately and catch up with the group. In a closed marathon after the start, new participants are not accepted into the community. These marathons are often held in a closed site.

3. *Duration.* In this regard, marathons can be conditionally divided into express marathons (3–7 days), online marathons of medium duration (from 1 to several weeks) and long online marathons (more than a month). The duration of the marathon should not, in our opinion, exceed 3–4 months. Otherwise, the dynamics of task performance is lost (one of the key characteristics of a marathon).

4. *Interaction of participants.* An important factor in the implementation of online marathons is the formation of a community of participants. At the same time, their interaction can be either direct (in the marathon chat, on the forum site, in the comments to educational materials, when performing tasks,

during the mutual assessment of tasks), and indirect and optional (when viewing, commenting on the reports of other participants – at will). However, the awareness of the very fact of the existence of other marathon participants activates the mechanisms of social facilitation, a sense of belonging and a sense of teamwork. As part of the online marathon, peer learning is being activated.

5. *Site for the marathon.* To organize an online marathon, it is possible to create your own platform (thematic site); use of distance learning sites; use of applications ("Google-class"); use of social networks (Vkontakte, Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, etc.). It is also possible to use several channels (for example, chatting in a social network and posting educational materials on a thematic site or on the Youtube site).

6. *Availability of payment.* Marathons can be paid and free.

7. *Availability of reward for the best participants.* Often, the issue of payment for participation is also associated with the availability of gifts and prizes for the participants who showed the greatest activity or the quality of the assignments. This factor provides additional motivation for participation.

By choosing the type and topic of the online marathon in accordance with the pedagogical goals, as well as observing all the requirements for the presented technology, the teacher can fully realize its pedagogical potential. At the same time, it is important to understand what the pedagogical resources of the online marathon are based on and what the difficulties of using this technology are.

6.2. Opportunities and risks of using online marathons as an educational technology

As part of this study, a survey was conducted among individuals participating in online marathons. The survey was completed by 60 respondents from 18 to 50 years old. Among the respondents participating in online marathons, 68% noted that they had completed 2 or more marathons, confirming the attractiveness of this form of training for users. More than 55% of respondents participated in paid marathons, which allows us to conclude that there is an increasing willingness to pay to get topical and relevant knowledge.

The topics chosen by the marathon participants were as diverse as possible: proper nutrition, photography skills, SMM, vocal improvisation, emotional intelligence, etc. Almost half of the marathons did not have a prize fund.

Various channels of information were used to organize the marathons: social networks, Google disk for storing materials, email for notifications, the organizers' own website, Zoom and Discord platforms, etc.

The reasons for participating in online marathons were also different: curiosity / challenge, participation in a company with friends, a current topic, availability of free time (quarantine), deep immersion in the topic, a community with which results can be achieved, ease of learning (from home), etc.

Analyzing their progress in the marathon, 68% said that they managed to complete the marathon. Among the respondents who failed to complete the marathon, the following reasons for the failure were noted: difficulties in self-organization and planning, content mismatch with the description of the marathon, insufficient knowledge / skills level to complete the marathon.

Among the characteristics that motivated the participation and completion of the marathon, the respondents noted the following: useful content (80%), interesting presentation of information (66%), systematic work (43%), communication in the community (35%), a sense of drive from the intensity of work (33%), etc.

Based on the results of research and analysis of theoretical works, the following possibilities of educational online marathons can be identified:

- provision of relevant, practice-oriented information;
- dynamic presentation of information through channels convenient for participants, at a convenient time for them, the ability to study from anywhere in the world;
- activation of the educational potential of social networks;
- community formation, activation of mutual learning mechanisms;
- the possibility of using in educational and extracurricular activities;
- development of skills of self-organization;
- deepening and specialization of knowledge.

"The teacher ceases to be a mentor or a coach who imposes his own positions, but gets the role of a teacher-leader, laying a route for an individual learning path for each participant. The distance between teacher and student is reduced" (Avramenko, 2019, p. 54).

At the same time, one cannot but identify the possible risks and difficulties in organizing educational online marathons. First of all, it is the quality and reliability of the information provided. When organizing a marathon, it is extremely important to rely not only on one's own practical experience, but also on existing theoretical data and modern research. It is important that the interesting presentation of the material does not prevail over the content, creating a beautiful picture, behind which there is emptiness. Associated with this problem it may also be the false belief that completing a marathon provides confidence or expertise.

When organizing a marathon, difficulties may arise due to the varying degrees of preparedness of users. Advanced participants can get bored, while beginners can get left behind. This issue can be resolved thanks to the primary diagnosis of the knowledge and skills of the participants. Avramenko (2019) draws attention to the fact that when analyzing and assessing the effectiveness of online marathons, it is important to analyze not only the results of individual participants, but also the dynamics of the group.

In addition, participation in online marathons contributes to an increase in the time of using gadgets and computers, which can negatively affect the health of the participant and requires volitional efforts to ensure a balance of intellectual and physical activity.

6.3. Increasing the effectiveness of the use of online marathons in the educational process

Currently, there is not enough empirical research to identify universal recommendations for improving the efficiency of using online marathons in the educational process. However, let us designate the proposals presented by individual authors.

According to Dronova (2016), the effectiveness of the online marathon is ensured by the implementation of the following principles: continuity (regularity of messages and tasks), variability (tasks and materials), openness / voluntariness, dialogue and polylogue (support for interactive interaction between participants and the coordinator – comments, discussions, voting), complexity.

Avramenko (2019) refers to the principles of organizing online marathons as systematic and consistent, visibility (through the use of audio, media files), independence and activity of participants, the strength of the assimilation of results (due to the ability to return to educational materials and repeat what was passed at their own pace), as well as the principles of authenticity, actualization and dynamism characteristic of microlearning.

In the course of their own empirical research, the respondents were asked to designate the most comfortable duration of the marathon (the prevailing option is 7–14 days – more than 60%), as well as the intensity of tasks (52% – one task for 2–3 days).

Among the characteristics contributing to the passage of the marathon to the end, the participants noted:

- training on an equal footing, informal communication with a teacher;
- convenience of obtaining information, mobility, availability of training;
- gamification, challenge, competition (prizes for participants);
- intensification of the educational process;
- useful content, uniqueness of content; learning by doing;
- communication with like-minded people, community; support of organizers;
- participation fee (for some of the respondents).

Based on the conducted research, we have identified recommendations for ensuring or increasing the efficiency of using online marathons to solve educational problems:

- a detailed description of the tasks and the content of the marathon, which will ensure that the expectations of the participants coincide with the reality of the educational process;
- availability of a theoretical basis for the proposed tasks;
- intensity of assignments;
- the ability to complete tasks at a convenient time (provision of recordings of webinars);
- constant communication with the organizers of the marathon, notifications about new tasks, providing feedback on the completion of tasks, additional motivation when the dynamics of the performance of tasks in the online marathon decreases;
- providing opportunities for interaction, mutual assessment or communication with other participants (however, this interaction is optional);
- providing the opportunity to refer to the materials of the marathon after completion, providing sources and materials for further self-education on the topic of the marathon;
- availability of an award for the most active participants of the marathon (a symbolic award for all participants – certificates of completion, prizes, etc.).

In a number of marathons, it is necessary to provide reports on the completion of tasks in the public domain (for example, on the participant's personal page). This can be both a challenging and a demotivating feature of a marathon. However, such a requirement disciplines the participants and also attracts those around him to the topic of the marathon.

7. Conclusion

Online marathon is becoming an increasingly popular online learning technology in academic and non-formal education. The subject matter of existing marathons is constantly expanding, the methods of interaction between marathon participants and the presentation of information are being improved. This study made it possible to identify the key characteristics of the educational technology of the online marathon: independently completing thematic tasks within a limited time frame, providing reports and receiving feedback from participants and organizers of the marathon.

A well-thought-out theoretical base and a detailed description of the content of the marathon, systematic support of participants, and the opportunity to receive an award contribute to an increase in the effectiveness of an online marathon. Of course, further fundamental experimental research is required to identify the pedagogical potential and difficulties in organizing an online marathon, but the data obtained allow us to conclude that such a training format will gain popularity among both organizers and participants.

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