

Teaching and Learning on the Edge of a Pandemic: Providing Continuity and Re-building an Online Learning Community

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Abstract

The present analysis investigates the effects of an unprecedented situation which occurred during the pandemic of COVID-19 outbreak, when the entire education system had to transfer in the online medium- a form of extreme blended learning adapted to unique circumstances. The present study is meant to offer an insight into a "bleak" period from which lessons are to be learnt and systems to be adjusted. We strongly believe that difficulties should be embraced and seen as perspectives of growth. The article is based on a survey containing a number of 14 questions concerning the use of virtual instruments and learning platforms, the challenges encountered by students during this online period and the impact of these. The survey was carried out on a number of 128 students enrolled in the 2nd year at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, at "Ovidius" University of Constanta.

Key words: asynchronous teaching, synchronous teaching, online teaching, blended learning

J.E.L. classification: Z13

1. Introduction

The beginning of spring 2019 marked the starting point of a period in which countries across Europe were forced to put on hold public life and numerous other activities in an unprecedented joined effort to stop the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. In the context of this endeavor, Romania issued a nationwide lockdown on March 25. The traditional education system had to adapt to this new challenge- a new reality in which the need of technology, online resources and staff training had to be decidedly and alertly compensated. While medical staff lead the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, another less visible fight, but with even longer-term consequences had to be fought behind the screens by teaching staff and students alike. With few exceptions, in which online or blended learning was practiced, for the rest, this proved to be a tough lesson to be taught and learned. Online learning was adopted as a unique general practice, in order to provide a sort of emergency mode of education functioning from primary to post graduate level.

The online system although long practiced and theorized in various studies, provided an opportunity to analyze, test and discover the efficiency of different techniques and structures, as well as their educational, psychological, social and economic impact on a medium- and long- term. Delocalized long distance learning, coupled with (at least a hope) of being able to perform several tasks at the same time (and time saving), as well as enjoying the security and comfort of personal residences, seemed to threaten for a while the institutional structure of a school (which requires the existence of a physical space and the gathering of a group of individuals in this space). With its limitations, since for certain academic fields online teaching is considered unsuitable or even impossible and its disadvantages, among which the most prominent would be the impossibility to enable students to develop "soft skills", the computer assisted learning system was adopted and adapted to suit, as much as possible, the academic needs. The influence of external socio- political factors marked the migration from the traditional education system to the online teaching and learning.

We should also note the fact that the learning community was formed in a traditional schooling environment and later sheltered in an online environment. This influences the behavior and learning patterns as well as the preferences of students. These unique (and we hope unrepeatable) conditions offered the possibility to experience, test, analyze and validate possible options under such circumstances, it developed into "a testing ground for the brave new digital classroom" (Blake, 2013, p. 132).

2. Theoretical background

Bearing in mind the premise that technology in our times should not be an option, but a vital part of academic life, it is now time to introduce the theoretical framework around which our investigation is built. Instructors can organize class sessions remotely in two ways: synchronous and asynchronous. Asynchronous teaching enables instructors to upload materials that can be accessed at any time, while learners can, within a certain time frame, access the courses and contribute whenever they decide. In synchronous class sessions instructors and students gather and interact in "real-time".

Among the advantages of asynchronous teaching it is worth mentioning its high level of accessibility by providing a flexible time framework, as well as the possibility of being easily transformed into an archive of materials to be used and retrieved when necessary, it allows learners to interact with the content in a very personal manner. This temporal flexibility provides an increased ability to explore, reflect and process information, while there is no temporal pressure of an immediate answer. Social presence can become "a distraction which forces individuals to narrow their attention on the task at hand" (Robert et al., 2005, p. 10).

This "controlled" form of freedom facilitated by asynchronous teaching practice has its limits, for example students become somehow isolated in their own time limits and consequently dissatisfied without the traditional social interaction they usually develop with their peers and instructors in other systems. Students are tempted to "put off" a task, because it can be done "later".

Translated in an economy of communication efficiency versus time, the facts look like that: it is estimated that an exchange of 600 words face-to-face requires about 6 minutes, while an email exchange for the same number of words takes about 1 hour (Knock, 2005, p. 122).

In terms of personal engagement, sharing the same temporal space increases the feeling of belonging to a real community in synchronous forms of teaching. At the same time issues connected to misunderstanding or miscommunication can be easily clarified. Instructors can adjust the presentation according to students' reactions. A complex web of muscles allows our facial expressions- over 6000 communicative expressions can be generated (Bates et al., 2001, p. 23).

The main concern of the teaching staff during, and long after, the migration phase of the traditional learning community, was to re-build and provide adequate support for the newly created e-learning communities. Technology functions within a social framework, it is not a self-determining agent (Selber, 2004, p. 8), and therefore, communication played a vital role, whether it was related to content transfer, planning of tasks or offering social support (Haythornthwaite C., 2002, p. 162).

3. Research methodology

My endeavor is focused on a micro-level analysis of the social and psychological factors which dominated this period, I consider this might provide useful information, as well as lead to a certain direction in further developments of the methods and of the curricula used. At the end of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, I conducted a survey on a number of 128 students enrolled in the 2nd year at the Faculty of Economic Sciences, at "Ovidius" University of Constanța. The groups of students are approximately the same size and their age is around 20 years.

The survey contained 14 questions concerning the use of the virtual instruments and platforms, the challenges they encountered as learners, the quality of explanations being offered, the possibility to establish social connections and the feeling of continuity during the online courses, the risks students foresee for their academic education associated to this online period and the improvements they would bring to the online system. The survey contained both closed-ended

questions and opened-ended questions. Students were allowed to skip uncomfortable questions in the survey. The average time to answer the survey was 6:38 minutes.

4. Findings

Considering the fact that in synchronous communication monitoring the interlocutor's reaction to the message is less equivocal, quicker and easier, while the advantage of asynchronous forms of education come from the fact that the receiver can bring an increased cognitive output, whereas in the case of synchronous learning it comes with an increased personal involvement, the challenge was to find a well-balanced and accessible form of e-learning, in order to keep the students motivated and at the same time not to transform the social individuals into e-learners.

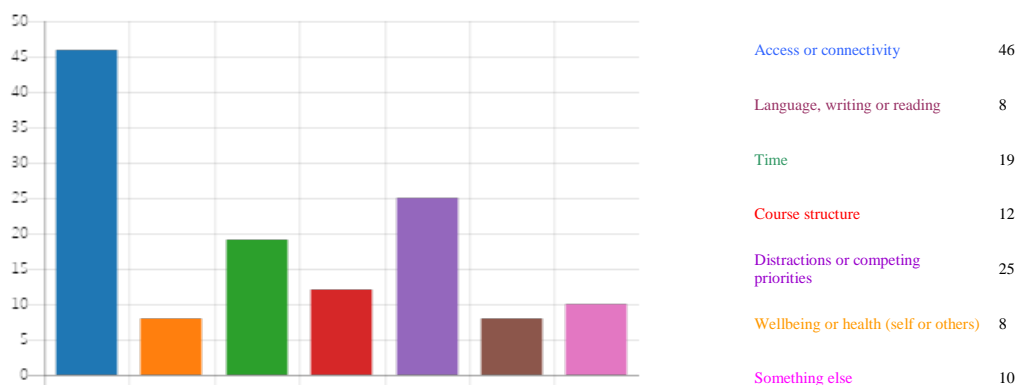
The winning combination for my Business Communication classes was real-time video conference, combined with asynchronous activities, which I evaluated weekly. I chose this blended structure because I considered it was an ideal combination meant to re-create, at least in part, the traditional classroom context. It was a combination I opted for after two first weeks in which I used an asynchronous form with posted materials and comments and tasks to be completed within a strict time limit. The feeling that "I was losing my battle" and a certain accumulated tension convinced me to adopt other alternatives in which to share the same temporal space with my students.

On the long term I noticed that real time conferencing is more limiting in terms of students' interaction with their peers or the professor, moreover the combination of text and video image is quite exhausting for the nervous system. Allowing students to adjust their equipments by opening the vide-conference even 15 minutes earlier proved to be a wise decision, I avoided manifesting my online presence during this time, this allowed my students to socialize and exchange information freely. The atmosphere improved considerably, students' involvement and motivation increased, part of the class atmosphere was restored.

A particular aspect which should not be ignored is the social and psychological impact of the circumstances which determined this re-building process, as all of a sudden students found themselves isolated from peers, friends, families, deprived from real forms of communication, kept in front of the screen for hours and hours. In order to offer a deeper perspective in a more meaningful manner, I included below the most significant parts of the questionnaire and the corresponding answers.

In terms of the challenges encountered during the online period, 46 out of 128 respondents chose "access or connectivity", 25 opted for "distractions or competing priorities", while 19 students considered time to be a difficulty. Other challenges, as you can see in the table below, included course structure, distractions or competing priorities, wellbeing or health etc.

Figure no. 1. Challenges encountered during the online period



Source: Generated on Microsoft forms, based on students' responses

What has been bothering you during this period of online courses?

The respondents felt the need to share different worries in their free answers, ranging from technical difficulties concerning the internet connection, to the amount of materials being taught and the difficulty to understand the concepts, as well as about the “disruption and the lack of clarity regarding future developments”.

In which circumstance were you able to focus more on learning?

A number of 100 respondents chose real-life circumstances whereas only 28 opted for online courses. When asked about the quality of explanations offered to them, an overwhelming majority of 107 respondents opted for real-life courses, while 20 respondents chose online courses. In terms of their preferences, 101 consider real-life courses a better alternative, compared to 26 who chose online courses.

Figure no. 2. Circumstances in which students were able to focus more on learning



Source: Generated on Microsoft forms, based on students' responses

Was there a re-building of the real-life learning community in the online medium?

In this case, 74 respondents chose “Yes”, while 53 said “No”. The numbers are comparable to the answers to the question concerning a feeling of social connection during online teaching, in this case 76 said “Yes”, while 51 opted for “No”.

When asked about the risks for their academic education associated to this online learning period, 89 students provided free answers. Their worries concerned the grading system being used, not being able to understand or to absorb the necessary amount of information provided, they also noticed a certain lack of intrinsic motivation to continue studying or they worried about being absorbed by other distractions which seemed more accessible than ever, such as video games.

In what way can online teaching and learning be improved?

This open-ended question provided interesting and practical suggestions, such as: “The obligation to turn on the video camera”, or the suggestion for professors not to ignore the “moments of a lesson, the most important part” being “the winning of the good will, which is skipped by most professors”, or that practice makes perfect so more practice would help us discover the flaws and improve the systems. It was reassuring to notice from the answers provided that an overwhelming number of students appreciate and understand the efforts of the teaching staff to compensate this unusual circumstance.

5. Conclusions

The digital classroom is less than we would expect it to be at a first glance- a universal remedy for all our problems or a space in which real-life teaching can be recreated. Limitations and difficulties either connected to the human component or to the technical part can reside. A wise and well structured use of the online resources can facilitate interaction, collaboration and learning autonomy, allowing at the same time to better grasp the meaning.

Apart from being a period dominated by fears and physical distancing, the COVID-19 pandemic offers us an opportunity to seriously reconsider our educational systems and practices and to test possible changes. In a fast forward manner we are being forced to adopt a more blended teaching model which empowers students to share opinions and information on the one hand and to become more responsible for their learning, on the other hand. At the same time, professors have to