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STUDENT OPINIONS ON THE ONLINE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS DURING THE SARS-COV-2 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Human society is constantly evolving, sometimes with faster steps, other times facing various problems and crises. In this context, there is a need for a radical change in the education system, to make students more aware, more flexible, and better prepared for tomorrow's life with the unknown. The changes must include more consistent involvement of parents, but also community members, as active partners of teachers, in the education of the younger generation. Students should be taught to learn, thus becoming professors' partners, open to learning primarily for themselves, effectively capitalizing on multiples intelligence, which later become important acquisitions for the progress of society. Adults and young people alike are in a position to discover new ways of social connection and to continue their professional, social, cultural, leisure and activities. In this sense, the use of new technologies took on an unimaginable magnitude a few months ago. All these elements certainly have an important area of evolution and social development, but the fact that everything happened suddenly "overnight" put society in front of a challenge with a magnitude that we have never encountered before.

Keywords: On-line, teaching, students, opinion, SARS-CoV-2

1. Introduction

The response of European countries in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was almost unanimous in closing educational institution to stop the spread of the disease, with teaching-learning-assesment continuing in most cases exclusively online. The situation in the spring of 2020, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, has exposed the existing problems in society, and will certainly contribute to a radical change in people's mentality (Cerbușca, 2020)

In the context of school closures due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the Romanian Ministry of Education issued on 21.04.2020 the order no. 4135 / 21.04.202020. The measures provided in this order are instituted more than a month after the establishment of the state of emergency and are already the subject of numerous debates on the fairness, fairness, or possibility/realism of their implementation (Florian & Toc, 2020). Adapting education to the online environment is a challenge not only for teachers, but also for students, whether they are young people enrolled in undergraduate studies or adults, involved in continuing education programs (Stan, 2014). This new learning situation has led to a paradigm shift, thus contributing not only to self-education but also gave space for one's own thinking (Stănescu, 2017, Stănescu, 2012).

The more sensory performances are included, the more effectively and sustainably the learning is done. Thus, for more efficient learning it is important to apply the neuropsychological principle of multiple networking which is based on multiple means of representing information and expressing knowledge but also on multiple means of engagement in learning (Stănescu, 2017).

The element that led to major pressure on the education system and society was the exclusive use of distance media for education. "Any distance education project is, of course, a pedagogical approach that involves resizing content and communication strategy," says Prof. Constantin Cucoș, director of the Department for Teacher Training of the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, analysing the school from home phenomenon, seen as a new challenge for students and an opportunity for professors. Based on the preliminary research results, he stated that "Our professors are ready to face this challenge and compensate for the inconvenience through didactic creativity, meticulous design, personalized training" (Botnariuc et al., 2020, p.10).

2. Problem Statement

In these circumstances, a series of logistical, pedagogical, technical, and content impediments in the field of many school subjects inevitably appeared. All these can be seen either as barriers or as challenges that professors, students and education decision-makers try to face in the fast pace in which they appear, manifesting, in varying proportions, availability, interest, pedagogical mastery, inventiveness (Stan, 2018). We considered it important to determine what students think about the main advantages and disadvantages that students perceive in relation with online teaching.

3. Research Questions

We considered it necessary to find out what are the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching that students perceive and what is their opinion on how these distance learning activities take place. For

this purpose, we invited the students of the Faculty of Letters within the Babes-Bolyai University Cluj Napoca, enrolled in the teaching training program, to complete a questionnaire composed of two open-ended questions?

I.   Mention at least 5 benefits brought to you by online learning, in the order of the importance, noting with 1 the most important one.

II. Mention at least 5 difficulties brought to you by online learning, in order of their importance, noting with 1 the most important one

4.   Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to investigate in detail the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching, as evidenced by student responses, to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of academic activity online and to analyse the situation. These aspects could lead in the future to the improvement of the problematic aspects and could allow us to keep those actions that have proven to be beneficial.

5.   Research Methods

Responses were collected anonymously, via Google Forms, to ensure data confidentiality. Thus, 134 students from the teacher training program, distributed as shown in Table 1 answered the two questions, mentioning their personal opinion on how they perceive the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching in the university environment.

Table 1.   Distribution of students by gender and year of study

Gender	First year students	Second year students	Third year students
Feminine	59	42	18
Masculine	5	6	4

6.   Findings

6.1.   Results concerning research question no. 1

We present below the qualitative analysis of the results obtained after processing the answers to the first question. Thus, analysing all the answers provided by the student (the sample of subjects being made up of students from years 1, 2, and 3), we found that there are recurring several reasons why they consider that the online teaching environment has certain benefits. The main advantages mentioned repeatedly were:

*   **Possibility to attend courses from anywhere.** Given that most of the respondent students are not permanent residents of Cluj-Napoca (76%), such an advantage cannot be denied. The presence in the middle of the family, the renunciation of the rent payment during the return home period, as well as the state of comfort, relaxation, and financial economy are related elements mentioned by the respondents. Regarding the access to courses in more varied and relaxed contexts than in the classic version, through learning platforms, we consider important to validate the well-being that the student feels as a result of his return to the family and, we consider that it can lead to increasing

the student's willingness to participate in courses and their motivation for learning. The less rigid learning environment, the renunciation of known academic customs, can also have beneficial effects, leading to the presence of a more relaxed attitude in academic activity, both in terms of the student and the professor.

- **The possibility to re-listen to the information transmitted by professors and recorded during the course** is another advantage perceived by respondents, who consider that the deepening of knowledge can be made easier since the courses on the platform are recorded and each student enrolled in the platform has unlimited access to it. The repetition of an audio-video fragment is considered by students as the second most important advantage of online teaching, being mentioned with increased frequency in the answers provided. By repeating, the ideas become clearer, the differentiation between the elements becomes clearer and the loss of information through oblivion is greatly slowed down. The Latin saying *repetitio mater studiorum est* must be understood in the sense that repetition should not be used at random, but to increase memory productivity. To reach the desired result, an optimal number of repetitions is necessary, supported, in the case of online teaching, by the materials recorded during the courses, knowing that each repetition must lead to the establishment of new, meaningful connections between the various elements of the stored material.

- **It is a good opportunity to accommodate students with new learning situations**, in didactic contexts different from the classical ones. The use of online teaching-learning platforms, depending on the choice of professors or school, although requires students, on the one hand, more accommodation time and better IT devices (or at least larger screens than a smartphone), also brings the possibility to experience learning and teaching in the most diverse ways possible. Given that respondents are preparing to become future teachers, it is an additional chance for them to experience online learning, as a student, and then to perceive it, in the future, as a teacher.

- There is **no downtime in relation to academic activity**, such as travel from home to faculty and vice versa, free hours between classes, travel to libraries that are in locations other than classrooms, and thus efficiency is higher and the extra time is more consistent. The students' answers indicate that this time is used either as free time, for relaxation, time for solving homework, preparing for the exam, or recovering lost courses.

- The students consider that **materials provided by professors are easier to access**, both in terms of content, and in terms of accessibility and the materials are more essential. There are students who claim that the materials projected in the classroom were less visible, compared to how they now can access it on the screen of a device. In fact, in relation to this advantage, it is also mentioned that in the situation of online teaching, the professors' materials are more comprehensive, trying to supplement the explanations offered in the face-to-face meetings. Suplimentary supporting materials are made, to compensate for the lack of direct interaction between professors and students, materials found, as stated above, in the portfolio of the student, to be reread and analysed in detail at the most convenient time.

- **Multitasking or the ability to do several things at the same time** is another advantage mentioned. The students state the fact that they can participate as an audience of the course, having

the possibility to close their camera, contributes to the reduction of the state of physical and mental fatigue installed quite quickly when they spend 6-8 hours on a chair. In the case of online teaching, they can carry out several actions at the same time, without losing focus on the online teaching activity that takes place and having the opportunity to move in different spaces, without losing the course they attend.

- **Communication with professors is much easier and the feedback provided or the response to the email requesting clarification is much faster.** The respondents state that the educational environment built in the online space brings new openings regarding the ways of communication with professors, especially in terms of the speed of the response received. Statements such *as the professors were very kind and gave us directions whenever we needed* or, *if I have a question and send an email I receive a much faster response to the situation in which I would schedule an audience with that professor or I would send him an email, in classical teaching conditions*, or *the professors now respond much faster to emails and help us now with any kind of explanation, which does not happen before* are evidence of changes in the professor-student relationship, perceived as a result of moving activities in the virtual environment.

- **Improving technological skills** has been repeatedly mentioned by students as an additional benefit, which completes the picture of the positive aspects mentioned above. Computer-assisted learning (IAC) refers to the use of electronic multimedia and technology-assisted strategies to support learning. Computer-assisted learning can take two forms: technology for students when they use specific programs or applications to solve problems and to perform school tasks, and technology for professors when they use materials such as interactive whiteboards and screens or teaching platforms /learning. Sometimes considered the most important technological innovation of modern pedagogy, IAC contributes to the efficiency of training and is a result of the gradual introduction of computerization in education. Also, this type of training can allow the development of a personalized learning and assessment process depending on the level and potential of each student. In cases where it is implemented correctly, the IAC provides widespread interactivity, providing the student with permanent feedback that is immediately displayed instantly on the screen.

6.2. Results concerning research question no. 2

The answers to the second question were aimed to collect information on the disadvantages of online teaching, as claimed by the students of the Faculty of Letters of Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, participants in professor training program, as respondents. Corroborating the obtained data, we have identified the major difficulties that they encounter in the online environment and we will present them below, in the qualitative analysis.

- **Insufficiency or lack of human face-to-face interaction**, not mediated by technical means is the major problem identified in most of students' responses. The changes that took place determined us to approach the teaching process from another perspective by completely replacing the face-to-face interactions with students and colleagues with the meetings mediated by the applications in the virtual environment. The transition from the instructive-educational process carried out within

the educational group and based on direct psychological relationships, of the face-to-face type, to the development of teaching activities, exclusively through modern means of online communication, can lead to perceptual changes of the paradigm. educational, the impossibility of physical interaction making it difficult to learn in the peer group.

- **The teaching has a much lower interactive character**, tending to turn into a monologue, which prevents the active participation of the student in the course and can prevent the understanding of the contents taught. We believe that in order to increase the interactivity of courses, we need to take action to adapt learning methods to the digital age. Decreased interactivity may be associated with the installation of the lack of interest, decreased interest and motivation for learning, which subsequently significantly affects students' academic performance. The educational reality of the days we live in shows us that changes in the educational environment must necessarily bring about changes in the educational paradigm, at the level of teaching methods and techniques, assesment and interaction with other educational actors.

- **The increase in the number of academic tasks**, to compensate for the cancellation of practical activities, of the face-to-face type, is frequently mentioned as a negative consequence of the activity carried out exclusively online. In this context, overcrowding may occur, which students perceive as a complementary consequence, along with intellectual fatigue, decreased interest in the discipline, difficulties in forming a team and collaborating in order to solve a task in a group or too much effort to solve all this tasks on time. Too many activities makes the student tired, stressed, with less time available for other activities, family time, or personal development activities that complte his or her education.

- **Frequently encountered technical difficulties** can be a problem that is part of the shortcomings felt by students regarding participation in online courses. The multitude of platforms used, at the choice of professors, represent factors of additional stress that students perceive unconditionally. The lack of a stable internet signal, the instability of the platforms used, their inability to cope with the large number of students accessing it at the same time, are all recorded by respondents as possible difficulties in the proper conduct of teaching activities in the virtual environment.

- **Fatigue installed as a result of spending time in front of the computer** is also mentioned in the category of disruptive factors installed in online teaching Students say that although the connection with the faculty through online courses is very important, they feel they have become this period exactly what they do not want: computer addicts, and this translates into a phenomenon of mental and mental fatigue. The multitude of practices and applications has generated fatigue and confusion among both professors and students. If in some universities it was decided to use certain applications, in others each professor used different platforms. You need not only resources, but also assistance in organizing your work with their help. The students stated that they felt the need for coordination and work according to an organized plan, but also for assistance.

- **Lack of feedback in** the formula they know can lead to confusion and dissatisfaction. This is because feedback aims to improve learning among learners. Feedback reorients the actions of the professor, or of the student in the direction of achieving specific goals of the learning process by aligning the effort and the activity with a certain expected result. It can be offered regarding the

results of the activity, the process itself, the way the student manages his learning or self-regulates in the learning activities, having a strong effect on learning. However, feedback can have a very wide range of effects, and some studies show that there are situations when, when not given properly, feedback produces negative effects. For this reason, it is important to have a good understanding of both the benefits and potential limitations of online feedback as an integral part of pandemic-specific teaching and learning process.

7.   Conclusion

Although there are pros and cons of such a modern system of distance learning, it is certain that in this period, in the context of the global pandemic, online education seems the only responsible possibility, and the digitalization of education outlines a need that so strongly we feel it for the first time now. Aspects such as teaching and evaluation have undergone consistent changes, precisely due to the different way in which the teaching activities were carried out this year (Jucan, 2020). Considering the answers that students offer us regarding the positive and negative aspects of online learning is a necessity in achieving a relevant digitization of the educational system and a first step towards adapting to current times.

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