ADVANTAGES AND SHORTCOMINGS OF ONLINE TRAINING IN THE UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract. *The online school has shown more than ever that the paradigm of the educational act is, to a large extent, like that of a hundred years ago, that, unfortunately, many students do not want or can not get out of the scheme of teaching - memorization - rendering because it probably seems more convenient this way. Young people need behaviors (of the adults around them) to encourage them, to teach them responsibility, to help them overcome their fear of failure, to increase their self-esteem. It would be wrong to consider that the online school, imposed by the pandemic situation, was / is "a total failure". Perhaps it is, in fact, the first important step, in our country, towards a fundamental and necessary change in the way the school has been conceived so far. As electronic communication becomes more common and as students juggle study, work, and family life, many universities offer their students more flexible learning opportunities. Face-to-face courses are now being replaced by online ones. However, there is little research comparing students' experience and learning in these two ways. The purpose of the study presented in this article was to present the preferences of students, their academic performance in the context of the transition from the classic face-to-face teaching system to the online one.* The study was conducted based on a social experiment at the Faculty of Theology - Social Work, University of Bucharest, on a sample of 20 students

Keywords: *online training; students; advantages; disadvantages; university*

1. Introduction

With the changing lifestyle of students and rapidly developing technology, universities are offering more and more "flexible" learning environments. "As technology advances, the provision of online e-learning experiences has expanded rapidly in the higher education sector for over a decade" (Imel, 2002: 3). Today, online learning is part of the experience of students around the world, in a substantial proportion (e.g., Ituma, 2011: 57-68; Otter et al., 2013: 27–35; Tucker et al., 2013: 470-484).

The development of online teaching has made it possible to encourage students to take responsibility for their own knowledge acquisition (Ituma, 2011: 57-68). In a traditional, teacher-centered teaching model, it conveys knowledge to students, with reduced contributions from those students (Harden and Crosby, 2000: 334-347). However, "the shift to less traditional courses coincided with a greater emphasis on more student-centered learning, with the lecturer facilitating or managing student learning rather than simply transmitting information" (Balluerka et al., 2008: 222). Due to the more self-directed learning that is supposed to take place in online environments, "online learning can have the potential to produce more in-depth discussions and improve the quality of learning, as well as the practical benefits of encouraging greater student participation and to increase

the profitability of education compared to traditional face-to-face learning"(Smith and Hardaker, 2000: 16).

Numerous studies have focused on the efficiency, content, and delivery method that teachers have developed (e.g., Rossman, 1999: 1-8; Twigg, 2003: 28-38; O'Neill et al., 2004): 313-323), while the perceptions and experiences of the students themselves have been largely neglected (Alexander, 2001: 240-248; Holley and Oliver, 2010: 693-700; Ituma, 2011: 57-68). Some teachers seem to perceive web-based platforms simply as an alternative way of presenting traditional content, while others may look for more innovative ways to use such platforms to improve student engagement and thus their outcomes. learning (Holley and Oliver, 2010; 693-700; Ituma, 2011: 57-68).

The global trend towards providing online learning has led to many online-only courses, one example being the universities in Australia. However, students' experience in online courses is different from that of traditional face-to-face classes, and patterns of involvement seem to differ between the two (Robinson and Hullinger, 2008: 101-109). For example, Otter et al. (2013: 27-35) found that students in online-only classes felt more disconnected from their peers and teachers, more forced to direct themselves in their studies. Students may also feel discouraged by the technological expectations of online study, especially if they start without sufficient technical support and knowledge (Zhang and Perris, 2004: 247-264; Holley and Oliver, 2010: 693-700).

For example, Davies and Graff (2005: 657-663) found that students who interacted and participated more in online discussions did not perform significantly better academically than students who were less involved in that discussion. In contrast, other researchers have shown that "students performed much better when their online course material was accessible in an interactive, navigable format than through a series of web pages" (Evans et al., 2004: 43). Thus, there is mixed evidence as to the extent to which some online activities could help or hinder student outcomes compared to more traditional face-to-face courses.

There are various reasons to expect students to prefer at least some aspects of online learning over traditional courses. Previous researchers have suggested that, in contrast to the faster, real-time pace of face-to-face courses, the extra time available for online activities could allow students to think about more critical and reflective course material, leading to a deeper understanding. of course content (e.g., Ramsden, 1992; Robinson and Hullinger, 2008: 101-109). Others have suggested that the less confrontational or personal nature of online might encourage more shy students to engage more or feel less pressure than in face-to-face interactions (Warschauer, 1997: 470-481; Hobbs, 2002: 60-65).

Although social connection can be derived online (Grieve et al., 2013: 605-609), most students believe that face-to-face contact is essential for building a sense of community (Conole et al., 2008: 511-524). Even when the courses are only partially online, students may feel that online discussions diminish this sense of community with colleagues and their teacher. Moreover, on a practical level, "students need to exercise more motivation to complete online activities, compared to those in the classroom, where the role of motivator is taken over by the teacher" (Upton, 2006: 22).

2. Case study: the impact and efficiency of online teaching in the university environment

Therefore, the current research was designed (in May 2021) to examine the performance and perceptions, both in the face-to-face experience and in the online learning experience, of students who were enrolled in 2018 at the Faculty of Theology - Social Assistance, University of Bucharest. In the first two years, they conducted face-to-face courses, and in the second year, due to the pandemic, they conducted online courses. We have adopted a two-pronged approach, in order to provide an integrated picture of both objective and subjective results. To this end, we compared both the academic performance of students and their qualitative comments on their learning experience, between offline and online, as described below.

To control for individual differences and thus increase the statistical power of the study, we tested the same students in both offline and online tasks, rather than having separate groups for each modality. Along with the empirical rigor of this concept in the groups, I wanted to maintain the authenticity of the measures and thus chose to incorporate the tasks into the students' actual learning experience, rather than into an artificial study. I also wanted to make sure that, instead of just observing students' behavior (for example, counting their discussion contributions), I assessed both the objective and subjective measures of their learning.

The participants were 20 third year students, 13 girls and 7 boys. Their age ranged from 22 to 54 years. The students who took part in the study agreed that their data should be used for research purposes.

2.1. Research strategy:

The participants had two topics for discussion: one referred to the stages of children's cognitive development, and the second to the stages of children's drawing development. They were divided into 2 groups.

In week 1 there was a one-hour face-to-face course (in an informal, outdoor setting), group 1 students discussed their recent experience of observing a child performing multiple tasks. Some students who failed to directly observe those tasks were required to watch several online videos with children who were given the same tasks. Students in group 2 were offered a series of self-portraits drawn by children aged 2 to 16 and a copy of the developmental stages of Lowenfeld's drawing (1939).

During the course, the teacher initiated the discussion with questions addressed to students in group 1 in which he asked them to discuss in what cognitive stage they thought the observed child was. In group 2, the teacher asked the students to decide what stage of development each self-portrait seems to represent. For both groups, the discussions took place first in small groups and then with the whole class, for a period of one hour, with the questions offered by the teacher, but the discussion structured by the students. At the end of the class, both groups were then given a half-hour written test on the topic they had just studied.

In week 2, both groups of participants participated in the course online. Group 1 went through the series of self-portraits for children, presented in PDF format, and received an online copy of the developmental stages of Lowenfeld's drawing (1939). Group 2 was asked to think about the tasks performed by the children, which they had to observe

Both groups were asked to consider the same questions that were considered in the face-to-face course (described above), for drawing development (group 1) and for cognitive development (group 2).

At the end of this experiment, we asked the students to express their preference for the face-to-face or online course and they were asked to identify something that was good for online activities and something that was good for classroom activities.

2.2.Results of the study:

-students showed a general preference for studying subjects face to face

- the number of students who preferred to complete the tasks in the face-to-face course was significantly higher than the number of students who preferred to do them online

-I noticed if there is any association between the academic performance of the participants and their preference for face-to-face learning vs. online. First we considered the grades of the participants in the assessment test applied by the teacher (for the online course and for the face-to-face one). The correlations were not significant either for the subject done online or for the subject done in class. This suggests that the students simply did not prefer one way because they felt that they performed better in that task and did not perform better in the way they already preferred. We then analyzed the final grade of the participants throughout this academic unit and analyzed the correlation between this grade and their average preference for face-to-face and online tasks. The correlation was not significant, suggesting that there is no consistent relationship between overall academic performance and preference for online or classroom learning. Finally, we concluded that there was no significant correlation between the participant's age and the preference for the modality, nor between the age and the grades obtained.

2.3.Qualitative aspects

We also asked participants to write down something they liked most about completing face-to-face activities and something they liked most about completing them online. Participants provided their own answers, which we then subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 77-101). We chose a thematic analysis rather than a more specific approach, such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). We followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006: 77-101) to identify topics as they emerged from an analysis of student responses:

• More involvement: This was the topic with the most responses, with students noticing that they felt more involved when the activities were completed in the social environment of a face-to-face interaction, rather than online. Most commented that the face-to-face discussion really allows them to think more deeply and reject other people's ideas. Online, they felt that their answers needed to be

more formal and accurate, while in face-to-face discussions they felt they could fight more ideas from colleagues before reaching a conclusion.

• Immediate feedback: Participants appreciated that each comment they made in direct interaction, immediately supported an associated comment from a colleague or a clarification from the teacher in real time, rather than waiting for hours for a response to their particular online comment.

• Don't want to read comments: Some students noticed that they did not want to read their colleagues' comments online, although they were happy to listen and interact with their colleagues in real life.

• Easier to examine paper documents: others noticed that it was easier to analyze the material in class because it could spread the pages in front of them on a table, rather than scroll on the screen.

• Comfort: the most common theme was a practical one; greater convenience of being able to complete online activities during their time, in any location.

• Wider contributions: the online discussion allowed contributions from a wider range of people than a face-to-face discussion, in which more timid students sometimes sat quietly in the presence of their more confident colleagues.

• More detailed answers: Students also noticed that the online encouraged more detailed answers than face-to-face discussions, because class time restrictions do not allow each individual to complete their task thoroughly.

• More time to think: Some students noticed that giving answers online gave them more time to consider their answers than to speak spontaneously in the face-to-face course.

• Less judgment: Eventually, some students felt less judged by the teacher and colleagues when the answers could be written than spoken.

3. Case study conclusions:
Study participants preferred, on average, to complete face-to-face activities rather than online. Their responses indicated that, although they were happy to complete individual written exercises online (especially if they had a reasonable level of difficulty), students much preferred to participate in face-to-face discussions. The thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the qualitative comments of the participants showed that the students liked the greatest feeling of involvement offered by the activities face to face vs. online activities. However, it must be borne in mind that the benefits of online do not diminish the existing benefits of traditional classroom learning.

Both ways of education have multiple aspects, and research that focuses on one aspect or a combination of aspects could reach very different conclusions from research that focuses on another aspect or a combination of aspects. Our participants enjoyed conducting online activities, but preferred to participate in class discussions in person.

One limitation of my study is that the size of my sample was modest. The participants were all advanced level students, who were initially enrolled in a face-to-face study program, but who later became accustomed to online learning in a self-directed way. Thus, additional work with a wider range of participants would help to establish the generalization of these findings. It should also be noted that we

asked students about only a few aspects of online learning versus face-to-face. This specificity is both a force and a limitation of current research. Although it offers good experimental control and strong ecological validity, the concentrated nature of these tasks and their context means that it is important not to over-generalize our findings. Future research should aim to extend questions about online learning to a wider range of disciplines, using online activities in a wider range of ways to build a broader picture of students' online and classroom preferences and performance. Expanding research into a number of dimensions will become increasingly important to understand how blended learning can progress along with the technology behind these paradigms.

By directly comparing the same students' performance and perceptions of face-to-face learning with online learning, this study confirmed that, in this group, at least, online activities led to similar levels of academic achievement as face-to-face activities. It seems that, although students appreciate the flexibility of choosing the time and place to carry out activities, they also appreciate the greater commitment offered by face-to-face discussions, rather than face-to-screen. Instead of being seen simply as an alternative way of providing academic content, the benefits of online technology should be tailored not only to provide greater flexibility, but to inspire student engagement and success in and beyond.

4. Advantages and disadvantages of online education
4.1.Advantages of online education

During the pandemic, the courses in the university environment took place in the online environment, which made it possible to spend a long time in the company of the family and obviously contributed to the emotional connection with parents, family members. the faculty headquarters also meant a time gained in favor of carrying out other activities. Unlike the faster, real-time pace of face-to-face courses, the extra time available for online activities allowed students to deepen more critical and reflective course material.

Another important aspect of online courses was the reduction of costs. Learning traditionally involves costs for courses, accommodation, meals, travel, consumables, books, etc.

Both teachers and students had to adapt as they went to the use of technology (acquiring technical skills such as downloading materials, interactive tests and practical exercises), and teachers worked to improve the teaching strategy, a strategy that migrated from passive to active methods.

Students were encouraged to take responsibility for their own acquisition of knowledge, as online courses allowed for a convenience in completing the activities.

Online training also facilitated deeper discussions that led to improved learning quality and allowed a wider participation of students from different years of study, from different groups-simultaneously. Also, not being able to practice in different institutions, the online environment facilitated the presence of a large number of specialists from the country and abroad. Thus we can say that a certain balance has been created between online and traditional education.

The less confrontational or personal nature of online has encouraged more shy students to engage more or feel less pressure than in face-to-face interactions. A decrease in the pressure exerted by the group of colleagues was created. Also, the

student had to exercise more motivation to complete the online activities, compared to those in class, where the role of motivator is taken over by the teacher.

This created a self-directed learning opportunity offered by online activities and, with the increased use of e-learning in mainstream education, online components have become part of the university experience for more and more students.

4.2 Deficiencies of online education

Online teaching methods and their efficiency were reflected in the results of students in the winter and summer sessions. The situation created changed the general perception of education. Attempts to defraud exams have visibly increased, with teachers facing new challenges and having to identify effective ways to stop them.

The young generation reported negatively to the norms and rules, the lack of direct contact led to the destruction of the feeling of community, of belonging to the group. it involves not only study, but also relationships, connection with others). The relationship with colleagues, group outings, discussions, debates and teamwork disappeared.

Studies have shown that the young generation has developed feelings of sadness, anxiety and even depression, from mild to advanced. The disaster was completed by the lack of physical exercise, outdoor spending time and messy daily routine (without a well-established schedule, even chaotic), long exposure to screens (source: https://geografilia.blogspot.com/2020 /05/impudul-de-caz-impactul-si-eficienta.html).

The chaotic atmosphere was amplified by some teachers who failed to master the methods of online teaching, the lack of immediate feedback from colleagues and teachers, the lack of discussions about the content of the course with colleagues. In the family, parents or supporters experienced financial difficulties (caused by job loss, illness, isolation at home for a long time). The mood of adults (parents, grandparents, teachers) in the lives of these young people at the beginning of the road was precarious, marked of trauma, this is because no one was prepared to face the difficulties of the pandemic.

5. Conclusion

Regarding the deficiencies of online education, we have identified several solutions, which are directed on two levels, as follows:

a. Proposals to remedy the problems that appeared during the pandemic:
- the elaboration of a detailed study at national level would be necessary to identify and quantify the educational effects of isolation at home and the use of online platforms;
- mediatizing the problems encountered in online teaching and the transparency of the solutions identified by the decision makers;
- teachers could structure the class hours so that students can benefit from both the flexibility of online learning and the experience involved in face-to-face discussions;

- competition of training sessions for students and teachers in order to adapt to online teaching;
- permanent dialogue between teachers-parents-students in order to efficiently communicate any deficiencies and identify the best solutions to solve them;
- conducting additional training sessions for students with poor assessment results;
- creation of support groups (composed of parents, teachers, psychologists, classmates) in the online environment to provide support to students identified with problems adapting to the new requirements;
- creating a welcoming environment through the use of routines (these help to stimulate and strengthen the feeling of belonging to the group);
- online content developers need to consider a number of issues in designing the best way to deliver this content to students. Simply providing materials (Evans et al., 2004: 49-61) or an online discussion forum (Swan, 2002: 23-49) does not automatically aid learning (Davies and Graff, 2005: 657-663), and making more contributions to an online discussion does not necessarily lead to better academic performance;
- active involvement of psychologists in the case of students who have developed anxiety, depression, etc.

b.Proposals for improving the online teaching-learning-assessment process:
- communication with students to be efficient, with a supportive role;
- the way of presenting the course should be as adapted as possible to the level of the student group;
- providing all the necessary documents for the course;
- respecting the principles of active learning. We ask and encourage students to participate dynamically in the course, creating a friendly atmosphere from the first meeting;
- course sequences can be designed consisting of several sessions of 30 to 40 minutes. An adult's attention span is between 20 and 40 minutes for face-to-face lessons, so we don't try to get students' attention for two or three hours. Consideration can be given to conducting a series of 30-40 minute sessions with different activities;
- we make sure that students participate in courses. We ask and encourage them to speak. Another very useful strategy during discussions and sharing is to ask the student to name the next speaker;
- Diversification of activities. Like face-to-face lessons, activities must be modified to keep students' attention. They design interactive activities that they can do with their computers. Choose activities that are motivating and engaging;
- collaboration is encouraged. Some video conferencing platforms offer the possibility to divide the group into subgroups for group work. You can do the work in a small group due to this functionality. Collaborative writing platforms such as Padlet, Google Docs / Presentations, etc. can also be used;
- a plan B is considered in case of an unstable connection. Activities are prepared that students can do independently, in case of technical problems;

- creating a supportive environment, welcoming during classes;
- destructuring social stereotypes through interaction and interknowledge;
- carrying out inter-knowledge activities;
- involvement of students in the process of facilitating social interaction
  Example: Meetings with students to establish work rules.

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