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To Study or Not to Study Online? Students' Views on Distance Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Diary Study

ABSTRACT

Distance learning is a type of instruction between a teacher and students separated by a physical distance where communication takes place through mediated information encompassing one or more technological media. In other words, the instruction participants stay in different places, yet take part in the same learning activities sequenced, paced and controlled by the teacher using new technologies to facilitate both the student-teacher and student-student rapport. The aim of the paper is to gain insight into this kind of learning from the perspective of university students. The sample constituted 128 students of the English Philology at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland. The findings of a diary study exploring the subjects' reports on their attitudes towards online studying at the time of the COVID-19 period shows how students' view change with an increasing infection rate, and, in fact, present the advantages and disadvantages of education during the pandemic, be it a face-to-face or remote mode. In conclusion, the question of whether to study or not to study online seems to be difficult to answer unequivocally. Though, some suggestions are given on how to improve distance education at times of university closure and lack of full participation in the process of building the academic community and identity that have been ascribed to the university construed as an indestructible social system for ages (Sowa, 2009).

KEYWORDS

distance education, university students, the COVID-19 pandemic, advantages, disadvantages

1. Distance learning

The term distance learning is almost immediately associated with an opening of access to education and training, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, as well as flexible learning opportunities for individual and group learners. Based on Roblyer et al. (2000, p. 192), distance learning means “the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance”. The instructional delivery includes an instructor who is physically located in a different place from the learner, as well as possibly providing the instruction at disparate times. More

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specifically, the instructor controls the instructional sequencing and pacing and all learners participate in the same learning activities.

1.1. Types of distance learning

The most available and popular types of online instruction are termed synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous learning is a mode of delivery where all participants are present at the same time in accordance with a given timetable. The tools used in this process involve online chats, videoconferences, live webcasting, application sharing, whiteboard, polling and virtual classrooms, as they enable learners and instructors to ask and answer questions in real time. An asynchronous type of learning, on the other hand, is time-independent (Young, 2011, p.12). Participants access course materials according to their own schedule which is more flexible. The teacher/student interaction is executed in different forms: virtual office hours, e-mails or “check-in” online conversations once a week or once a month. There is a whole range of tools used in asynchronous online learning: reading materials in PDF files, pre-recorded lectures, presentations, Google Drive for coordinated group projects, educational games, audio tapes and video (Taplin et al., 2013, p.63). A huge advantage is that students can always come back to those materials in case of uncertainty or any problematic issues.

2. General advantages and disadvantages of distance learning

Following Harper et al. (2004, p. 590), distance education increases access to learning and training opportunities, and provides increased opportunities for updating, retraining and personal enrichment. Another advantage of distance learning is its convenience as many of the technologies are easily accessible from home. Many forms of distance learning allows students to participate in the school activity whenever they wish, and on an individual basis, because of the flexibility ascribed to it. As Isik et al. (2010, p. 218) emphasize, this kind of education is also quite affordable very often involving little or no cost as there is a wide variety of materials granted for free which, additionally, are multi-sensory and likely to meet everyone’s learning preferences. Based on that, distance learning can offer increased interactions with students, particularly when it comes to introverted students who are too shy to ask questions in class. The idea of giving such a group of students an opportunity to contribute to the classes via e-mail or other individualized means is expected to lower their inhibitions (Franklin et al., 1996, p. 126). This “opening up” can also be extended to balancing inequalities between age groups, geographical expansion of education access, delivering education for large audiences, offering the combination of education with work or family life, etc.

There is no denying that distance learning, due to the numerous benefits mentioned above, is perceived in a positive way by many, yet, as Christensen et al. (2001, p. 264) claim, “it may come with hidden costs”. First of all, compared

to a traditional course and method of delivery, distance learning imposes a disproportionate amount of effort on the part of instructors. Namely, teaching distance courses include not only the time required for the actual class, but also a great deal of time dedicated to student support and preparation, not to mention discipline and Internet connection problems. Using technology, that is, online tools and infrastructure seems to be another important obstacle. It is proved that among both parties (i.e. students and teachers) there is a high percentage of those lacking enough skill and experience in managing or following online courses, including the extreme cases of digital exclusion most frequently identified with systemic differences in the access to and use of new technologies. Last but not least, the greatest disadvantage of distance education is social isolation observed as a result of missing the socio-physical interaction that comes with attending a traditional classroom. The longer the period of online classes, the stronger the feeling of not belonging to any social group. However, recent studies (cf. Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021) have reported that this sense of isolation is expected to decrease slightly with the use of communication technologies in the form of video conferencing provided it is a short-term phenomenon.

3. Organization of distance education in Poland

The COVID-19 pandemic required educators and learners to shift to emergency remote instruction with little prior notice. Based on the Ordinance of the Ministry of Education and Science of 11 March 2020 regulating the functioning of the higher education sector under conditions of preventing, counteracting and combating COVID-19, the organization of distance learning was declared. Its main postulates provided a framework for the implementation of distance education, including the forms of teaching, tools used, the schedule, and office hours, as well as the availability and ways of contacting the academic staff regulated individually by rectors of universities in Poland. According to Ordinance no 28 of the Rector of the University of Silesia in Katowice on 12 March 2020 on countering the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the mode of distance learning introduced therein operated on the following conditions:

1. All lectures and classes for students, doctoral students and post-graduate students were cancelled.
2. Where possible, office hours and individual consultations were conducted remotely. Direct meetings were allowed to take place only in exceptional cases. In case it was necessary to organize a meeting, all appropriate precautions were to be taken.
3. Exams, defence of diploma theses, and meetings of committees (including doctoral and habilitation committees) were to take place in accordance with the rules established by the Dean and in line with the appropriate safety measures.

More specifically,

- 1) Remote classes were conducted according to the schedule effective for a particular group.
- 2) Remote classes were conducted synchronously – ensuring direct audio-video or audio interaction between participants of classes in real-time and asynchronously – through materials available on a distance learning platform, with the reservation that part of the classes was conducted synchronously with the teacher available for students online during classes – in line with the schedule.
- 3) Remote classes were conducted using Microsoft Office 365 (including Teams, Skype for Companies) and Moodle platform.
- 4) Classes were supervised by the Dean in consultation with the relevant degree programme directors.
- 5) The organisation of both on-site and remote classes were subject to monitoring.

The period of online education covered the time span from March 2020 to September 2021. It gave rise to a great deal of research done on the advantages and disadvantages of the COVID-19 distance learning. The studies conducted so far have proven what a huge impact the pandemic has had on the process of education at all levels. Following Jelińska and Paradowski (2021, p. 318), the teachers who were most engaged and coped best with the transition to online teaching reflected those having prior experience with remote instruction, had worked in high schools or higher education and had used real-time synchronous teaching. Also, this group of teachers underwent a smoother and faster adaptation to the changing conditions of schools re-opening and closing that was experienced a few times within a period of eighteen months, saving themselves confusion and stress that have been identified by UNESCO in 2020 as one of the consequences of school closures.

4. Online education during the pandemic in Poland

The negative emotions mentioned above have been thoroughly researched by Papaja (2020). Her study on Polish English teachers during the time of COVID-19 shows major concerns among instructors caused by the lack of support from the government and their colleagues, and also with the uncertainty about the future. The most general areas of teachers' success and failure while teaching online, on the other hand, can be found in Wysocka-Narewska (2021), where the problems with the so-called classroom management, including student behaviour, application use, syllabus coverage, and evaluation are emphasized. Among non-problematic issues highlighted by the teachers are the opportunities to cover the lesson material on most occasions, and time devoted to the written practice allowing the learners to perform much better than in real-time classes.

The school environment and the sense of belonging to the school community recently studied by Godawa (2020) brought to light diverse descriptions of chaos in schools and various social inequalities being observed among the learners, the phenomenon of digital exclusion among others, and leaving a lot of problems unsolved.

5. Methodology of the research

As the data provided on the Polish context of distance learning does not give much insight into the learner during the Coronavirus lockdown, not to mention the post-secondary school students, the present paper aims at collecting the university students' views on education in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. The major focus of interest is the current situation of an offline mode of teaching introduced into universities on October 1st, 2021, in line with an increasing number of infections in Poland, and a widely understood quality of studying.

5.1. The aim

One of the main objectives of the study was to collect the students' views on education, making a comparison between an online and offline one, and trying to decide which is more beneficial for them and why, which would hopefully provide the answer to the research question, namely: *To study or not to study online?*

Additionally, the time factor was taken into account, and the assumption was made that the sample could change their opinions with critical fluctuations in the COVID-19 infections.

5.2. The participants

The sample size was 128 students of the English Philology department at the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland, that is, 45, 28, 30 and 25 representatives of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th-year students respectively who entered real-time classes at the beginning of the academic year in October 2021. The choice of the sample was made on purpose to cover only the population with prior distance learning experience at the university. In order to reduce and, at the same time, standardize the sample, all the study participants were enrolled on the teaching training programme. The basic demographic data concerning the respondents in question has been tabularized in the following way:

Table 1. Description of the sample

CATEGORY	2 nd year	No. of 2 nd YSs	3 rd year	No. of 3 rd YSs	4 th year	No. of 4 th YSs	5 th year	No. of 5 th YSs
AGE	20	44	21	27	22	27	23	21
	21	1	22	1	23	3	24	4

October	1	44	3	25	1	29	0	25
November	21	24	12	16	15	15	13	12
December	30	15	27	1	25	5	19	6
January	40	5	28	0	30	0	24	1

To begin with, the majority of the subjects showed satisfaction with face-to-face classes offered in October, which translated into the percentages of 98, 89, 97 and 100 in accordance with the age of the sample taking part in offline education. Compared to the new cases of COVID-19 infections, the respondents' strong views on the preferred mode of studying overlapped with a relatively stable situation including the first fortnight of the month, reaching nine thousand at the end of the second. In November, the student's preferences concerning the form of instruction were no longer that obvious. As shown in the table, those in favour of traditional education (53% of second-year students and 57% of third years) only slightly outnumbered the students against online education, it being 50% of fourth-years and less than 50% of fifth years respectively). The subjects' enthusiasm and positive attitude towards the university as a community seemed to be dampened and replaced with a note of doubt influenced by a sudden increase in new confirmed cases of COVID-19, and the alarming nature of the week-over-week growth. December, although with imposed restrictions, deepened the mood of pessimism among the sample. Most of the students, irrespective of the group, were of the opinion of the necessity to reinstitute distance learning. The opponents of this type of instruction mirrored 67% in the second year exclusively and represented a minority of 4%, 17% and 4% respectively in the remaining groups. The observed change in the respondents' tendency to study from home was definitely the result of a COVID-19 wave and an expected peak of coronavirus cases. What January brought was worsening moods among all the groups examined. Based on the numbers, all third and fourth-year students voted for online studies. Only one person from the fifth-year group and five participants from the second-year group were against it. When compared with the infection rate, the whole month was marked by an average growth, oscillating between eight and 15000 new cases daily. As the Omicron *COVID-19 variant* started to dominate in January, the very situation of a more contagious virus strain might have been possible justification for students' reluctance to take part in regular classes. During this month, COVID-19 infections doubled over a two-week period and reached over 30000 cases daily as compared to December.

Based on the statistics, the new cases of infections within the four-month period being the study timespan, differed as follows (www.google.com):

The dates of diary completion were selected beforehand. The assumption was that the same random days arranged for everyone would facilitate the whole process of writing and data collection, guaranteeing the sample the same pandemic background at the moment of task completion optimizing the validity of the records produced.

Table 3. The no. of COVID-19 cases

OCTOBER		NOVEMBER		DECEMBER		JANUARY	
DAY	CASE	DAY	CASE	DAY	CASE	DAY	CASE
1.10.21	1361	1.11.21	4904	1.12.21	29076	3.01.22	6423
7.10.21	2007	7.11.21	12507	8.12.21	28549	10.01.22	11402
15.10.21	2640	15.11.21	9508	15.12.21	24264	15.01.22	16893
21.10.21	5591	24.11.21	18924	23.12.21	17150	20.01.22	32835
28.10.21	8382	30.11.21	19100	30.12.21	14326	24.01.22	29097

5.4.2. *The qualitative data*

As the numbers indicate, the student's views on the mode of studying differed as to the period of time, this being a kind of information carrier providing data on the current epidemiological situation.

In October, almost all the students questioned were in favour of traditional education interconnected with mobility and a sense of community. The arguments for face-to-face classes prioritized the social aspects that the subjects needed irrespective of their background, worded as follows: "I like to talk to my classmates before classes"; "Every day I walk to the university and I like and need this routine".

Apart from social interactions, including student-student and teacher-student relationships in a real classroom, the students enumerated better organization, motivation and discipline as the qualities the "full-time (as opposed to lockdown university)" imposed on them: "I'm more motivated to participate in a lesson, I learn way more. I prefer the activities that we do inside the classroom"; "It is better to organize myself when I have to go to the university".

The third issue mentioned by the sample concerned the infrastructure and Internet connection problems. The subjects complained about the equipment and Internet transfer they had to struggle with personally or suffered from inconveniences for some other reasons at the time of closure: "My computer is not suitable for online classes. It works slow and sometimes I have problems with it during the online classes"; "Technology often prevents me from being active during online classes"; "I experience big problems with the Internet connection. For example, one of our teachers has really bad connection which causes their flow of speech to pause constantly and it is a torture to listen/focus on it".

In November, when the rate of daily new cases increased significantly, the students' opinions on their preferred way of studying changed considerably and mirrored an almost equal number of those arguing for and against distance learning. A slight predominance of opponents of online learning was observed among the representatives of the second and third year, and a small majority of its followers was seen in the group of fifth-year students.

More specifically, those who did not opt for online classes in November gave arguments that overlapped with those presented in October, namely, with the need to maintain both student-student and student-teacher relationships, underlining the need to contact their seminar supervisors (especially in the case of the third year): "I don't want to study online. I will have a big problem with writing my B. A. diploma. My supervisor will not explain and give some advice as she does at the university".

The opposite point of view, however, mirrored a two-fold justification of students' lack of willingness to take part in real-time classes. First of all, the subjects mentioned a fear of being infected: "Studying online is safer than studying at the university. I don't have to worry about my family"; "I would feel safer if I didn't have to spend time in crowded places as university"; "During online classes I don't meet sick people. It is an important fact for me because I have a 10-month daughter".

Consequently, the second most popular argument against traditional education involved commuting, that is, time and money spent on driving to the university: "I would like to have online classes because I wouldn't have to commute and could save some money and time. Due to the time saved on commuting, I could do more things at home and wouldn't have to be in a hurry".

The data gathered in December showed a considerable increase in students' positive opinions about online education. The arguments presented this time ranged from fear of getting infected before the Christmas period, and far-reaching consequences to the very unstable situation that was observed at the university, that is, plenty of regular classes being cancelled or moved to the online mode due to quarantine: "I don't feel like going to the university. I'm afraid I could infect my family members, especially those with health issues"; "I don't like the idea of mixed classes, and uncertainty because they change regular meetings into online all of a sudden".

Those in the minority, who still supported the idea of face-to-face study, pointed to the fact of self-discipline and motivation that such a form of education offers: "I try to keep discipline. It's easier to be absent with online classes. Many of us keep making up excuses"; "Going to school has a good influence on me. I'm more self-disciplined and on time."

After the Christmas break, the new wave of coronavirus infections appeared and intensified students' fears of going back to the university. As a result, over 95%

of all the subjects manifested disapproval of regular classes being continued. The students' reaction, irrespective of the group, underestimated all of the previously mentioned arguments for traditional studying. This month, the subjects' views were definitely based on facts and figures and overlapped with the opinions presented by different groups of authorities advising everyone to stay at home. Admittedly, the sample was scared at the thought of travelling to and through the campus: "It's better to be safe than sorry if I remember correct. I'm afraid of being sick. At home I feel safer. Besides, I don't have to wear a mask, which is also unhealthy"; "It's the end of the term so we can study from home".

A few people who still opted for traditional education emphasized their need to take tests and exams in the classroom. For them, there is no use in being examined in front of the screen as "many students cheat, using online tools, and this is really unfair. Eventually, their grades are much better."

6. Conclusions and instruction implications

When analysing the students' responses gathered over the timespan of the study, it can be noticed that the arguments voiced either for or against online education were not only condensed but most of all wide in scope.

All the opinions presented can be encapsulated into several issues of considerable importance to the sample including: social affairs, transportation, infrastructure, health concerns and management.

Secondly, the arguments chosen by the subjects prove that they are fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and go even further, notably, thinking of a given studying mode in accordance with their personal deficits and possible benefits.

Thirdly, it seems that in the face of a difficult situation concerning the ongoing pandemic and a major crisis, respondents choose the lesser evil when it comes to the type of learning.

When trying to answer the question of whether to study or not to study online, there will always be two types of parties claiming their rights, that is, propagating and opposing the idea of distance education at the same time. And, as we read in Papaja (2021, p. 5), "the ongoing Covid-19 crisis has been and will continue to be both a massive challenge and a learning experience for the global education community", it is highly recommended to pay more attention to online education which may simply be a must periodically (i.e., from one wave of infections to another). To encourage the best quality of instruction, the following principles addressed by the emergency remote teaching instructors are believed to be a good short-term solution:

- Encourage student participation and cooperation,
- Encourage active learning,
- Give prompt feedback,
- Emphasize time on task,

- Communicate high expectations,
- Respect diversity,
- Address individual differences,
- Avoid information overload,
- Encourage student reflection.

These “golden means” sound like well-packed recipes for a huge crisis in education, such as that influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though, following Sowa (2009, p. 21), it is advisable to return to traditional teaching in due time not to lose the spirit of the academic community and identity that have been ascribed to the university construed as an indestructible social system for ages.

7. Further research suggestions

As the findings of the study indicate, studying under Coronavirus restrictions is not an easy task to do, often put to a great test because of changing pandemic conditions, it seems legitimate to say that a comparison of student's opinion on education with that of teachers' views would be of major interest to future studies.

Another idea as a follow-up to this research is to investigate more groups of university students representing other fields of study, and juxtapose the data with the obtained results, in the hope of gaining a deeper insight into the very problem, and have a more interesting profile of students, their needs and expectations.

8. Study limitations

The limitation was the diary tool itself. As it is difficult to involve students in regular diary-keeping, the research was limited to the scope of one semester only, for fear of them being discouraged and/or unreliable in completing the task. Continuing the research after February 2022, when the COVID-19 restrictions were relaxed, would probably offer a better insight into the situation, but it was not undertaken for the reasons as above.

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