



Students' Perception towards Online Activities in Higher Education

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Abstract

The research is an observational study on student satisfaction and learning efficiency, in the conditions of online courses and seminars, imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic, to improve the quality of education. The research was carried out capitalizing on the answers provided to a questionnaire by 194 students, who participated in the courses and seminars of Pedagogy and Educational Psychology. We considered this study necessary because online learning was a novelty and was perceived as a challenge for both students and teachers. The research results highlight the importance of knowing the students' perception on how to carry out online activities at the level of higher education.

Key words: E-learning platform; interactivity; online learning; students; work tools

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1. A brief history of computer-assisted training

The concept of "computer-assisted instruction" first appeared in the 1960s. The main advantage of this system is the large number of students who can benefit from it. The first computer-assisted instruction system was PLATO (it was implemented in 1960 by the University of Illinois. In a broad sense, the E-Learning system is defined as a form of education also known as "online learning", "Internet-based learning" represented by a type of distance learning distributed through the Internet by educational organizations or institutions (Vlada, 2003). In a narrow sense, E-learning is a type of distance education, as a planned teaching-learning-assessment experience organized by an institution that provides mediated materials in a sequential and logical order to be assimilated by students in their way. Mediation is achieved through new information and communication technologies - especially through the Internet. The Internet is both the distribution environment of materials and the communication channel between the actors involved .

E-learning platforms have gone through different stages from simple (2001) to enterprise (2007) and portals (2011). Now the emphasis is on content and collaboration, with learners being able to generate and share content. The e-learning platform includes procedures and tools dedicated to individual study, at your own pace using different means of study that are easily accessible. For use, minimum requirements are established for enrollment procedures, student selection, registration, monitoring, archiving of information related to services provided to students, ensuring communication between participants (administrator, tutors, students). The platform includes specialized tools for conducting online educational activities: tools for accessing content, online assessment, communication, and security (Petrescu, 2005).

The advent of personal computers has revolutionized the world we live in. Although initially, the acquisition costs were high, they were steadily reduced by facilitating their widespread use. In these conditions, their introduction in educational institutions was not too late; personal computers have been used by students and teachers in schools for more than thirty years, but in a completely different form than the reality in which we live, namely the generalization of online learning. The use of online learning brings several changes to the pedagogical techniques and strategies used. Teacher education and professional development must be adapted to prepare teachers for the use of new methodological tools, as they need to learn how to effectively use tools and resources in online teaching activities. In short, it can be said that the use of new technologies can become an effective practice only if teachers are trained in this direction and are convinced of the benefits of teaching and learning using these tools (Janvier, 1987). Only the transfer of the learning process from face to face format, in the online format, changing the communication channel and tools, together with some examples of good practices will not ensure the efficiency of online education.

2. Teachers' Response to Online Learning

Although access to new technologies has been provided in all educational institutions, especially if we refer to universities, the process of using technologies in current courses has been slow and the great potential of computers and educational applications has been underused. The actual use of technology largely depends on the ability to adapt to the new and the teacher's availability. In the context of online education, the first step in assisting teachers is to train them on how to use the right applications and increase their confidence in the digital applications that can be used in the classroom. By providing ready-made instructional materials, teachers can take on the idea of using them in the classroom without wasting extra time creating materials and generating ideas on how to effectively use technology (Riahi, 2015). Besides, teachers can focus on the possible change in the teaching method and expand their teaching repertoire to provide more effective teaching opportunities for students following paths that would not have been

possible without technology. Helping teachers to treat technology as an existing educational tool allows them to focus on the teaching itself.

The characteristics of the two useful tools, during the research courses, Google Classroom and Google-meet are:

- simple connection of the two working tools;
- the existence of a customized interface according to the types of users;
- accessible use, namely allowing visualization of instructional content (interactive work tools, PPTs,) in a short time;
- making simple, flexible working tools, adaptable to the specific needs of the topic;
- simple import/export of materials from files, resource archives;
- simple modification/editing of the content;
- the possibility of online evaluation of students and monitoring of their activity;
- secure communication, the security of communication services, collaboration.

The integration of technology into the day-to-day teaching process could facilitate the emergence of a situation that would allow teachers and students to benefit through technologies from an improved teaching and learning environment. And yet the use of technology has not become a common practice until it has become a reality, a mandatory one. Even in this reality, the efficiency of learning remained directly dependent on the teacher's ability to adapt to the new situation and the availability to harmonize with the requirements of the time.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The research analyzed the degree of satisfaction and efficiency of learning, appreciated by students, in the conditions of online courses and seminars, imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of the research is to improve the quality of the educational activity. It is an observational type of research, using the questionnaire as a survey method and as a tool. It was filled in by 194 students from the "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, participants in courses and seminars on Pedagogy and Educational Psychology, during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020. 58% of the respondents were students in the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, 28% were students in the Faculty of Theology and 14% were students at the study program of Physical Education and Sports.

3.2. Research instruments

The purpose of the questionnaire was to measure the satisfaction of the activity and the learning efficiency, as well as collect recommendations from the participating students, who attended at least half of the course and seminar activities that had been conducted online as a result of the isolation situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The 10 questions of the questionnaire were: 5 items with a closed answer and 5 open-ended items. The questionnaire was aimed at measuring the degree of satisfaction experienced by students, the efficiency of learning, and also at collecting students' recommendations for increasing the quality of teaching. This last aspect offered the character of an ameliorative study to the present research. Since March 2020, starting with combining traditional and interactive methods, we have developed synchronous and asynchronous learning, which offers modern training and flexible learning programs. In synchronous learning, all participants in the learning process were connected at the same time and shared the experience and interaction.

3.3. Research procedure

Using the materials posted in the Classroom, the students had the opportunity to achieve asynchronous learning. Students achieved learning based on personal effort, through study and

individual work, at their pace, and based on personal time management. It was the third category of students, who started the activity synchronously but completed it asynchronously, supplementing the time they needed, this being a benefit for those with a slow rhythm of activity who feel the need to carry out their process of learning at their pace. During the course and seminar activity, we used virtual classes, applications that allow the collaboration of a group of participants with access provided by the organizer (teacher) to the course, at a predetermined time. They were used to provide students with a variety of tools, such as: audio files, video files, instant messaging (chat), screen sharing, worksheets, bibliography sheets; students uploaded individual or group homework.

The Google-meet application was used as space for frontal, group, or individual activities, in which, depending on the type of activity, the presentation was made by the teacher or students. Due to the particularities of online learning, the work tools, support materials used must meet several conditions to be considered effective: their content can be easily updated; their use ensures the achievement of course objectives; they are logically structured; they ensure the possibility of interactions between students, between students and the teacher, as well as ease in evaluating the acquisitions of students.

We used Google forms to develop collaborative tools that allowed users in different places to edit worksheets for learning. The main advantage of these tools is a direct collaboration to develop a document, as well as highlighting the contribution of each author. We developed and used work tools to carry out learning activities using methods for developing critical thinking: I know / I want to know / I learned, SINELG, Gallery tour, Carousel, Reflective journal and recording some answers in a brainstorming. We also used questionnaires to conduct surveys to obtain answers to various questions, aiming at the acquisitions during the course or opinions related to the satisfaction/efficiency of the activities carried out (Temple, 2002).

Based on the analysis of the answers, we made correlations, and, finally, we were able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the activity. Given that we did not have the opportunity for a course, to acquire the digital skills needed to make materials and courses, all the training and achievement was supported by personal effort and testing. Dominantly we transformed the existing materials for traditional education into a digital format so that the course becomes dynamic.

To avoid passive participation, frontal activity (academic lecture) was combined with individual activity, applications for the topics covered, and group activity. To perform the continuous evaluation (inter-evaluation), we used the Mutual Reading technique, through which each student reported to the group members the results obtained (Popa, 2009). For this purpose, in the course activities, we integrated individual activities, pair activities, group activities, using social networks, in which students made common or individual themes, ending with mutual reading, as a moment of inter-evaluation and self-evaluation. The group activity was also held to offer students the opportunity to consult with colleagues before an individual activity, to clarify their task. The psycho-affective climate, during the course, was a constant preoccupation, in the way I thought about the didactic strategies. The lecture was frequently followed by group work, followed by an individual activity and again group activity and then frontal, to validate with the teacher the solutions offered, the problems under discussion (Temple, 2002).

The explanations were supported by examples, with references to concrete situations, demonstrations, psycho-pedagogical reflections, to make learning accessible and to achieve purposeful learning. The students' attention was directed to the key elements, essential points and connections for understanding the phenomena and the studied processes.

Several times during the course, we used group learning. According to the literature, learning in small groups can lead to:

- academic success and social and personal development;

- increasing motivation: the collaborative learning process; by increasing the understanding of materials it contributes to increasing the motivation to perform a specific task;
- practicing teamwork;
- critical thinking; the collaboration between students leads to the development of critical thinking through the fact that they are encouraged to discuss, clarify and evaluate ideas;
- development of social and cognitive skills.

Towards the end of the semester, we applied a questionnaire to 194 students from the study programs: Pastoral Theology, Protestant Theology, Religious Music, Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, who had attended my lectures and seminars on the Pedagogy and Psychology of Education during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020.

4. Results

4.1. The positive aspects of online activities

Most of the respondents appreciated the comfort and the possibility to participate more often in courses, but also the fact that the online activity supported them in overcoming psychological barriers such as shame or fear associated with the situation of having to express a point of view (Figure 1).

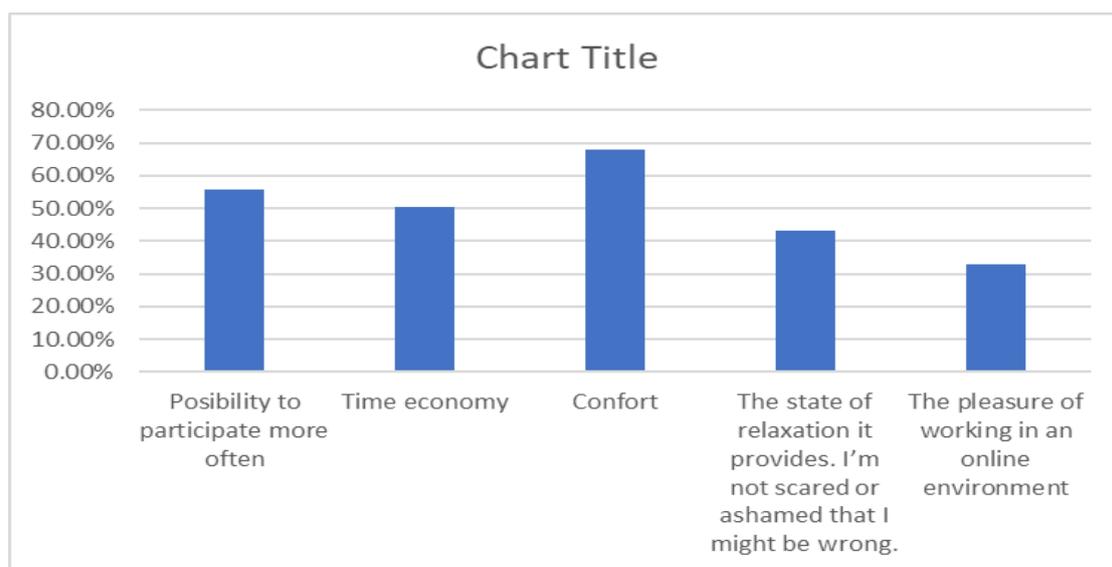


Figure 1. Graphical representation of the percentages regarding the perception of students regarding the positive aspects of online activities

Other positive aspects of online activities mentioned by students were:

- novelty, as an experience;
- the pleasure of learning how to use certain applications that can be used in teaching;
- the possibility to improve digital skills;
- flexibility and the possibility to work from any location with internet access;
- easier and faster interaction;
- ability to answer questions quickly, do homework quickly;
- possibility to work at any time and your own pace;
- direct access to information and the possibility to access it later;
- resource-saving: money and time;

- online education, less stressful than traditional.
- filling-in questionnaires individually or in groups with answers displayed immediately and intervention for correction where appropriate.

Regarding online courses, in general, most aspects with a positive impact are related to flexibility, comfort, resource savings, direct access to resources. For the pedagogy course, most of them appreciated the explanations received, the materials and worksheets used, and the possibility to consult with colleagues, as well as the group work, which was done on social networks (Facebook, WhatsApp).

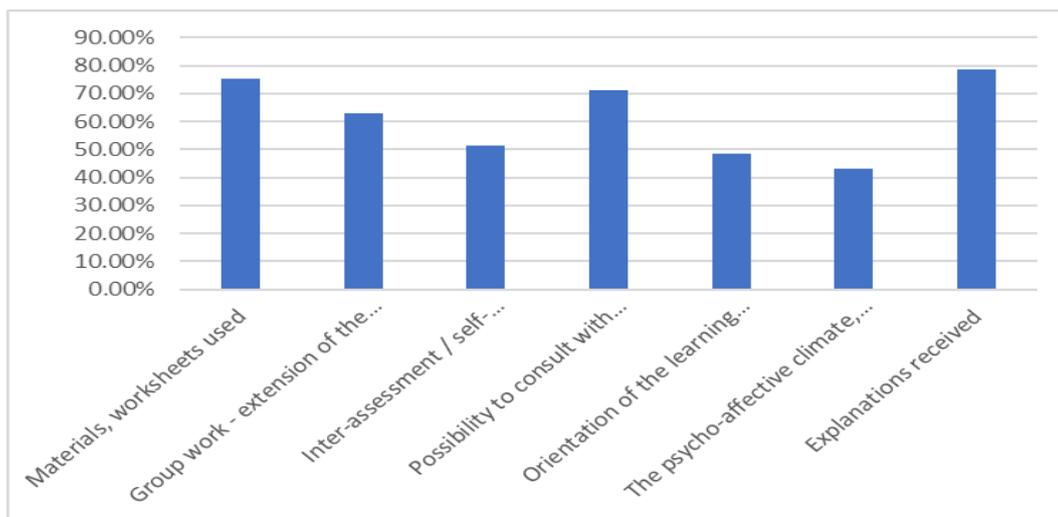


Figure 2. Graphical representation of the percentages regarding the perception of students regarding the positive aspects of online learning in Pedagogy courses

4.2. The difficult aspects of online learning

The data obtained on the difficult aspects of online learning highlighted the following elements:

- poor internet connection;
- too much information, too much time spent on the computer, body fatigue;
- lack of equipment that is easy to use;
- lack of organization and sometimes very vague explanations;
- lack of practice hours;
- a high volume of homework;
- no explanation for the courses posted on the platform;
- lack of face-to-face interaction;
- covering learning content too fast.

Regarding online courses, in general, most aspects, which hinder the activity, are related to equipment, internet connection, unfavorable conditions in the online environment but also issues related to overload through the large volume of homework, rapid transition, and courses posted on the platform without explanation.

Conclusions

The use of IT in education, E-learning platforms is not a novelty. The magnitude of education in E-learning, on the other hand, is a novelty, dictated by the specifics of the times we live in. At a time when face-to-face course activities have become impossible, the E-learning system has become a norm, although we were taken by surprise. The efficiency of e-learning activities depends to a large extent on the teacher's preoccupation with preparing teaching materials and pedagogical tact, on how he can motivate and hold students accountable for active participation, for taking on work tasks, and not hiding behind a computer screen.

We consider that this is the main variable, which ensures efficiency or not, in the university environment. Of course, the variables in the conditions of education for the other levels are completely different: high school, middle school, primary, preschool. The use of the Internet has fundamentally transformed the way we socialize, interact, and present the content to be learned. Most of the students have no dissatisfaction or inhibitory factors when it comes to using online tools. Students are the X generation. Technology is part of their lives. They need technology and they work very well with it. We believe that interesting, interactive teaching activities, offered by teachers, would increase the appetite of young people for online learning. Among the positive effects of using online learning, there are: flexibility, increased frequency, training of skills to use technology, enrichment through the multitude of information they can access. Among the negative effects of using online learning, there are: the poor development of the emotional area, of emotional intelligence. There are deficits in this area and we will probably become even more deficient.

The university, at the level of institutional policies and through the effort of each faculty member, uses online tools to maintain the learning activity with students. Despite the physical distance, teachers have taken on a difficult mission, because we were not prepared for this type of activity, but the need put us in front of a situation in which we felt responsible to act. Moreover, I realized that we are at the same time, in need of psychic support in carrying out activities. The result of this research leads us to consider that hybrid tools or educational spaces designed to operate in the hybrid form are necessary and useful because we can ensure participation in courses both in the physical and virtual classroom, and here we refer to the restrictions related to the minimum number of individuals who can work in a group. If we have acquired the necessary skills we will arrange educational spaces to meet these needs, we are convinced that they will be useful even after the COVID-19 pandemic, as some students will still not be able to be physically present in the classroom for various reasons: lifestyle and life responsibilities, distance.

It would be necessary to have a database that gives institutions a quick overview of the online tools available and the type of activities that can be carried out in an interactive database in which someone can enter the field of work for the group of young people with whom we work and get the right tool. If it also includes the methodology of use, a short guide would be an extraordinary achievement. Of course, if we have access to such a database, pedagogical training would also be necessary. We believe that the database deserves to be open so that each working tool, each new learning sheet can be integrated into the library and its value increases with each day.

In terms of difficulties, I would see very high costs on the one hand. On the other hand, a very well-trained team is needed because the needs of a platform, depending on the specifics of the disciplines for which it is designed, are extremely varied.

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