

Transnational Analysis

Mankind is experiencing an unprecedented situation due to the rapid spread of a particularly threatening virus, characterized by uncertainty about the future. With no previous experience, all sectors of society were called upon to face this new ordeal by coping in the best possible way. Without exception, the sector had to immediately adapt to this new situation and to continue its work (Schleicher, 2020). In most countries, education rapidly went online, and the educational system was abruptly confronted to online education – while many teachers did not possess any or sufficient skills to keep up with it. This rush was due, on the one hand, to the uncertainty of how the pandemic would develop and, on the other, in order not to raise the issue of having to retake an entire year. Students and teachers also were kept away from classrooms to continue the educational process via online education. What does this mean for both parts? It means that for a smooth achievement of this new educational process students should adapt to the new modes of delivery while teachers ought to ensure the learning process. Studies conducted around the world during the lockdown period found that there is a significant percentage of students who felt negatively affected and this not only in relation to their academic, but also to their social activities. Findings in other studies show in within-person comparisons that students were slightly more anxious and more stressed, on average more depressed and felt lonelier than half a year earlier (2020; Elmer, et al., 2020).

In order to ensure the delivery of courses, online teaching meant using special web communication tools, the so-called synchronous distance education platforms which would work in conjunction with asynchronous communication platforms (course management systems - CMS or learning managements systems – LMS). Countless students were forced to adapt to a completely different way of communicating with their teachers and fellow students, and countless teachers were called upon to adapt to these communication tools and at the same time turn their lesson completely into an online one. Yet despite ensuring the continuation of face-to-face classes with online courses, no one could say the same about equal access for all users, not even about the effectiveness of learning from the educational practices adopted by teachers during the distance learning period. In most countries over the world, schools had to close in spring. All institutions were compelled to react immediately to the new requirements. They had to show rapid reflexes and seemed to adapt to the processes of synchronous distance education. Students and teachers managed to continue the educational process, the main result of these efforts being the successful completion of the semester. Reference is made to modern communication since the staff of most academic institutions in the countries had for many years at its disposal asynchronous communication platforms and knows how to use them in combination with face-to-face

learning (LMS such as Moodle and e-class, a free open-source asynchronous education platform being the most widespread in academic institutions). Despite the academic members' experience in asynchronous education, it is natural to have many questions and objections about the feasibility of substituting teaching in the classroom with synchronous online teaching, since online classes have displayed limitations, including time flexibility, problems with internet access and internet connection quality, and insufficient digital skills. Some questions involve the teachers' willingness to use the new tools and adapt their teaching strategies, students' ability to cope with new communication forms, plus the availability of appropriate equipment, and finally, the impact that this whole new situation had on individuals' behaviour during the lockdown.

Based on the emotions that arose when the closure of schools was announced due to the pandemic of COVID-19, the majority of students felt negative emotions which mainly included stress, anxiety and sadness: "Anxiety and concern about what will happen to the semester, the courses and the placement." Some students felt mixed emotions which included joy and relief due to the fact that they would not have obligations but at the same time (or immediately after) concern and sadness about what was going to happen to their studies. "On the one hand I was worried, afraid, since closing was not a good sign at all, but on the other hand, to be honest, I said to myself at least we'll get some sleep tomorrow." Finally, the lowest percentage experienced positive emotions of joy and relief. "Of course, I was glad believing it would be something temporary, like for a week."

The positive characteristics of online education compared to the usual context

- Easier to participate in class
- No need to commute (savings in time & money)
- Home comfort
- Classes are not lost
- Familiarity with new teaching methods
- Attending and study flexibility

Regarding the negative characteristics that students identify in online education, in relation to the usual educational context, the elements mentioned are related to issues of poor communication, cooperation and socialization in the academic context. Specifically, the majority mentions the lack of personal contact between teacher and students and also among students, the difficulty of concentrating and participating in the class, as well as the lack of physical presence on classes: "No one can understand your feelings since there is no direct visual contact." "In the classroom there is more spontaneity in communication between teacher - student (whereas in distance mode not so much), the teacher cannot observe our reactions, in order to make further clarifications or even questions (not everyone shares his/her questions through the chat)." "Teachers don't get to know us. It's hard to have excellent communication with someone you don't see. They don't know if there is participation or if half of them are lying in their beds." "Socialization and interaction

with my fellow students are not achieved." "We don't have this interaction with our teacher and fellow students, and we can't work so smoothly in groups and that also applies to lab courses." "The absence of immediacy, which exists in the normal classroom, where there is a real contact with the teacher." "Certainly, there are difficulties that interrupt or alter the way content is presented, resulting in a lack of understanding or wasting valuable time." Other negative features are the technical difficulties of online education, the long hours in front of the computer, and the lack of logistical infrastructure.

The negative characteristics of online education compared to the usual context

- Lack of personal contact
- Technical difficulties
- Difficulty concentrating and participating in the class
- Too many hours in front of the computer
- Lack of logistical infrastructure by some students
- Non-physical presence on classes
- Work placement and some lab courses are lost
- More workload

In particular, comparing the two modes of education, i.e. the usual and the online the majority believe that to a large extent (much/very much) new skills related to distance education are being developed which are related with the use of technology, as well as with online attendance and participation in class. In addition, they argue that the content of the course is understandable and attendance is easy, the new mode of teaching is interesting, participation in class is great, and communication with the teacher is satisfactory

Regarding the teaching method of distance education, most students believe that it largely covers the needs of the course, while they believe that the interaction between teacher and students is great. However, the interaction among students is considered less.

In the same situation principals and teachers had to face the-lack of appropriate equipment and tools at the school and individual level. The availability of infrastructure was an issue that created unequal access to the online platforms and limited internet access. This combined with the lack of adequate expertise in achieving hybrid or online education forced teachers to rapidly improve their digital skills to cope with the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

They had to adapt the courses to the new teaching conditions but most of them did not have the necessary training. Teachers had to quickly adapt their curriculum of the subjects they teach to the online teaching. They had to choose the most suitable online platform for them and for their students. They had to choose the testing platform on which to run the student assessments and to digitise the tests according to the chosen platforms.

When delivering online classes teachers highlighted the following challenges:

- Teachers' struggle with time (online teaching is more time-consuming than in-school teaching).
- Low accumulation of new knowledge and low student participation
- Lack of control of the class at different levels
- Students' assessment in the online environment

Teachers had to maintain the quality of education in the online environment that proved to be more demanding and complex than the traditional one. It was observed that teachers who had had digital skills coped better with the transition to online education. However, even they were subjected to great pressure to perform their required teaching activities.

From the above, it can be inferred that each mode of teaching has to offer some strong elements to education, but in no case should it be considered one superior to the other. It is clear that face to face education could in any case be benefited and enriched with elements of online education, since, as it can be seen, students' views are positive towards the latter, while the students find it easy to use ICT. As a result, teaching methods that combine face to face with distance learning can enhance students' interest and participation in the lesson. One such example could be the application of flipped classroom, which can provide even greater classroom interaction and new dynamics in face to face teaching through a focus on experiential situations. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, can serve as a good reason for the renewal and development of teaching and learning in the school context.