UNIVERSITIES AND THE PANDEMIC: GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH AMBIGUITY

Universităţile şi pandemia: a fi confortabil cu ambiguitatea

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Abstract

As a result of the closure of higher education institutions, students and teachers had to swiftly adapt to online teaching and learning. The need to design learning environments for students implies choices, adjustments and decisions in order to meet not only students' expectations but also the conditions in which universities had to operate. Our study seeks to explore the innovative practices used by educators that allowed them to form engaging classrooms in a pre-service teacher education programme during the Covid-19 pandemic. The participants of the present study were educators (n=9) from the teacher training department. By making use of a qualitative inquiry, data was collected through participating at semi-structured interviews via ZOOM videotelephony software.

The key findings suggest that the digital instructional setting has been a distinctively challenging experience for university teachers. The sudden shift in institutional teaching activities and conditions reshaped pedagogical practices and challenged the academics to identify and creatively respond to the students' needs with ingenuity and speed. Therefore, it is paramount that educators retain the advantages of working from home in ways that transform their practice.

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Rezumat

Ca urmare a închiderii institu iilor de înv   mânt superior, studen ii i profesorii au fost nevoi i s   se adapteze rapid la predarea i înv area online. Necesitatea de a proiecta medii de înv are pentru studen i implic alegeri, ajust ri i decizii pentru a r spunde nu numai a tept rilor studen ilor, ci i condi iilor în care universit ile trebuie s func ioneze. Studiul nostru urm re te s exploreze practicile inovatoare folosite de educatori care le-au permis acestora s creeze s li de clas atractive în cadrul programului de formare ini ial a profesorilor în timpul pandemiei de Covid-19. Participan ii la acest studiu au fost educatori (n=9) de la departamentul de formare a cadrelor didactice. În cadrul unei investiga ii de tip calitativ, datele au fost colectate prin participarea la interviuri semistructurate prin intermediul programului software de videotelefonie ZOOM. Principalele constat ri sugereaz provocarea adus de cadrul de instruire digital pentru experien ele cadrelor didactice universitare. Schimbarea brusc a activit ilor i condi iilor institu ionale de predare a remodelat practicile pedagogice i a provocat educatorii s identifice i s r spund într-un mod creativ nevoilor studen ilor, cu ingeniozitate i rapiditate. Prin urmare, este esen ial ca educatorii s p streze avantajele acumulate din munca de acas în moduri care s le transforme practica.

Cuvinte-cheie: Covid-19, formarea profesorilor, practici inovatoare, tehnologie.

1. General background

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges that forced all education institutions to transition from face-to-face to remote teaching over a period of days. Being classified as non-essential services, universities were closed down throughout the country, and students were told that they would no longer be able to attend on-campus classes. Rather than teaching in the classroom or amphitheater, academics had to deliver lectures exclusively online from their homes. Therefore, with little or no preparation, the educators had to successfully migrate to an online setting and provide a coherent learning experience with the help of technology.

As higher education institutions moved to remote teaching, the staff were asked to produce and provide all content in online mode. This sudden shift from classroom interaction to remote teaching gave little opportunity for university staff to redesign their teaching (Sahu, 2020). Given this context, Jandri et al. (2020) lays emphasis on the fact that most academics had limited prior experience related to digital instruction. But, at the same time, they were being requested to transition, design, and implement online teaching (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Rennie & Morrison, 2013) in a relatively short amount of time. Therefore, they had to learn how to adjust and expand their teaching practices (Bao, 2020).

There is a plethora of research into the constraints and difficulties associated with poor learning infrastructure (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh & Althunibat, 2020; Kitzmiller & Drake Rodriguez, 2022; Pham & Nguyen, 2020), lack of mentoring and support (Judd et al., 2020), inexperience of teachers (Cavanaugh & DeWeese, 2020; Marshall, Shannon & Love, 2020), students' mental health (Huckins et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020), and teachers' competencies related to digital instruction (Hatos, Cosma & Clipa, 2022).

Against this background, the present paper reports on interviews conducted with academics from the teacher education department. A key objective of the paper was to explore the innovative practices used by educators that allowed them to form engaging classrooms. That is why, this study aims to derive valuable lessons that could advise the teacher education sector on how to competently react during and after the pandemic.

2. Methodology

As a result of the closure of higher education institutions, students and teachers had to swiftly adapt to online teaching and learning. The need to design learning environments for students implies choices, adjustments and decisions in order to meet not only students' expectations but also the conditions in which universities had to operate.

This research is based on empirical data tracing the experiences of university teachers within an initial teacher education programme. Employing a purposive convenience sampling approach (Creswell, 2014), nine faculty members were selected and invited to a semi-structured interview. The educators were selected following six inclusion criteria: (a) representation of different academic career moments (novice and senior educators), (b) representation of different teaching subjects, (c) representation of both genders, (d) little or no previous experience carrying out online teaching, (e) representation of different technological skills and experiences, (f) availability to be interviewed and audio-recorded.

In order to capture the complexity of the educators' experiences during the emergency remote scenario, all questions were open-ended, which allowed them to share their reflections on their practice in a more open and honest way.

All interviews were conducted via teleconferencing, and lasted between 50 and 80 minutes. The educators participated of their own accord and agreed to have their responses recorded and incorporated in the present study.

In order to better analyze the collected information, the data from the nine interviews were examined through qualitative content analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). The data was transcribed verbatim and afterwards analyzed. Based on the participants' responses, we were able to determine broad categories and afterwards group them into three main themes: (1) implementation of new skills, (2) social interactions, and (3) student engagement.

The next section will provide an in-depth exploration of these themes.

3. Results

3.1.   Implementation of new skills

As a result of the pandemic, many members of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) community had to navigate the complexities and ambiguities of the new educational context. This has inevitably resulted in changing and transforming the HE system into a more collaborative one at the micro, meso and macro layers.

> "*For the first time in my ten years of teaching experience at university I felt a high level of uncertainty. […] I knew that I had to maintain a minimum quality of online teaching. […] Naturally, many questions emerged: shall I lecture synchronously or asynchronously or a mix of both? Which option is better? So many questions and so few precise answers...*" (Teacher no. 1)

The sudden shift in institutional teaching activities and conditions reshaped pedagogical practices and challenged the academics to identify and creatively respond to the students' needs, with ingenuity and speed.

In normal circumstances, the process of designing an online course is supported by a systematic approach with rigorous consideration of the target learners' distinctive characteristics and the selected instructional medium (Reiser, 2001). Specifically, the design process generally begins with an analysis of the students' needs and previous learning experiences. Based on these findings, the most fitting instructional methods and strategies are selected. Under the pandemic outbreak, however, systematic instructional design processes were unavailable. Instead, individual academics were given the task to produce successful outcomes without sufficient understanding or prior involvement in effective online teaching practices.

The academics were at the frontline of these changes and dealt with immense levels of pressure and confusion to their professional roles and practices (Watermeyer et al., 2021).

In these circumstances, there is a "temptation" to make comparisons between emergency remote teaching and learning and face-to-face instruction. But this seems to be to no one's benefit, because it is futile to try replicate the ways of designing on-campus classes. Transferring of work from one social and physical setting to the one online without taking into account the complexities and nature of the technology-driven medium can be quite challenging.

Research suggests that there are colossal discrepancies between the traditional pedagogical approach to online teaching and that required by the pandemic context (Hodges et al., 2020). Effective online teaching and learning derive from meticulous instructional design and planning processes (Branch & Dousay, 2015). What we know from research is that implementing online learning in such a narrow preparation window will most likely hinder teachers from taking full advantage of the affordances and opportunities of the online setup (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020; Watermeyer et al., 2021). Also, there is a fast-growing COVID-related literature that discusses the limitations of remote teaching.

Most interviewees recalled feeling frustrated and apprehensive at the beginning stages of online teaching. As one educator states: "*I realised that I had to get confortable with complexity and ambiguity. I really had no other choice if I wanted to succeed... My educational practices changed. Also my relationship with the students*." (Teacher no. 6).

They had neither technical nor pedagogical resources to produce high-quality learning materials for online teaching and learning. There are numerous instances where educators expressed their concerns regarding their lack of knowledge and insecurity regarding the new teaching context: "*Online teaching was an area that they had very little experience and technical skills.*" (Teacher no. 7), "*I was not prepared for this challenge*." (Teacher no. 9).

Moreover, designing a space for work in the home created an additional burden for academics. In regards to repositioning of work practice in the home, many academics described difficulties, but some also reported benefits of working from their own personal space.

"Even if I was not used to using my PC all the time when teaching, I actually started to enjoy it at a certain moment... I do not actually recall when this happened... I felt the materials were better organized this way." (Teacher no. 3)

"Because I teach students about ways of incorporating technology in their lessons, one can guess that I was really affected by this situation. [...]. When we used to go to university, there were times when the PCs did not work [...] or other such problems. But all these problems were not present anymore." (Teacher no. 5)

The academics were forced to adapt to the digital instructional medium, and experienced stress in adapting to remote practice in order to provide high-quality courses. Nevertheless, they recognized the importance of implementing new skills into existing teaching practices. This is particularly pertinent as the educators tried to find new ways of adapting the learning environment while spurring their professional development.

For instance, many teachers actually examined deeper principles of teaching and learning in the online medium and the ways technology can be integrated in pedagogical contexts.

"This period will surely influence in a positive way my future pedagogical practice. [...] I think it will be also useful for students, because they have learned a lot for the past 2 years about integrating technology into their lessons." (Teacher no. 5)

The changes that occured while adopting online teaching have transformed many teachers' usual educational practices, as one educator stated:

"I created a handbook or a step-by-step guide, however you want to call it, for students in order for us to better navigate this online context. This handbook was designed by me but was finalized with the students' help. This was actually the entire purpose... to better communicate with students and receive their feedback on things that actually affect their lives directly." (Teacher no. 8)

3.2.   Social interactions

Because academics and students usually interact through spontaneous interactions while being physically co-located on campus, the emergency remote context heavily changed the dynamic of interaction. Educators reported that working online led to a formalization of interpersonal exchanges which created disruptions for both parties. To address this tension, some academics set up online informal sessions to promote spontaneous interactions. These new setups spurred the creation of new connections and opportunities to get to know each other better.

"*In a way, I feel that this whole situation brought us closer together. I found out so many things about my students and even my colleagues. I think you can say that their partners, children and even pets became a peripheral part of our work.*" (Teacher no. 3)

"*I tried my best to bring everyone together because I noticed that after the first few weeks of remote classes students were starting to become less involved in their learning process. […] I have always put emphasis on meaningful interactions and constructive feedback, so one must realize how I perceived this sudden change. I knew that I had to do something, so I organized informal meetups with students to stimulate interaction and just be there for each other in times of need.*" (Teacher no. 5)

"*I could see that my students were really affected by this sudden shift to online teaching and learning. Therefore, I tried to strengthen the social relationship with the students. I did the same with my fellow colleagues.*" (Teacher no. 7)

3.3.   Student engagement

While academics' responsibilities were reinforced, there was little emphasis on students' contribution. In pre-pandemic context, the students were seen as dynamic actors of the educational community. Nevertheless, the transition to remote teaching and learning in a context of crisis turned the students into

passive recipients. There were several cases where academics greatly stressed this problem:

> *"The course was very different from the one you hold on-campus. […] There was no immediate feedback… actually, there were instances of it in the beginning, but as the time went by, the students became more and more disengaged. […] The interaction was suddenly missing and I knew that I had to do something to better this problem. So, I focused on achieving an efficient teacher-student interaction in the online context."* (Teacher no. 3)

Conventional lecturing practices encompass visual clues, such as body language and facial expressions. Educators heavily rely on these in order to adapt their teaching practices. But this could not be accomplished online, because the lecturer can hardly see the audience and collect clues related to the student's level of understanding and engagement. Therefore, educators had to thoroughly explain to students that being in different physical spaces did not mean that feedback cannot be part of their educational experiences. This is noteworthy because it can lead to a better collaboration and understanding of the work academics perform.

> *"I made it clear that I need them to ask me for clarification when they feel they need it. Sadly, I could not rely on visual clues, so something had to be done. Ultimately, we were all adults and we needed to support each other. Eventually, they understood my stance and collaborated with me in this regard."* (Teacher no. 4)

> *"I honestly believe that it is really necessary to be able to maintain student's learning concentration and engagement even in the online context. […] Therefore, I made efforts to design efficient online learning activities and ask for feedback regularly. […] I believe the key to successful online teaching and learning lies in choosing the proper feedback mechanism, which can be very different from the face-to-face classes."* (Teacher no. 9)

4. Discussion and conclusions

The present study aimed to examine university teachers' lived experience of online teaching. There were a variety of lessons learned through this research, and the insights could benefit other academic institutions.

At the conclusion of the interviews, a number of major ideas emerged, and such key themes include: implementation of new skills, social interactions, and student engagement.

The findings suggest that the digital instructional setting has been a distinctively challenging experience for university teachers. The sudden shift in institutional teaching activities and conditions reshaped pedagogical practices and challenged the academics to identify and creatively respond to the students' needs, with ingenuity and speed.

Moreover, designing a space for work in the home created an additional burden for academics. In regards to repositioning of work practice in the home, many academics described difficulties, but some also reported benefits of working from their own personal space.

Academics recognized the importance of implementing new skills into existing teaching practices, as they tried to find new ways of adapting the learning environment while spurring their professional development. Many of them actually examined deeper principles of teaching and learning in the online medium and the ways technology can be integrated in pedagogical contexts. Therefore, adopting online teaching have transformed many teachers' usual educational practices.

Concerning the relationship with students, the new setup spurred the creation of new connections and opportunities to get to know each other better and led to a better collaboration and understanding of the work academics perform. Rather than perceiving the environment as inconsequential, it is imperative to consider that the situatedness of work can generate opportunities for academics to learn and grow as professionals (Fuller & Unwin, 2004). Moving teaching practice from the campus to the home environment can influence the development of their practice. Therefore, it is paramount that educators

retain the advantages of working from home in ways that transform their practice.

Based upon current findings, the education system should be more prepared for eventual emergencies that call for remote teaching and learning. Therefore, it is crucial to establish actions that will facilitate a steady shift to online teaching and learning.

This period of change calls for the need to provide an evidence-based perspective in order to have knowledge of the distinctive characteristics, processes, results and the implications of online teaching and learning practices.

While accounts of how university teachers and higher education institutions acted in response to the transition from face-to-face to digital instructional settings is significant, more needs to be done on this subject. It is paramount to learn more about the potential and use of constructive online teaching and learning. In essence, it is necessary to go beyond emergency remote practices and elaborate on quality online practices that derive from rigorous instructional design and planning.

There is also a need to build capacity in universities for successful technology-driven communication, and to encourage strong links between the educational institution and students during remote teaching and learning.

Even though the emergency remote scenario format may provide a comprehensive understanding of adopted practices, it is quintessential to ensure that these learned lessons are indeed effective and that they inform further practices.

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