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Online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Aim and focus

- As part of the TLHE course, this study reflects on student experiences with online teaching methods.
- The aim is to generate knowledge about university students' experiences with learning through online courses during the covid-19 pandemic. This small study contributes to strengthening future online university courses to include digital teaching methods that are supportive of the student's learning process.

Background and scope

- During the Covid-19 pandemic, universities went into lock-down and courses turned digital at rapid speed (1). This furthered the debate on how to create online teaching, which is supportive of students' learning processes.
- Recent studies show a drop in students' well-being during the pandemic lock-down. They report low satisfaction with online teaching compared to teaching 'in-real-life (IRL), which can eventually cause higher drop-out rates (1,2).
- While much discussion takes place between instructors on how to design online teaching, less is known about how the students currently experience online teaching at the receiving end.
- This study does not discuss whether online teaching works better compared to IRL teaching. Rather, it explores 'what work best and how' by answering questions of 'if digital, then how?' (4).
- The study contributes to fields of research on online and blended learning at university level in general (3,4), and specifically during the covid-19 pandemic (1). It also contributes to studies on students' self-perceptions of learning (5).

Limitations

- The students' experiences with online courses are inevitably influenced by their general experiences of the pandemic lockdown. It is expectable that their online learning experience would be different during a period with fewer social restrictions.
- It is unknown how many students responded to the anonymous Padlet and only 18 out of 40 students completed the questionnaire. Hence, it is expectable that there are unexpressed views/experiences of online learning that could potentially influence the results and analysis of this study.

References

1. Garris C. & Fleck, B. (2020). Student Evaluations of Transitioned-Online Courses During the COVID-19 Pandemic in *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology,* Advance online publication.
2. Social situation survey of international students at UCPH during the Coronavirus 2020 at: https://anthropology.ku.dk
3. Hampton, D. et al. (2016). Student Engagement in Online Nursing Courses in *Nurse Educator*, 41/6, p. 294-298.
4. Hattie, J. (2015). The Applicability of Visible Learning to Higher Education in *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*. 1/1, p. 79–91.
5. Deslauries, L. et al. (2019). Measuring actual learning versus feeling of learning in response to being actively engaged in the classroom, PNAS.

Methods and data material

- Cohort of app. 40 students who participated in two online courses during spring semesters 2020 and 2021. Hence, the study is not representative but provides qualitative insight into a small sample of experiences in order to discuss general issues of online learning.
- Student experiences were gathered as written and anonymous feedback via three Padlets and one online mid-term survey (2021, SurveyXact). Written and anonymous feedback was supplemented with face-to-face feedback in the final course sessions.
- Questions concerned the different digital teaching methods (e.g. recorded videos, Padlets, break-out groups) as well as different online teaching formats (e.g. long online sessions vs. asynchronous teaching (outside class) with subsequent shorter in-class session).

Student experiences of digital teaching methods

Results and analysis

- Points of comparison: Although the aim of this study was not to compare online teaching with IRL teaching, this is the students' natural point of comparison when self-evaluating their learning processes. Many emphasize that they want to return to IRL teaching when the pandemic lock-down lifts. However, their responses also show how some initiatives and methods for online teaching are more supportive of their learning process than others. Listening to their experiences can therefore strengthen post-pandemic online teaching

- Online-fatigue: Many students write that they find it difficult to concentrate on zoom compared to IRL sessions. Some are more easily distracted or bored. Others find it difficult to follow discussions and grasping new theories through the screen.

- Online-anxiety: Some students write that they are anxious to speak during plenary online sessions. They feel that all eyes are on them. Muted microphones in the audience create a silence when a person talks, which exacerbates their fear. They write that IRL is less frightening since they then know each other better and can see and hear who is watching them (or not). It is worth testing whether turning on everyone's microphones during plenary discussions could potentially reduce zoom-anxiety by breaking the silence. In larger courses it could however cause an overwhelming background noise.

Zoom-fatigue is a real thing and I really appreciate attempts on countering this problem in a constructive way by e.g. doing shorter classes and then watching a movie instead.

It is harder to concentrate when its online, so its nice with quite a lot of (short) breaks.

The videos and movies are a nice way to break up the lecture and use as a starting point for discussion

Online seminars get a bit awkward since it is the same students talking, or no one talking. An idea could be at the beginning of the seminar to make fixed breakout groups to discuss the texts. Then have a plenum where we could ask questions to the texts. After that we could move to the weeks' topic in random breakout rooms - so that you get a group to 'feel safe' with, in the beginning of the class, but then also get to talk to different people later during the seminar.

Anonymous Padlet contributions are nice, and a positive change from classroom classes. I think it engages more people which is nice.

The online format is interesting as it makes it easy to invite people from around the world to join the classes.

- Shift scenery and tempi: all students write that longer teaching sessions work best if they are split into shorter slots with different methods and digital teaching tools. Shifting between break-out groups and plenary session is one approach. Using short video clips and other movie materials to break the length of the class is also appreciated. Students prefer minimum two breaks of 10-15 min in a three hour teaching session. Several students write that posing discussion questions before the break and allocating sufficient time for subsequent group discussions supports their active participation in the plenary sessions.

- Safe spaces: most students write that break-out groups support their learning process since they can discuss course content in a less intimidating space compared to the plenary sessions. They prefer small groups of 2 or 4 students. Some students also recommend that each break-out group appoints a presenter, so it is clear who is supposed to talk when they return to the plenary zoom session. This can help to break the awkward zoom-silence many students talk about. Many students appreciate using the Padlet as a substitute for the classroom billboard and write that the anonymous Padlet function makes them feel more at ease with writing thoughts and questions. Many student write that they appreciate when the instructor logs on/off the session 15 min ahead/after class. This creates a space for informal conversations with the instructor, to clarify small questions or concerns.

- Asynchronous teaching: many students appreciate watching movies or lectures ahead of class and thereafter shortening the in-class session. This made the in-class time shorter and more focused on discussion. However, a few students were concerned that asynchronous teaching results in less time to engage with the course instructor. It is therefore important to balance asynchronous teaching so time is set aside for student-instructor interaction at other instances. Some students find it helpful to their learning process when the instructor develops additional short video tutorials about more complicated course texts/assignments, which are uploaded as complementary material. This can help reduce uneven difficulty levels in mixed BA/MA courses.

- Bringing the world into class: many students write that they enjoy that guest lecturers from across the world can join online sessions. It creates new possibilities for global interactions and breaks up the long session with changing speakers and discussions.

Conclusions

- This study reflects on student experiences of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Learning from their experience can help design future online courses that are more supportive of students' learning processes. Results show that learning online can be very challenging compared to IRL sessions. Online classes are most supportive of students learning processes when they are split into shorter slots to reduce online-fatigue, using different online teaching methods interchangeably (shift between lectures, groups, plenaries, watching video materials, writing on Padlets/polls etc.). Asynchronous teaching works to reduce zoom fatigue but with careful attention to not reducing the students' possibilities for engaging with the course instructor. Allowing space for anonymous contributions and questions (e.g. via Padlet) as well as creating small 'safe-discussion-groups' helps to reduce online-anxiety.