E-Learning in Poland: Challenges, Opportunities and Prospects for Remote Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Article - April 2021

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Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

- COST Action 16207 European network for Problematic Internet Usage View project
- Computer piracy in Poland - perspective school, parents and youngsters View project
Spearman’s rho=0.071). However, none of them proved to be significant (p>0.1). These results call for a further, preferably quantitative, survey.

Taking future delivery methods in higher education into account, all of the lecturers agreed that digitalization was inevitable, and it creates opportunities in higher education such as introducing more blended or purely e-learning courses and implementing more digital tools in conducting lessons either offline or online. Most of the interviewed lecturers would keep online consultations in the future and would introduce more online classes for part-time students since students on these courses usually have full time work and “they really appreciated that they did not have to travel to the university”. On the other hand, all of them noticed that contactless lessons make students less motivated, and lecturers need to put more effort into helping students to overcome the difficulties since even the students missed face-to-face lessons. “The magic of personal lectures is in personal physical attendance”, one of the lecturers said.

**Conclusion**

The research conducted allowed lecturers to reflect on their teaching practices and they said offline teaching might be replaced by fully digital education because it is cost-saving and makes education more economically efficient, but cannot be replaced because the essence of the university disappears. The transition of higher education to a fully digital mode has required flexibility, agile resilience, patience, skills and competences as well as enthusiasm from the academic staff.

“Higher education in Hungary has long been undergoing a major reform in terms of methodology. This virus has forced” Hungarian universities to jump immediately into online education and “forces this (digital online) direction in the future”.

This paper raises the question whether a purely e-learning form of education could serve higher education best in the future or a blended or even a hybrid type of education should remain. Blended and hybrid learning are two terms but usually refer to one concept [1]. Both instruction methods combine traditional in-person teaching and online teaching (e.g. video conferencing, online courses etc.) [2]. Both utilize a mixture of offline and online instruction methods, the difference is in the space, time and groups. The same group, at different times and in different spaces define blended learning, in the course of which the same students complete some activities online and some offline. On the other hand, different groups, the same time and different space characterize hybrid learning, in the course of which some students participate in-person while others participate online, for instance.

Based on the qualitative research results, lecturers at Óbuda University stand by blended education where online consultations could serve as an active and efficient supplement to their educational practices and most lectures are face-to-face combined with online activities and online consultations.

**References**


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**Introduction**

For over two decades, a debate has been taking place in Poland on the role new media should play in learning and teaching. The importance of ICT is evidenced by the fact that computer classes and information technology are an obligatory subject from the first stage of education. Elements of ICT implemented at various educational levels and among various groups have been a permanent component of the Polish educational system for many years. Since activities in the area of digitalization have been carried out for over two decades, the rapid transformation of the analogue environment into digital equivalents should not generate many serious problems. This hypothesis was subjected to a thorough assessment in 2020.

**Emergency e-remote teaching and learning**

Since March 2020, Polish formal education and the non-formal sector have experienced a state of accelerated digital transition. In describing the transformation related to the implementation of e-learning solutions, two stages can be distinguished:

- the first, from March to June 2020, was characterized by the dominance of crisis distance learning;
- the second, from October 2020 until the lifting of restrictions, was characterized by a full or similar methodology to professionally delivered e-learning.
In the first period, the majority of classes were conducted in the Emergency Remote Teaching mode. This meant that teachers sought to transform the didactic process using the resources available. This did not differ significantly from what happened in other countries. The scale of the phenomenon and the challenges of the crisis situation resulted in the emergence of many problems in the organization of classes at all educational stages. The COVID-19 crisis forced classes to be taught using ICT without debate or consultation. Those teachers who found themselves without methodical support tried on their own, with the use of the available tools for education and synchronous communication (Skype, Zoom, Google Meet, Cisco Webex, Moodle, etc.), to design an educational environment which would allow them to continue the courses they had started offline. This was not an easy task due to the lack of previous experience in this area among Polish teaching staff. The first stage was a time of crisis in distance learning, because teachers (including academic teachers) had only intuitive knowledge of the methodology of distance learning, they did not receive adequate technical support, and in most cases they had to gain e-learning skills through self-education. Many such activities were carried out with the use of tutorials available on the Internet, peer support, or the implementation of e-learning with a constant concern about the quality of education. In schools and universities with a high level of computerization, where the development of the digital competences of the teaching staff had previously been attended to, the transformation was much faster and more effective.

Higher education institutions and universities in Poland during the pandemic

Higher education entered the pandemic period more prepared for e-learning than education at lower levels. Universities in Poland have been conducting selected classes using blended e-learning for a long time. E-learning has been treated as an educational instrument, something that is perceived as a modern solution but which is an attractive addition rather than a basic tool. None of the leading Polish universities decided to take the bold step of fully digitalized education until the beginning of 2020. Many of the courses were delivered in an asynchronous or a mixed mode.

For several years, the free Moodle solution has been extremely popular in Polish higher education. Before the pandemic, this platform was the most frequently used web application for academic e-learning. A great advantage of the software is its advanced configurability and the minimal costs incurred to launch a virtual educational environment. However, many of the academic lecturers noted that Moodle mainly became a repository for files (presentations, text materials, e-books, scientific articles, tasks) rather than a real learning environment. In the initial period of the pandemic, however, Moodle fulfilled its objectives by becoming one of the main or complementary channels for transmitting knowledge. Has it become a real learning environment that provides intuitive operation and interaction between students and lecturers? The answer is not obvious.

The first period of crisis e-learning was a difficult time for many university lecturers in Poland. Currently, there is no representative quantitative data available showing the cross-section of academic e-learning during the COVID pandemic. Based on scarce reports, in the majority of universities the most popular solutions supporting learning and teaching are the following platforms and communicators: Teams, Zoom, Meet, Skype, Messenger, Moodle [1]. In the period from October 2020, solutions based on online direct contact between academic staff and students (live streaming) have been preferred. According to the results of the research collected at the Pedagogical University of Krakow, about 18% of teachers rated their own digital competence in e-learning as poor or very poor. Most difficulties were reported in relation to more complex platforms such as Moodle. About one third of the respondents declared that their skills related to the use of this free platform were low [2]. From the data collected among researchers from Krakow, almost 2/3 had no online teaching experience before the pandemic. Only a few percent had conducted e-learning classes very frequently before March 2020 [3]. The pandemic became a time of forced updating of digital knowledge and skills among Polish academic teachers.

Taking into account the reported needs of teachers and students, universities offered fast and effective courses for the complete transformation of education. The Pedagogical University of Krakow provided several courses on using the Moodle and Teams direct communication software. Both solutions became official teaching tools within a short time. Academic teachers who had a lack of practical knowledge received information on how to conduct exercises and lectures with the use of these applications. Several hundred academic staff took advantage of the offer of the European Centre for Lifelong Learning and Multimedia Education (ECKUM), an internal university unit focused on digital didactic research and training. Operating until March 2020, ECKUM proved to be one of the most practical internal teaching and research units during the pandemic. Similar centers operate in most Polish universities, offering technical support in the use of e-learning platforms and the development of the digital competences of academic teachers.

The mission of universities in Poland is not only to carry out research and teaching but also to cooperate with local communities. Therefore, since the beginning of the pandemic, the Pedagogical University of Krakow has been offering continuous in-service training courses for primary and secondary school teachers. The courses cover basic issues related to creating educational content and operating the Moodle and Teams platforms (creating teams and channels, inviting students to remote meetings, enhancing student involvement in remote activities, forming attendance lists, making presentations, desktops, and whiteboards available, using chat, class booklet, tests,
tasks, placing student materials as read-only or also for editing). The courses also included the advanced options of the Moodle platform (Quizzes, BigBlueButton videoconferencing system, Glossary of Terms, Division of students into groups, Quiz Hot Potatoes, Voting, MindMap, Questionnaire service, Gradebook, Obtaining feedback). So far several hundred teachers have completed the courses.

It is also worth highlighting the implementation of innovations in academic e-learning. One of the non-standard solutions used so far is the SELI platform – Smart Eco-system for Learning and Inclusion – which was developed between 2018 and 2020 by specialists from Latin America (Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Uruguay), the Caribbean (Dominican Republic) and Europe (Finland, Turkey, Poland). It is a multilingual platform used in these countries as a tool supporting academic e-learning. The use of the SELI platform provides special support for people with special educational needs (visual, hearing, or cognitive deficits). The platform was built for users who do not have extensive digital competences or the time resources to create modern digital educational environments. The pandemic period coincided with the intensive testing of the SELI platform in schools and universities from the above-mentioned countries, including the Pedagogical University [4].

Conclusions

From October 2020, school classes are again being carried out using ICT. Even though the situation is still difficult, the present model of e-learning has slightly different characteristics from the emergency e-remote teaching and learning phase described earlier. The digital exclusion rate (lack of equipment, low quality internet connections) has been reduced in many cases. Teachers (and academics) were compelled by the authorities to avoid asynchronous forms of remote learning in favor of synchronous communication. It is increasingly rare that lecturers or teachers send their students self-study files without “live” contact. Educational institutions as “learning organizations” have recently undergone breakthrough transformations forced by external circumstances. The rapid digital transformation of Polish education is the largest unplanned pedagogical experiment in recent history. Conclusions from this experience are becoming increasingly clear. New technologies have become fully-fledged channels connecting learners and teachers, but they are not able to replace the traditional offline model which allows relationships to be built, and thus going beyond the transmission of information. This experiment, driven by ICT, has also highlighted a number of challenges. Teachers can now see, to a greater extent, the potential of new technologies, and they are more aware of the limitations of using ICT with certain groups (pre-school children, people with certain disabilities and learning difficulties). The voices of technophobes, who might otherwise seek to prove that analogue teaching methods are outdated and unnecessary in the information age, are heard less frequently [5] [3]. It is also noticeable that institutions, regions, and countries that have invested in the development of ICT infrastructure and the lifelong learning of their teaching staff have been much better prepared in all respects for full e-learning than universities that (re)acted under adverse circumstances [4].

References


The Challenges of Distance Learning to Student Mental Health

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