

IN THE DEFENSE OF TEACHERS IN TIMES OF CRISES – THOUGHTS, IDEAS, OPINIONS REGARDING TEACHERS

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Abstract: *The noble tradition that viewed the profession of teachers and teaching itself as an important service has lately been declining. Educators used to be considered a valuable human resource in guiding students towards a responsible future. The outbreak of coronavirus disease has been declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and the virus has now spread to many countries and territories. What we do know for sure is that it is transmitted through direct contact. Therefore, education premises have changed radically and so has the role of teachers. Measures taken by education institutions throughout the whole world tried to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 and consequently students and staff were lockdown. What is a teacher nowadays? This is the question that will try to find answers in this paper. Teachers assume the role of educators. Thanks to technology, they step backwards and delimit themselves from the role of authority they used to hold and become guides, facilitators, mentors and sometimes even supporters. Is it the time to adopt a different approach to teaching in general and teaching of English as a Foreign Language in particular? What is the role technology can play in education in the current socio-economic context? Does it throw shadows on the part played by teachers?*

Keywords: *online teaching; face-to-face education; teachers; educators.*

JEL Classification: *J60.*

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought challenges for the higher education community worldwide namely the urgent request for face-to-face university courses to be taught online. A clear fact is that education has turned online for several months and it will continue in this fashion for a while.

It has become a common practice these days to comment on health, government measures, education etc. Everyone is an expert. Mainly regarding education issues. All people can explain why online teaching at all levels -from kindergarten to university- is not a solution, how things can be done better, how teachers should react to the new challenges. Hence the idea of the present paper to depict some similarities and differences between face-to-face and live online lessons trying to underline the role of teachers in the new learning environment. It will also include the results of a questionnaire applied to university students of Economic Sciences, University of Oradea regarding the above-mentioned issues.

Recent technological upheavals have determined a growth in popularity of online learning over the years. Providing online education has become more popular than ever, even before the present pandemic crisis; teachers are faced with a unique new challenge – managing and handling the differences between traditional and digital learning. The most provocative challenge of the online education remains maintaining motivation at reasonable levels so as to keep the students in front of devices. Besides it, the online has piled on to the stresses and workloads of the academic staff who were already struggling to balance teaching, research, and service obligations as Houston, Meyer and Paewai 2006 (in Rapanta, 2020:1). Moreover, there is a lack of pedagogical content knowledge needed for teaching online (Angeli and Valanides 2005).

2. Literature Review

There are countless definitions of online learning in the literature, definitions that are widely used with a variety of meanings and reflect the diversity of practice and associated technologies. For the purposes of this article, online learning is learning rendered by means of the Internet. There is the concept of ‘networked learning’ that focuses on human-human connections (Banks et al. 2003) but online learning is more than that. On the other hand, ‘eLearning’ and ‘digital education’ include a wider range of digital resources, not just the Internet therefore it is more than online learning. Teaching face-to-face and teaching online are both teaching, still very different. Online education starts when faculty move from the traditional classroom to the online classroom. The unexpected and swift turning to online teaching instead of the face-to-face educational work, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, has made teachers sensitive to these differences. In the online scenario there is a distance between the student and the teacher and both use some form of technology to access the learning materials, whereas there is some kind of support provided to learners as Anderson 2011a (in Rapanta, 2020:5).

According to researchers online education involves a diverse range of tools, resources, pedagogical approaches, roles, organizational arrangements and forms of interaction, monitoring and support—with many possible combinations of substitution and integration according to Bates and Poole (in Rapanta, 2020:20); in the meantime, Anderson rightfully asserts that there is a valuable gain of this type of education that involves ‘the capacity for shifting the time and place of the educational interaction’ (Anderson 2011b: 344) and that is flexibility.

Teachers are process designers in the online education as they choose materials, resources, environment, strategies, they implement time management that help students to learn (Richey, Klein and Tracey in Rapanta, 2020:7).

In addition to the designer role, instructors are also actors that perform in the play they had designed themselves as Goodyear and Dimitriadis (in Rapanta, 2020:4). Our goal is to make explicit some main aspects of the online teaching expertise, as perceived by students as recipients of the educational process and aimed at mirroring the role of teachers in the course of the process. We conclude the paper with a discussion in which we reflect on the teachers’ role as educators in the present circumstances.

3. Method and Findings

The method used for this study was applying questionnaires to students of University of Oradea, especially studying Economics as they can provide useful insights on the researched topics, opinions which are not so easily or quickly obtained through other means. First, we drew up a questionnaire aimed at collecting essential information about the students: their proficiency, learning preferences, computer access and eventually, identifying the preferred style etc. Students of different specializations (Marketing, Management, Finances, Accounting, and International Business) of our faculty were selected to fill out the questionnaire. They covered all levels of education -1st, 2nd, 3rd, and MA students. There were 150 respondents. They sent their answers online. The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions and were exchanged by e-mail, after the goal of the research was explained to the participants. The questions were as follows:

1. Is the online educational process any different from face-to-face teaching and learning?
2. In what aspects do you think online learning is different from face-to-face teaching and learning?
3. Do you think online teaching is more successful than face-to-face learning?
4. Do you miss anything while learning online?
5. Do you find online control tests effective?
6. Do you need online sessions with your teachers?
7. Would you rather work alone or on live online sessions with colleagues and teachers?
8. Do you consider online preparation useful?
9. Do you feel motivated when working online? If yes, what motivates you?
10. Do you consider the teachers' support as effective in online?

As shown in Figure 1, the huge majority perceive a difference between the two educational manner, the *yes* answers covering 89%, the *no* answers reaching 0.9%, the rest being probably uninvolved in the survey. The response is logical, expected, obvious. First, online teaching and learning require careful consideration for how technology can facilitate the types of interaction we seek. In point of content, online learning relies more on materials texts, videos, exercises rather than presentations, role-play, discussions that are specific to the traditional way of teaching.

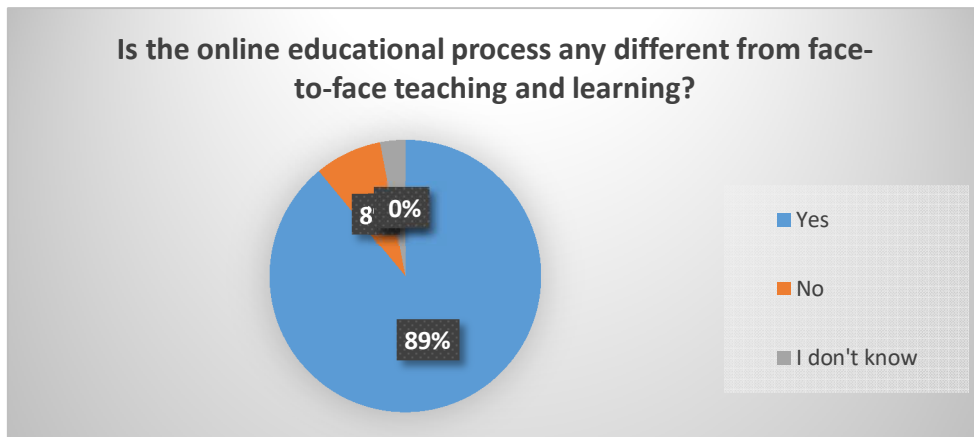


Figure 1
Source: authors' own findings

The second diagram in Figure 2 shows the answers regarding the differences between online and face-to-face education as perceived by students. All students submitted their answers and, as results demonstrate, motivation or rather lack of motivation concern students the most, whereas in point of topics and materials there is a slight difference between the two means of education.

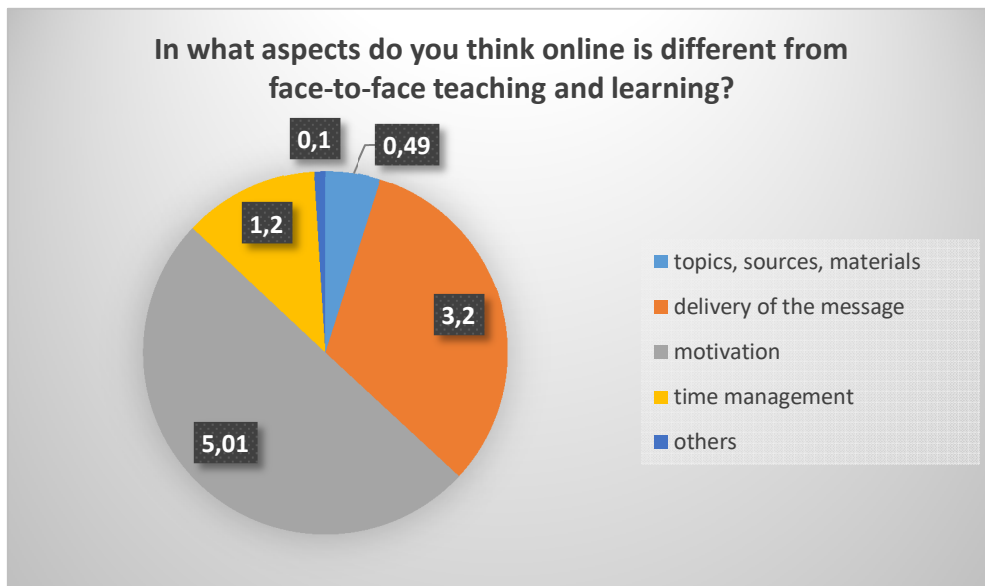


Figure 2
Source: authors' own findings

The third question 'Do you think online teaching is more successful than face-to-face learning?' had an unexpected result: 97% of the respondents answered *no*, meaning they would rather follow the traditional way of teaching. Autonomy (avoiding interactions, managing time and resources) as well as accessibility are the most important aspect of learning online. The proper guidance tasks centered on students and not on syllabus, social activity and peer collaboration are among the reasons why so many preferred face-to-face education.

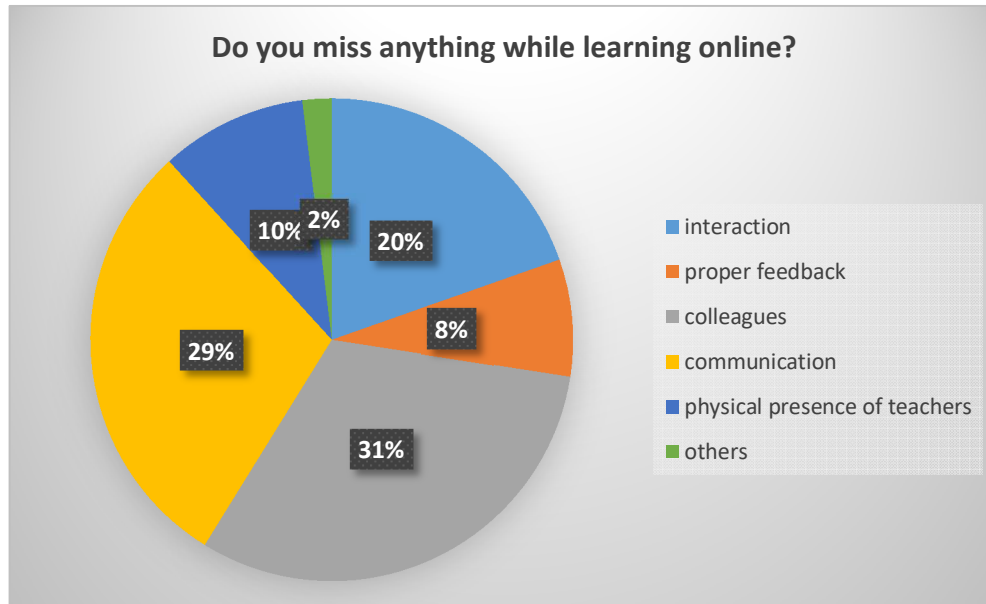


Figure 3
Source: author's own findings

Figure 3 presents students' choices on what they miss while learning online, that is the fourth question of the survey. Not surprisingly at all there is an urging need for human real face-to-face interaction. This answer could also relate to the lack of motivation underlined by the second question of the survey.

The fifth questions 'Do you find online control tests effective?' received a predictable answer meaning that students were honest admitting they can cheat while sitting for an online test. To their conclusion we could also admit the shortcomings of internet connection, devices that may not work properly at the requested time or platforms that are not calibrated enough for the number of people using it at the same time. Nonetheless, it is important to monitor and assess learner progress. Teachers should conceive chunks of tasks for students to engage in (individually, in groups or teams, etc.) and this will eventually provide and insight on student engagement. Assessment is of utmost importance for both teachers and learners.

When answering with *yes* at the question 'Do you need online sessions with your teachers?', students were asked to provide one-two word reasons and here is the

result: 78% of students considered online sessions useful when they could relate effectively to their teachers (both in writing, but also visually). The words that students used to render the importance of connecting with the teacher were very diverse, still there were several that appeared repeatedly: 'better understanding', 'socializing', 'explanations', 'guide'. As for guidance, online learning literally means mediated communications, teachers should offer clearly expressed indications from teachers. Teachers should encourage more student autonomy, nevertheless, for this purpose online teaching requires more careful design. Consequently, the role of teachers does not cease once everything turned online, there is still a need for facilitating the process, for guiding the learning, even for social connections. Figure 4 shows the results of the seventh item regarding the way students preferred to work.

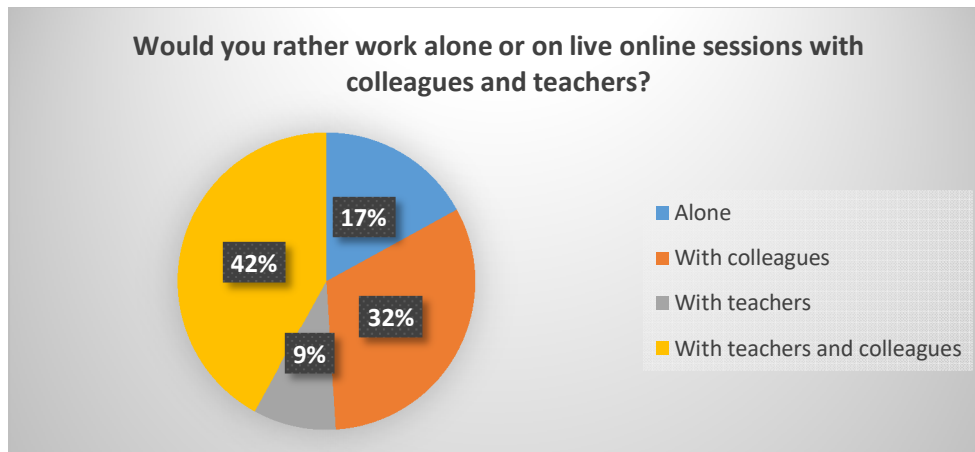


Figure 4
Source: author's own findings

The diagram reveals the preference of working together probably because of so many years of traditional education system. Students need guidance, interaction, anxiety is reduced. Students will have to adapt simultaneously to new ways of teaching and learning and deal with all the logistical complications and emotional stress of the pandemic and its associated lock down. In habitual face-to-face educational system, all participants rely on many supports, cues, prompts, etc. In other words, the physical world provides a variety of resources which are missed once they are gone.

When responding to the item 'Do you feel motivated when working online? If yes, what motivates you?' students provided affirmative answers in their majority (75% answered yes). The interesting aspects reveal the need for feedback in order to be motivated and thus we understand the importance of assessment as already presented above. They mentioned the general recognition of their results, teacher appraisal, good grades, among the most important motivational factors.

The last question referred again to the teacher's support and its importance for students. Students considered that the presence of the teacher was important as mediators between the content and the learners. And this is probably the key ingredient for a successful online class. This means facilitating, supporting, guiding so that everyone can learn, as each one of us is different in what we know, what motivates us or what we value most. When online, there are numerous materials, but they alone cannot provide the mediation. In many ways we can state that teachers are what they teach; they promote a living model of how what we teach gets real. Materials alone cannot do it. Teachers as life creators.

4. Similarities and differences between the two types of learning: face-to-face and live online courses as they result from the survey

Live online lessons are like traditional face-to-face classes as there is a teacher presenting information and interacting with a group of people in real time. To this end, teachers have to engage students with practical course applications, demonstrations, interesting guests, interactive assignments and group projects, etc. However, beyond these broad similarities, we can say teaching in a conventional learning environment is different from teaching online.

4.1. Class participation

In face-to-face courses students must listen and participate in class, take notes, study, and complete coursework, assignments so as to have success. In the online environment, successful students must add motivation, more discipline, knowledge of time management.

4.2. Teacher as facilitator

In face-to-face courses, students can get information and feedback easier, whenever they attend class, whereas in online courses students depend even more on the facilitation, assignment clarification, and feedback provided by their teacher.

4.3. Communication

Face-to-face courses rely on in-person dialogues and conversations; in online learning, the communication involves more non-verbal correspondence largely in the form of email, instant messages, video and audio messages, discussion forums. Nevertheless we can underline here an advantage of online courses that is students may view, reread and review again and again the messages conveyed as compared to face-to-face courses where they may hear one time what it was said during class.

4.4. Online behaviour is different from the face-to-face one

On one hand, online learning requires digital literacy and the netiquette becomes a must. Even if teaching online does not literally mean teachers need to be proficient at computer programming languages, they still need to be comfortable working within a learning management system and basic computing programs. Building healthy and productive relationships without the face-to-face interaction may happen only following the netiquette This includes several aspects of the Internet, such as email,

social media, online chat, web forums, website comments, multiplayer gaming, and other types of online communication and the general idea is to respect others online. Among the unofficial rules to be followed are: avoiding posting inflammatory or offensive comments online; respecting others' privacy by not sharing personal information, photos, or videos that another person may not want published online; sticking to the topic when posting in online forums; offering to help when asked; thanking others who help you online.

4.5. The role of teachers

In both types of instruction, the role of the teacher is to teach. Nevertheless, teaching online means an entirely different thing than teaching in a face-to-face class. All the information in the world is at easily accessible. Therefore, teaching online becomes less about teaching information and more about facilitating student efforts to think critically, apply and make sense of new knowledge.

4.6. The design of an online course

The design of an online course is different from the traditional face-to-face approach, as it should be strongly student-centered where the teacher's role is more focused on facilitation and on the student support regarding competences development. Along with the technological advances, students have gained independence and ability to virtually communicate. Consequently, the criteria for selection of teaching methods and strategies should be focused on the student rather than dependent on the teacher's teaching methods and abilities. For this, considerable efforts have been spent

5. Conclusions

Firstly, considering the results of the questionnaire it is beyond any doubt that the attitude towards online learning should encompass a multitude of aspects. The main purpose of online education which has become a must in Romania just overnight, should be efficiency and enjoyable learning facilitated by the technologies available to the teacher, to students. New technologies offer limitless possibilities to improvise and experiment in the field of education. On the one hand, there are many limits imposed by this sudden turn to exclusive online approach on teaching and learning, namely the need for new design for curricula, for adequate teaching evaluation methods, effective pedagogical methods, and they seem nowadays more urgent than before. Therefore, the main investment should be in teachers and their professional development as they need to be updated to the use of online technologies. And we refer to teachers as playing an enormous part in the educational process.

Secondly, we will conclude by pointing out some of the most important roles of teachers thus answering the question stated in the abstract. No, the role of teachers does not fade away.

The teacher remains a guide for students ready to adapt to all needs as after all, different online learners prefer different learning styles and modes.

The teacher is a facilitator, a very creative and innovative one that come up with effective ideas to facilitate online school students further. The teacher offers different options when it comes to assignments and projects and bringing fresh ideas to the table. There are plenty of multi-media options at the time of demonstrating knowledge.

The teacher is a motivator as online learning more than anything else require highly motivated learners to make it through the process as online learning is hard work.

The teacher should provide constructive feedback, pointing out the weak areas while educating the student to become better.

The teacher is also a model that supports the students, comforts them and develop their levels of confidence.

The teacher is a learner as well as the online teaching techniques develop constantly so there is a permanent need for training and updating. The teacher needs to remain a lifelong learner.

The teacher is a communicator that needs to remain effective. Teacher-to-student and student-to-student communication play a vital role in an online learning environment. Online students are taught that communication is the key to student success and the teacher should maintain student engagement in the learning process at all costs.

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