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EXPLORING ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING. A CASE STUDY

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***Abstract**: The present paper focuses on the practices of tertiary level students with digital learning and teaching and their views on the strategies employed in both situations, as many of them also work as or have some experience as teachers. Since the development of digital competencies is no longer optional, our study proposed to take a closer look at the specific learning/ teaching strategies and to map any changes of attitude, or practice towards teaching/ learning in a digital format, for a particular group of students in the field of humanities. Since many of the students train to become teachers and by the end of this academic year will have conducted more than half of the their BA programme through online classes, and the MA students will most likely only meet their colleagues face to face for the first time at their graduation ceremony, their expertise with the use of digital resources, particular learning strategies and the identified "glitches" in what concerns teaching, prove a very important source for re-shaping and debugging this medium of instruction to ensure effectiveness of outcome.*
***Keywords**: digital learning, digital teaching, digital competencies, lifelong learner, upskill, reskill*

1. Introduction

Life in the time of Covid 19 (to paraphrase the title of a stellar piece of literary work) has caused a dramatic change in who we are and how we behave. Ready or not, whether we like it or not, we all turned digital to a certain extent, both personally and professionally. We do seem to spend at least as much time online as we do offline. Such a spectacular and rapid transformation is bound to have far reaching effects, be they short or long term. Research is no exception from the other aspects of human life deeply affected by pandemic induced social distancing. This time last year when we were working on an article we published in the same journal, we observed that: "research on digitally related teaching and learning will undoubtedly soar in the next decades. The Covid 19 pandemic crisis has seen to that" (Goșa and Mureșan 2020:91). How right we were. Social distancing still haunts us, and no researcher can ignore it either when dealing with the topic, or with the design of the research process. Neither could we.

As such, in the study mentioned above, a questionnaire-based survey, we investigated perceptions and attitudes towards online teaching and learning from students in philology at all three Bologna university levels (BA, MA, PhD) from our university. What we found out was that most of the respondents saw themselves as being digitally literate. They also manifested the belief that they have managed to develop new skills and have become increasingly familiar with gadgets and tools, and also displayed an understanding of the importance of digital skills in today's society. All these point to a positive attitude towards online teaching and learning. On the other hand, the respondents identified some negative effects, such as the physical effects of the increased online activity, triggered by an exclusive reliance on technology (see Goșa and Mureșan 2020).

While the results of the survey turned out to contribute to the understanding of the importance of digital skills among the students targeted, quite a few stones remained unturned and relevant meanings attributed to online teaching and learning remained uncovered. This prompted us to think of and design a follow-up study which aimed at exploring our students' views, this time in their own frames of mind. To this end, we resorted to the qualitative research paradigm. Even though initially we intended to conduct semi-structured interviews with students belonging to the same group, eventually we agreed upon a google-form open-ended questionnaire, as it enabled us to address the entire population frame, rather than a self-selected group of interviewees. It is the results of this follow-up study that we present in this paper.

2. Research Frame

We must mention here that the 2020 article focused on aspects of digital literacy in the context of a generation which is claimed to be "bathed in bits" (Tapscott 2008:39), even more so than the previous one, and for whom digital skills are no longer optional, but for whom both the present and future job market demands – and the educational context calls for – these competencies to be activated and developed (see European Commission 2018; OECD 2019; Nesta and Pearson 2017). If previously the aspects of competency development were covered, we now look at student autonomy as reflected by the awareness of both strategies and instruments employed by students in order to best cope with the requirements and the constraints of online education.

Although the importance and the influence of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has been brought into discussion for some time now, the pandemic situation has accelerated the transition to the employment of digital instruments in education and has highlighted the importance of skills in mastering digital tools. As different overviews of CALL research (Chen et al. 2021; Gillespie 2020) demonstrate concerning the evolution of CALL topics in research, the last few years have seen an increase in topics such as seamless learning, wiki-based learning VW (Vowpal Wabbit – an open-source online interactive machine learning system), VR (Virtual Reality Training) or MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning).

At national level, although a digitalization trend in education was present at a rather limited level, the pandemic situation caused for the accelerated adaptation to a different medium of instruction and triggered the need to define and adopt a number of educational strategies, with direct implications for teaching methodologies. Thus, the Romanian Ministry of Education proposed for discussion a national strategy for the digitalization of education in Romania in the context of a very low level of digital competence – only 11% of the 16-74 year-old Romanians having advanced digital skills, while 43% of the people having limited Babeș-Bolyai University (https://www.ubbcluj.ro/ro/infoubb/noua_pedagogie_universitara/), University of Bucharest (https://unibuc.ro/continuitatea-pedagogica-si-pandemia-prof-univ-drti-anca-nedelcu/), or specialized training programmes such as graduate courses offered by the West University of Timișoara – "Profesorul XXI – un model de învățare pe tot parcursul vieții. Dezvoltarea de competențe digitale, antreprenoriale și de expresie culturală în domeniul științelor umaniste" or "Resurse educaționale și digitale pentru instruire online".

Additionally, the multitude of available learning/ teaching platforms and resources also implies a number of sub-skills that need to be actively developed in order to be able to navigate the present changes safely. Thus, we must mention here the learning to learn competence and its two important sub-competences of *managing learning* and *fostering a growth mindset* as discussed in the EU LifeComp framework (Sala et al. 2020), as well as the activities and teaching methods that empower students to develop their learning autonomy (further distancing from traditional teacher-centred learning). It is thus worth mentioning here that these two sub-competences are defined by Sala et al. (2020:59) as specific manifestations: managing learning

involves "awareness of and confidence in one's own and others' abilities to learn, improve and achieve with work and dedication; understanding that learning is a lifelong process that requires openness; curiosity and determination; reflecting on other people's feedback as well as on successful and unsuccessful experiences to continue developing one's potential", while fostering a growth mindset implies "awareness of one's own learning interests, processes and preferred strategies, including learning needs and required support; planning and implementing learning goals, strategies, resources and processes, reflecting on and assessing purposes, processes and outcomes of learning and knowledge construction, establishing relationships across domains". In the present study we focused on investigating students' experience with both learning and teaching online, from the perspective of students who have to deal with the reality of putting lifelong learning skills to use, namely they have to manifest an understanding for the need to constantly "upskill and reskill […] in a variety of formal, non-formal and informal settings both intentionally and incidentally, requiring an attitude of willingness and openness to learning from each interaction and experience" (Sala et al. 2020:62).

Concerning the teaching end of the continuum, a large number of publications have dealt with the different pedagogical aspects of online education for a while now, such as Smith (2005), who successfully compiled a comprehensive list of fifty-one competencies for online instructors, of importance before, during and/or after the course, or Shelton and Saltman (2004), who discuss specific principles to be used in designing effective online courses. Online instruction, especially at tertiary level, is not a novelty, but in Romania many universities have only recently implemented online teaching platforms, making the switch to compulsory, exclusive online teaching for all staff members a little difficult at first.

2.1. Method, instrument and respondents

> "Qualitative research represents a legitimate mode of social and human science exploration, without apology or comparisons to quantitative research" (Creswell 2013:6).

The claim presented in the above quote does seem to suggest that qualitative research might be viewed by some theoreticians and practitioners of research as not being scientific enough to be taken seriously. However, even though in its historical becoming, qualitative research was regarded as marginal and perhaps noteworthy only as complementary to quantitative research, for some time now its position has been reconsidered and its worth re-evaluated. Thus, qualitative approaches to research are not only seen as trustworthy used singly, but even recommended in certain cases. Hood (2009:67) observes that "the qualitative researcher is interested in rich, real and uniquely human material." Goșa (2014:57) further expands on this idea by claiming that the qualitative researcher is "perhaps a new kind of researcher" who is "interested in understanding a phenomenon in its complexity, not just in terms of its generalisability." Qualitative research is also exploratory in nature. As the name suggests, "exploratory studies seek to explore what is happening and to ask questions about it. They are particularly useful when not enough is known about a phenomenon." (Grey 2014:72)

As mentioned previously, questionnaires are not a typical instrument in qualitative research. On the other hand, unstructured and semi-structured interviews are. What they have in common, though, is that they both invite the respondents "to talk about their own attitudes, beliefs, behaviours or experiences" (Rowley 2012:260), with the difference that "questionnaires are research tools through which people are asked to respond to the same set of questions in a pre-determined order" (Grey 2014:404), while "an interview is a verbal exchange in which one person, the interviewer, attempts to acquire information from and gain an understanding of another person, the interviewee" (Grey 2014:434). The big difference between these two research instruments, nonetheless, resides in the way these people "talk" when they share their

experiences and views. While in a questionnaire they usually answer close-ended questions, by choosing options set in the researcher's frame of mind, most often in a written format, qualitative interviews are made up of open-ended questions to which the interviewees answer more freely in their own frames of mind. Moreover, being delivered verbally and synchronically, the interviewer has the opportunity to probe further and deeper to find out what a respondent thinks about the investigated phenomenon. In brief, what characterises qualitative interviews are the open-ended questions**,** which some researchers also aptly call probes or probing questions (see, for example, Grey 2014:414). Grey also refers to the potential for richness of responses, some of which may not have been anticipated by the researchers." And this, in his view, "may lead to interesting or unexpected responses." (Grey 2014:414)

In all, the purpose of the follow-up research we envisaged did seem to suggest that the qualitative interview was best suited, be it either unstructured or semi-structured. Nonetheless, as mentioned before, we eventually decided to use an open-ended questionnaire rather than interviews. There were two reasons which underlined our choice. The first one was, what else, the pandemic times we have been living in for almost two years now. Its inherent social distancing, as the buzz social phenomenon of the day, brought about online teaching, especially at university level. There are students who are graduating this year who have hardly, or not at all, set foot in their alma mater. As such, the only option that we had was to conduct online interviews with our students. As any researcher knows, online interviewing is a difficult endeavour and special care should be taken to obtain the confidence of a respondent, to help them get through the fact that they are being recorded and to establish a good rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee. But conducting online interviews in a context like the Romanian one, which is fairly new to this kind of instruments being used, particularly with young respondents, can turn out to be even more daunting. The practice of interviewee response is not taught in schools, power relationships between teachers and students are still strenuous at times (a reminiscence of the past regime), making it difficult to go over barriers and make a student respondent open up and share his/her views. In other words, we considered that a qualitative interview-based investigation would have a very low success rate.

The second reason behind our choice of not using qualitative interviews was both time related and reach related. It was our intention to resort to the same target population that we applied our initial close-ended questionnaire to. This population consisted of 642 students who were given the link to the google form close-ended questionnaire with a response rate of 19%. Interviews with such a large number of respondents, even self-selected on a voluntary basis, would have been an almost impossible task due to the time-consuming effort and other logistic-related considerations. Consequently, we decided to design a second questionnaire to be addressed to the targeted student population: BA, MA, and PhD students having English as medium of instruction.

This second instrument that we used turned out to be a hybrid between a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, as it shared the characteristics of both. It was a self-completion google form, nevertheless, and except for a very few demographic close-ended questions (gender group and level of study related), all the other questions were open-ended, resembling the script of a semi-structured interview. Due to this open-endedness and the strain put on the respondent it entails, we tried to keep the questions to the minimum. As such, the core questions the respondents had to think about and answer were the following:

- To what extent and in what ways has your personal life changed in terms of the use of computer-based technology use as compared to the life before the outbreak of Covid 19?
- To what extent and in what ways has your attitude, your feelings, your view towards the use of computer-based technology changed during pandemic times?

- To what extent and in what ways do you use computer-based technology in your life as a student?
- To what extent and in what ways did you need and appeal to help and/or training in the use of computer-based technology?
- What, in your views would make online teaching more effective?
- If you had any teaching experience so far, has anything changed in the strategies that you use due to the pandemic outbreak?
- Is there anything that you would like to add concerning the use of computer-related technology before and after the pandemic outbreak?

Sufficient (but not too much) space was provided in the form for the respondents to complete their answers in. This was done for two main reasons: to suggest a possible length of answers that should be focused enough and relevant at the same time, and to also suggest that we do not wish to take too much of the respondents' time and in this way maximise the response rate as much as possible. The cover letter contained clear and full information about this follow-up study, mentions of the voluntary nature of responses, assurance of confidentiality and anonymization of the data, as well as request for authorisation to use the results of the analysis. As expected, the response rate was lower, but not too much so (18%), which was explainable in the sense that the same respondents who answered the first questionnaire reacted to the second one, while the fact that it was open-ended and required more thinking than the first, triggered a reduced number of responses.

The results of the qualitative analysis of the responses will be presented in the next section.

3. Analysis and Results

It is well-known and accepted that qualitative data analysis is less straightforward by far than quantitative data analysis. In quantitative analysis it is the design of the instrument that is complex and needs a lot of thinking, while the hypotheses-driven analysis is easily done by computer software, most often than not. By contrast, while the design of the instrument is much simpler in qualitative research, the analysis is more complicated. As early as the 1990s, when the qualitative research paradigm was already gaining momentum, Dey (1993:1) observed:

> There is no one kind of qualitative data analysis, but rather a variety of approaches, related to the different perspectives and purposes of researchers. To distinguish and assess these different perspectives fully would be a formidable and perhaps rather fruitless task, particularly as the boundaries between different approaches and their relation to what researchers actually do when analysing the data is far from clear.

Two decades later Creswell (2013:180) spoke about "three analysis strategies":

> Data analysis in qualitative research consist of preparing and organizing the data (…) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion.

It is this strategy that we adopted with the view of accounting for the credibility, rigour and relevance, which, according to Goșa (2014:79), makes a "qualitative study to be accepted as a valuable piece of work."

The results of the data-driven analysis process have revealed that, on the one hand, students have listed four gadgets that they frequently employ for studying/ teaching: laptops (predominantly), tablets, smart phones, and only a few mentioned a Kindle reader. The mentioned software/ apps concentrate on Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, PDF, online

dictionaries and books, Google Scholar (for assignments and research), MyStudyLife – apps to keep track of classes/ assignments, Webinars, Kanbanflow, Google Meet, university platform (Moodle)/ Google Classroom (for online classes), Facebook, Gmail (sharing materials) – "tons of mails".

Asked to provide a justification for the instruments they use, the students' responses highlighted the use of technology both as a reaction to external factors, and one which relies on internal motivation, as can be noticed in some sample answers below. However, the majority claim that the present use of technology is the result of regulations, requirements or lack of an alternative.

> "I have always thought that technology is very helpful and brings both value and joy, depending on the purpose it is used for. Of course, some limitations should exist, but as the world turned to digital in this pandemic, I think the advantages of using technology are pretty obvious."
> "Well, that's required."
> "Because now we aren't allowed to attend the classes in real life."
> "Considering that every course is online, everything that I do related to my life as a student, from attending classes to doing projects and taking exams, I do through technology."

In addition, some of the justifications for the instruments used also encoded students' personal beliefs and attitudes regarding the use of online resources and instruments. Asked if there was any change of attitude towards the use of technology, there was no unanimous voice, but instead, the participants positioned themselves in different groups – no change, positive change, negative change, and mixed feelings.

> "As I mentioned before, I have the same opinion about the use of technology. I am happy to have the platforms and everything we use for our online courses."
> "I think technology can be a good thing, if used properly. I thought the same thing last year. The pandemic has simply made the time I spend with technology different."
> "It is easier; you can find information very quickly."
> "I still think that technology can't replace human interaction and what happens online is ok, but it will never be the same as being face to face."

Many of the answers were also mixed, students mentioning the negative aspects of technology use, as well as positive ones.

> "I find life easier but emptier."
> "I acknowledge the usefulness of the technology and the fact that it is very helpful these days, but I still think that it should be used with moderation."
> "I acknowledge the usefulness of the technology and the fact that it is very helpful these days, but I still think that it should be used with moderation."

It is also worth mentioning here that in a few instances, the discussion about the change of attitude also revealed the emergence of changed practices, such as minimising paper usage, reading eBooks on the tablet, or spending less time on social media, or even improved teaching practices ("The exams are interesting because it is now much... how should I put it? Easier to cheat :)) But the teachers changed to subjects so as to make us think, use our brains and that is better").

Although the majority of students, 55.7% of the 122 participants, admitted that studying online also involved additional training in the use of technology, we must also point out that this was not necessary for a good 44.3 % of them. This lack of perceived specific effort to upgrade also relied on the more intuitive nature of some technology users (members of a digital generation), who claim that there was no need for training as they "figured it out" themselves; at times there was a clear claim to no training – "I did not have to do any training regarding the

use of technology because there is nothing new for me". Other respondents linked self-training to a deliberate effort to upskill – "Even if I had no formal training, I had to self-train myself by resorting to various tutorials online, or I asked my friends for advice". Yet, there were also respondents for whom watching tutorials was not perceived as training – "I usually watch online tutorials when I find myself in a difficult situation, but I can't call that training".

Most of the respondents here mentioned a reliance on external sources of instruction, such as watching tutorials, asking others, specific training sessions, webinars and some talked about learning how to solve "digital issues".

> "Truth to be told, I have hardly had any knowledge of efficiently using certain platforms prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Therefore, I had to push the boundaries and watch several tutorials on Youtube and on specialized websites in order to get myself instructed."
> "I was forced to learn how to use google meet, mentimeter and other online apps, I needed to figure out the upload on the platform, the screen-sharing, the long-distance teamwork".

The mixed skills of computer users also implied that some had put an effort into learning how certain online platforms operate, but which most admitted to be easy, while others claimed that they were already familiar with most apps and online media of instruction. There was also the case of a perceived lack of help from the university in the students' effort to upskill or reskill, although we have to mention that a package of tutorials for students and staff on how to use different platforms was available on the university website.

> "Also, I've learned at home, by myself, how to best use technology and how to fix issues if I have any. We don't really use technology at its full potential at University and so it was really easy for me to understand everything without additional training (not that we've been offered one by the university)."

When asked whether or not students had any suggestions for teachers to improve their teaching strategy, most of the participants answered affirmatively, almost 60%. Their answers could be divided into three major categories: no recommendation, everything is fine, and several issues to resolve as illustrated in the examples below.

- More interaction, less lecture – "I would like if it would be possible that the courses be more interactive and shorter; I Find it difficult to concentrate so many hours, being at home in front of a computer"; "Having more short breaks during the online class like just chatting outside the course topic"
- Too much homework – "My only suggestion is for teachers to consider the amount of weekly homework we receive, since it's a bit much, but still manageable"
- Too many different platforms – "Please do make use of all the platforms available to you to make teaching accessible or interesting, but please keep it organized. We have 10 other teachers also giving us links to meetings and assignments and materials, and it is hard to keep track of"; "Don't spread homework over 100 links and e-learning posts. Preferably organize them in one Google Document. Use apps that are integrated in the Google Suite or just E-learning instead of a lot of third-party apps and resources."
- Less teaching time – "The teachers need to make the lessons shorter than actually are";
- Invest in professional training (teachers) – "Some of them got used really quick to this online teaching, but some of them need to open a browser and try to learn how to use technology in order to make their courses more attractive and appealing"; "Embrace technology, modernity, change, acceptance and you will make a change (a change that many other countries have learned to make and are great at it)."
- Slow down – "They usually speak fast, and some of us are not fast "typers" so most of the times we end up with lots of missing information in our notes."

- Do not just read notes – "Teachers could work more with us than reading a pdf for the entire course."

It is worth mentioning here an answer which, on the one hand, points out some less successful practices, but, on the other, focuses on the lack of real interaction.

> "Unfortunately, there is nothing that you can do. There is no use in having interactive games and exercises or bringing us videos or WORSE, PowerPoint presentations, God, those are terrible. We really hate them, believe me, we are barely paying attention to them. So there is no use in having all of these as we, the students, lack motivation. We lost all our motivation back in March and this is a general truth. This also applies to middle school, high school and so on, we simply do not like the way in which all of these things take place. We know that this is the only way, but I think that this proves that school and university were actually not about transmitting information, but rather about the connections and the relationships that we had (student-student, student-teacher). When these are gone, there is nothing left, at least nothing that brings us joy. I believe that the teaching process was stripped down to its nude form by this pandemic, which makes it not so attractive anymore. It is also quite easy to do something else like listening to music or browsing Facebook (or even muting the teacher), so the effect of that particular class is almost 0."

Concerning teaching strategy, the participants also identified a number of useful activities for online learning, such as group homework, questions for the students (even of a personal nature in the beginning), course notes to fill in individually or collectively, breakout rooms, the virtual whiteboard, video and a follow-up questionnaire, theory alternating with practice, short presentations. Yet, there were also students who could not choose a preferred activity since "none of the methods particularly attracted" them.

Finally, asked whether they detected any change in their attitude (feelings, views) towards the use of technology in teaching by comparison to the same period of the last year, or before the pandemic breakout, the majority of the answers acknowledged a positive change towards the use and the benefits of technology ("I begin to understand how useful it can be"; "I am using more online resources than I used before the pandemic"; "I have always thought that teaching and technology should go hand-in-hand as the technology use in our everyday life increases"). A respondent also discusses the higher responsibility for managing time as a learnt lesson ("Now I hate even more wasting time on the Internet"). There were also a number of participants who also discussed having changed their mind about online teaching (not technology in general) and claimed that face-to-face instruction was better – "Before the pandemic maybe I have thought that online classes may be better than face to face classes, but I was wrong and now I don't see it that way anymore". Moreover, there were some isolated examples of a clear change towards negative feelings – "Now I am more nervous, many times I feel anxiety, I have panic attacks and that is scares me compare with my personal attitude of last year", or even "I think we use it too much without a real benefit from it".

4. Conclusions

As a conclusion, our research intended to map current student practices in technology use for learning and teaching and we discovered in the responses that the positive outcomes outweigh the negative ones, although the margin may be rather narrow at times. Moreover, the majority of students discussed changes of attitude and behaviour – two components which are consistent with the development of lifelong learning subskills – and are now willing and able to adapt to new methods even if this implies a certain amount of time invested in professional development. In the very clear and detailed explanations they provided, most of them proved to be very insightful and thus more autonomous in their management of learning strategies, including taking time to reflect in order to improve their learning/ teaching practices and also those of their teachers. We also have to mention that learner autonomy also implied here decisions about what else to learn in order to better cope with the new educational demands.

Another important aspect to be mentioned here is that, in the case of students in the field of humanities and their digital competencies, the shift to online education also implied a levelling of the field, quickly, albeit unpleasantly for some, reducing the discrepancy between the abilities of students to make full use of digital resources.

Finally, the greatest benefit may lie not at the level of information we now have, nor at the level of skills, but in a change in our attitudes, as best summarised by a student:

> "Just like with anything else, people need to adapt. Being aware of the teaching platforms and how to use them to a basic level should not prove a challenge, be it for professors or for students."

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