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GAPS IN ONLINE EDUCATION IN THE TIMES OF A PANDEMIC IN THE OPINION OF POLISH AND KENYAN STUDENTS

ABSTRACT: The authors aim to answer the research question: ‘What do you miss most about online education?’. The rationale for the research is that this form of education is likely to continue to be used. Referring to the quality strategy, the authors concentrate on the meaning of words used in responses to the above-mentioned open question, which was part of the research on the ‘Socio-technological aspects of academic education during the pandemic – from an international perspective’. The tool used was an electronic questionnaire, which was completed by 796 respondents from Poland, including 678 students and 118 academic teachers, as well as 41 students from Kenya. The questionnaire consisted of 31 closed and 6 open questions. The responses of Polish students and academic teachers, as well as Kenyan students, indicate the following categories: ‘contact’, ‘organisation’ and ‘technical dimension’. It forms an image of a specifically understood craft, work performed in separation, and the place of residence. The component in the form of modern technologies only modernises the educational process but does not make it satisfactory for either party of the aforementioned social relationship. The conclusion that can be drawn from the research is as follows: in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary task is to reorganise the contact between students and academic teachers in such a way that it is possible to achieve the assumed learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS: academic education, learning process, COVID-19 pandemic.

Introduction – students and teachers responded that during online learning they miss having direct contact with each other

In their responses to the survey, both students and academic teachers emphasised that they miss having direct contact with ‘the other person’ in online education which was imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They miss ‘pure’ direct encounters with emotions expressed here and now. The same issue has been raised by Kenyan students who participated in the survey.

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According to psychological research, during a first meeting, words used account for only 7 percent of all communication (Strelau 2000, pp. 231-274). It is only after some time, when people better know each other, that words may become more important and account for 50 percent of the message conveyed. This translates into a major difficulty in online communication if we consider that the Internet can half the efficacy of communication. Subtle facial expressions may express approval or disapproval. The same applies to the meaning of short or long pauses. During a conversation, a person deprived of context encounters discomfort. He or she may compensate the discomfort by developing an individual image of the interlocutor, which may differ from the real one. Such a conversation is similar to walking on thin ice.

In the traditional context of a conversation, when we talk to someone, the other person can hear us. Once the topic is raised again, we know whom we should refer to. In the case of e-education, the teacher is not present in the classroom since he/she asynchronously sends materials to be studied) and no one can see the teacher or feel his/her real presence. You need to send information, but an email is a mere inscription, an icon, or a pictogram on the screen. On top of this, you need to be familiar with the curriculum (education effects, syllabi, ECTS points), customs, and who may be offended if neglected. In normal conditions, when a lecturer is late, you can use the time to talk to your peers, you can go and ask someone when he/she is going to come... whereas in the virtual space, students must instead check their email inboxes once or twice. Irritation reinforces opinions that the lecturer does not know how to log in, or people need to wait for information to be delivered in the very last moment. Moreover, an ordinary conversation facilitates communication involving multiple parties, whereas e-mails can be frustrating, since one needs to wait much longer for an outcome. If words are misunderstood, the recipient (student/teacher) will misinterpret the message and it may lead to a conflict. In a normal situation, you can talk and find reasons for any difficulties that may arise and provide explanations if needed. In the virtual world, people may not check their inboxes for a couple of days, then they may read an email again and negative feelings may resurface.

Many people hate to see emoticons (faces) and pictures added to emails, since they blur communication and make it informal and childish. Others write emails using flamboyant language or too many abbreviations typical for a given community (e.g. social media). It is necessary to adjust the style of communication to the recipients and to remember that emotions play an important role in conversations, making it impossible or difficult to fully convey them in writing.

During online conversation classes, some participants may be active all the time and still not introduce anything valuable. Others remain silent due to their more analytical

minds. Their silence can be interpreted as a lack of involvement. Those that need to read facial expressions find remote work very difficult, since facial expressions of their interlocutors confirm that they are appreciated, accepted, listened to and good at what they are doing.

Usually, academic teachers need to take the lead (control the learning process) and for this reason they need to work in a tangible environment. Like extraverts, they dislike remote work, since they are convinced that external factors decide everything and their personal involvement does not play any significant role. Such people provide e-teaching at the expense of fulfilling their internal needs.

E-teaching is an ideal solution for individualists. By nature, they desire to be the only authors of their solutions and regardless of their success or failure, they assume responsibility for whatever happens. They dream of controlling everything, including sources of information, information processing tools and the pace of work. They can clearly set the boundaries of their responsibility.

Commitment and understanding of remote learning is a separate issue. For a great many of teachers, this form of teaching boils down to e-craft. They send out study materials accompanied by a list of questions, and they consider answers to these questions as the basis for their assessment later on (like with crafts, workers receive materials as well as patterns to perform and are then required to provide a certain number of goods produced by a given deadline). This reveals a specific shortage in the methodology (or didactics) of e-learning at the university level.

According to comparative studies, the lack of real social contact and e-learning that boils down to the performance of tasks based on materials distributed are the basis to make changes and overcome difficulties in online teaching caused by the pandemic. The former difficulty results from the nature of remote education itself, whereas the latter can be mitigated to a large extent.

Research methodology outline

The research on the 'Socio-technological aspects of academic education during the pandemic – international perspective'¹ was based on an electronic questionnaire survey implemented between the 4th and 31st of May 2020. It involved 796 respondents from Poland, including 678 students and 118 academic teachers, as well as 41 students from Kenya. The questionnaire consisted of 31 closed and 6 open questions. For the purpose

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of the article, we analysed responses to the question ‘What do you miss the most in online education?’. The same question was asked to teachers and students. We provided a qualitative analysis of answers and grouped them into three major categories.

The analysis is only preliminary and does not cover other important aspects that appeared in the empirical material. However, a discussion of the major shortcomings of online education which revealed themselves during the coronavirus pandemic is important for academic teaching practice and the concept of education at a university, in particular in the context of the expected second wave of SARS-CoV-2 infections.

Opinions among Polish students and academic teachers

Since we have been mostly interested in the qualitative rather than the quantitative aspects of the study, we concentrate on the meaning of words used in the responses to the open question of ‘What do you miss the most in online education?’. However, we are not going to omit an analysis of their frequency which will help us to determine issues that are raised most often. This is expected to facilitate a convincing interpretation of the findings. We present a collective meaning of opinions surveyed and would like conclusions to be drawn, since it is highly probable that online education will continue to be used in academic education.

We managed to distinguish several core groups of students’ answers to the open question of ‘What do you miss the most in online education?’. The most important is the category of ‘contact’. It is not only limited to direct contact, typical for the period prior to COVID-19. It is rather a state that can be defined as a possibility of having a free flow of information reinforced by the possibility of face-to-face contact, a phrase very often used in responses. This type of contact has been referred to as follows:

- *In online education, I miss the most meeting other people²*
- *The possibility to talk to and meet people*
- *People*
- *I miss the direct contact with the lecturer and books. Long time spent in front of my computer doesn’t work for me*
- *Direct (‘face-to-face’) contact.*

These responses reverberate something that can be permanently lost, namely the tangible reality of the education process. Therefore, melancholy is mixed with the fear that we will never return to the state we knew before the pandemic. The number of similar answers may suggest that we encounter a collective, archetypical sense of being expelled from paradise, a mythical idealised and mystical space. Thus, students

² All responses are quoted in their original form.

express their grief that the previously underappreciated free contact in the real space of academia was indeed valuable. Now, when they no longer can enjoy it, they consider it to be a drawback of online academic education.

Considering the above, we should emphasise the physical aspect referred to in students' responses. They refer to venues and objects to express their nostalgia:

- *I miss the focus and the space of the classroom*
- *chalk and the blackboard*
- *town of Rzeszów*
- *university walls.*

A venue is a location facilitating relations between people and people, people and objects, and objects and objects. According to Maria Mendel (2006, p. 21): 'The place is always significant. "Everything" has its place. Events are held in some places, senses through which we understand the reality, and ourselves within it, are set in some places, with a more or less clear, but always present sense of relationship with a place'. An abrupt change of academic education space and place leaves a sense of destabilisation, detached from the known and safe experience of a place.

Another major category of responses is the 'organisation', understood as the overall activity designed to make the education process possible and efficient during the pandemic. Major components of the category are decisions (and their assessment) on the use of tools, especially communication platforms. Here 'organisation' refers to the process, which is in progress, and things that have been completed, organised. It is an evaluating category, since a larger number of responses are critical toward the education process in terms of technical and merit-based factors. Responses often refer to the 'conduct of classes' and irregularities as reflected in examples below:

- *More than half of the lecturers do not contact us online and instead they just send us assignments.*
- *Some lecturers do not maintain contact with us over the camera. They send tasks to be solved which is very discouraging.*
- *Lectures online, I prefer someone talking to me rather than sending files to read.*

So, the problem is less related to the fact that the process of education moved online, but rather to this translating into the loss of contact between students and their lecturers. The lack of contact in real time and sending assignments that students are expected to perform themselves are highly dissatisfactory for some students. Students wish to experience: '*More efficient communication with teachers*'. The same applies to the following response: '*Engagement of lecturers, although I do not want to put them into one pigeonhole*'. Students who are deprived of this contact, suspended in the internet void, full of fear, accustomed to traditional forms, may consider every deviation from their expectations as a betrayal of the ethos of a teacher. To a certain extent, this critical

assessment by students results from the fact that some teachers failed to organise their classes online or completely neglected their professional duties. This is certainly the reason for a very emotional response (written in capital letters and followed by three exclamation marks): *'PREPARATION BY LECTURERS AND THE UNIVERSITY!!! SHAME'*.

Yet another aspect in this category is a question of choosing a communication platform and the ability to use it by academic teachers:

- *Harmonization, i.e., the use of only one software by all teachers.*
- *Organisation of classes on one platform only.*
- *One teacher ran his classes using a chat instead of turning streaming on. Lack of harmonisation. Some use Zoom, others Classroom, still others DISCORD, and there are some teachers who contact us via email only. However, the peak of ignorance is to organise a chat using Hangout to write about the topic of a class.*

Students highlighted the lack of harmonisation of communication tools to contact their lecturers, which required them to install several platforms, programmes or applications. On the one hand, the multitude of solutions resulted from universities being unprepared to provide education online or the fact that they left it at the discretion of teachers. On the other hand, some academic teachers were not proficient in using such applications and programmes, and they resorted to email as the only communication channel with their students. This spread chaos and confusion among students who were not prepared to use these tools either.

The above discussion leads us to the third category of responses, namely the 'technical dimension'. Undoubtedly, the statement of *'Good Internet coverage, better website for online learning'* expresses the issue of organisation. Nevertheless, the technical dimension should be considered separately in the analysis of the survey, since it was very vivid (in short, without computers and the Internet there would be no education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a precondition for the contemporary workstation). Below, you will find several more examples:

- *Not everyone has their own personal computer; very often, it needs to be shared among several family members.*
- *Better Internet connection. The net is sometimes 'occupied'.*
- *Better and stable Internet connection.*
- *Suitable computer to perform tasks, which was difficult considering the overall situation and the situation in my family.*

Therefore, students requested better data transfer capacity and better hardware, and they also suggested that it might have been difficult considering their families' financial status. Interestingly, none of the students suggested that the state administration could support them (e.g. by giving an allowance to support the use of the Internet for

education). Similarly, they did not refer to such a solution regarding their lecturers. They clearly demanded a high-quality Internet connection: *Good Internet connection on the part of the teacher. In the majority of cases, it is too slow, and thus, sound and video streaming are extremely poor.* Perhaps, students believe that academic teachers enjoy such support of the state or potentially could have, but they just do not use it.

An advantage of a survey involving several hundred people is that we may come across a response that comprises everything we need to highlight in our report. Paradoxically, “detecting” such a response (among hundreds of others) is possible when we analyse all of them to be able to determine what we should look for. In the case of our survey, the following response lists drawbacks of online education, namely: *direct contact with others, no eye contact when everyone switches their cameras off, lack of spontaneity, power of the Internet, a reduced number of tasks (since their number increased).* The response starts with the reference to a direct contact. It is then followed by a reference to the Internet to be concluded with the appropriate (in the opinion of the student) organisation of the teaching process.

The universal nature of students’ observations can be easily found in responses given by academic teachers. We asked them an identical question ‘What do they miss the most in online education?’. The question was included in a questionnaire filled in by 118 university teachers from all over Poland between 40-31 May 2020.

Academic teachers gave identical responses:

- *Direct face-to-face contact and the possibility of direct interaction between a teacher and a student.*
- *Direct contact with a student.*
- *I miss the most the direct contact with students. Technologies won’t substitute it.*

One response is particularly pessimistic. One academic teacher concluded that in online education he missed the most a man. It seems that everything that had been important in the work of a teacher disappeared, namely the direct contact with another man. Initiation and continuation of relations require some effort to interpret, listen and react accordingly to communication received. As emphasised by Otto Speck (2005, p. 166) while referring to the student-teacher relationship: ‘I exists only because the Other exists together with the necessity of interaction.’ In the opinion of teachers, attempts to make contact with students are related to a sort of compromise which materialises in the form of a hybrid education: I can run my classes online when they are combined with regular direct meetings. The assessment of deficits of online education is very clear:

- *The possibility of providing fast explanation to a problem, personal contact and creative conversation.*
- *Contact with people. Free discussion.*

- *Contact with another person, free uninterrupted discussion, interaction and practical exercise in a group, something that cannot be done while sitting in front of a computer monitor.*

Teachers' opinions reflect their conviction that academic education cannot be based online in a long-term perspective. Responses can be grouped as follows:

(a) education has been subjected to a major experiment,

(b) education online is a valuable experience, but it would be good to end it.

The opinions show a cautious approach and fatigue with online education as well as the will to come back to well-known forms of education and contact with students.

It is also worth quoting one of the responses given by an academic teacher, as it combines categories of 'organisation' and 'a technical dimension': *The provision of equipment by the university: the majority of teachers were left alone to deal with equipment and other problems. Shortage of training in the efficient use of platforms – we must “discover America” ourselves. There are many different platforms that can be used to run classes at a single faculty; nothing was done to use one platform consistently, which has a negative impact on students. Many students do not understand what they need to read (including disabled students) – this could have been dealt with in regular conditions, whereas in the online form, it is much more difficult.* The above response reveals an entire spectrum of problems that both parties in academic education need to face during the pandemic. The teacher refers not only to problems that academic teachers need to deal with, but he also draws attention to the poor effects of online education. This happens due to shortages of adequate tools to meet all the goals set in the syllabuses.

While referring to a critical diagnosis of the status of education, one of the teachers expressed an opinion about the deficits of online academic education: *'In the current situation, I need time to organize the whole process well'*, yet another one responded: *'Approach of university authorities and the Ministry: teaching hours should be settled in a different manner – the required number of teaching hours should be reduced, since we work more on-line than previously and at the same time we can reach as many as 1000 students!'* (again, a reference to organisation). In both instances we see a reference to time. The first response includes an element of surprise and a shortage of time available for preparation and a proper reaction both on the part of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the university. In the second response, time is used to refer to the settlement of teaching hours, which is a major issue during the pandemic, especially when classes are not provided in real time. The need to spend time on putting teaching materials together as well as on checking assignments delivered by students require additional time on the part of academic teachers. The last response quoted has an addressee (Ministry) who is capable of improving the situation.

None of the teachers' responses included all the components (perhaps because there were fewer of them). Nevertheless, as already emphasised, teachers and students'

responses contain identical categories. We may conclude that both groups (teachers and students) have an identical definition of the three central categories (contact, organisation, technicalities). This can be explained as follows: although both groups exist symbiotically and experience the same stimuli, they show limited willingness to request the government to meet specific needs.

What do you miss most about online learning? A Kenyan experience of online learning

The uptake of online learning has increased globally in the recent past although ‘considerable diversity exists among countries’ due to many factors such as varied capacity in infrastructure support for e-learning as well as learners’ background (Muuro et al. 2014). In 2006, Kenya adopted a national ICT policy in order to ensure availability of connectivity to users (Makokha & Mutisya 2016). A 2016 study conducted by George Lukoye Makokha and Dorothy Nduko Mutisya, assessed the status of e-learning in public universities in Kenya and found that e-learning was at its infant stage as a majority of universities lacked senate approved e-learning policies to guide structured implementation. They lacked the required ICT infrastructure as well as skills, moreover, the online uploaded modules were simply lecture notes and not interactive material (Makokha & Mutisya 2016). Despite the opportunity provided by the availability of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the increased availability of collaborative tools in social media, online learning in Kenya has been sluggishly slow in replacing earlier forms of distance education characterised by minimal social interaction like correspondence, television, video and radio (Muuro et al. 2014).

Notably, however, a new impetus in the uptake of online learning has been necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis in the country, which has led to the closure of all forms of face-to-face learning between April and October 2020. A simple survey that targeted 400 university students in Kenya during this period managed to receive 41 responses. A qualitative analysis of responses to the question – what did you miss most when undertaking online learning sessions – is summarised in the table below:

Responses to what participants in online learning missed
in Kenya between April and October 2020

Response Category	Number out of 41	Percentage
I missed nothing	14	34
I missed the interaction	18	44
Online Learning is very flexible	4	10
I had many network challenges	5	12

Own source.

Of the 41 responses, 14 (34 percent) indicated that they ‘missed nothing’, whereas 18 (44 percent) ‘missed the interaction’ between learners and lecturers. Only 4 of the 41 (10 percent) found online learning flexible and interesting. On the contrary, 5 of the 41 (12 percent) ‘had many network challenges’. Overall, 44 percent were happy with online learning, whereas 56 percent would rather opt out of the online learning mode.

Apparently, the three categories witnessed by Polish students can be easily paralleled in the expressions of their Kenyan counterparts. With regard to the ‘contact’ category the learners said that they lacked:

- *Physical contact*
- *Having discussions with other members*
- *Face-to face-interaction*
- *Discussions on certain topics with course mates in the presence of my lecturer*
- *Seeing and listening to my lecturers*
- *Detailed and lively interactions making learning involving, interesting and easy*
- *Live arguments and fun from backbenchers.*

The remoteness of learning became painfully associated with COVID-19 isolation terms such as ‘social and physical distancing’, which was boring and a new territory all together. Similarly, the learners expressed the ‘organisation’ category by indicating that they missed *teacher’s participation in correcting and guiding us* and *an exact time to begin class plus lots of challenges with connecting to servers at the institution*. The disorganisation of their learning as a result of online learning was such a thorny issue that it was associated with boredom, disturbance, and difficulty in accessing materials. In their own words, they missed:

- *detailed and lively interactions that make learning engaging, interesting and easy*
- *Mostly network interruptions affecting most content*
- *Online lectures though the network was disturbed a lot*
- *ease of access and use of e-materials.*

This disorganisation was not lecturer-centered only, at times, the environment to study at home was simply not there. Parents would send them to do house chores such as cooking, shopping, grazing cattle, or even farming. Most parents did not suppose that there was any serious schooling when the learners were at home physically.

It was the “technical dimension” however, that dealt a major blow to online learning. One learner summarised it well, ‘*It depends on the network and amount of bundles I purchased, if the network is bad then I won’t be able to attend the class and if my bundles get finished in the middle of the class then I’m left hanging*’. The learners did not know just how to ask and answer questions.

Conclusion – students and academic teachers ‘locked down’ in their homes

Generally speaking, the COVID-19 context and online learning in Kenya, a developing African country, is different from that of Poland, a far developed European economy (Kibaru & Njoroge 2013). It is however possible to draw parallel trajectories and specific developments in a given period. Even so, the situation is different for public and private learning institutions (Namisiko et al. 2014). The 2020 survey discussed above presents a much improved scenario as compared to that presented four years earlier by Makokha and Mutisya (2016). During the period under review, online learning became the mode where for an institution to survive financially while remaining relevant, it had to embrace online learning. As a result, the uptake of online in learning institutions was considerably high, however, challenges still abound. Most of the students had skills in navigating between social media platforms yet lacked basic learning skills such as typing. The same applies to the teaching staff who were conversant with face-to-face pedagogies as opposed to online ones. There is therefore a need for universities to train both students and lecturers (Mulwa 2012). The challenge of connectivity in Kenya is real, costwise as well as in reliability. In Kenya, across the different service providers, it costs at most USD 1 for 1GB of data. This is far less expensive as compared to Malawi and Benin at USD 30. However, the cost for those living in Poland for 1GB is USD 0.5 (Onamu 2020). As a result, Kenya has to do more to make internet affordable and reliable to students in order to support online learning. It is understandable that students complained of interruptions and a lack of physical engagement with each other. This is partly because of the inability of the users to use all interactive features on the platform as well as the capacity of the ICT infrastructure.

In a post-COVID-19 scenario, there will be a great need to institutionalise and normalise an online mode of learning for academic programs in Kenya. The policies, infrastructure, and training components can go a great way in making learning pleasurable and less expensive for students, especially at the tertiary level of education.

The findings of the comparative studies highlighted the disorganisation of personal, family and academic lives, both among students and academic teachers, resulting from this shift to online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic from March until the end of September 2020. The same phenomena have been observed and examined in the case of excessively used remote work.

In conclusion, it is worth pondering on an answer to a simple question: *Why do students and teachers switch off their web cameras during on-line classes?*

At a certain stage of e-studying, an e-student feels like going for a cup of coffee. Then, he stops looking at the screen and goes to an empty kitchen just to hang around. When

his peer calls him to play an online game, he willingly joins in. When he comes back to his online learning it is already past 2 pm. At 4 pm, his parents come back from work. He chats with his parents for a while, has his dinner, its already 6 pm and he has not done his assignment. His parents have finished their work, whereas he takes his laptop and actually starts studying. A moment later, his friend calls and emails in his mailbox suggest that he has got a lot to work on. He needs to start with some tasks assigned. A while later, someone chats to him on an online forum, so he takes a moment of rest. Then, his parent looks at the screen and says angrily: *When you learn, you should focus on learning, and when you talk to us, focus on talking!* The e-student starts thinking that his work can wait until later and this thought calms him down.

His homework piles up and he has to work until the wee hours. Then, at around 1 pm he postpones washing and dressing up, sometimes he does not even get up and works in bed instead. Past 3 pm, he goes out to get some fresh air to prove to his relatives that he has been doing fine, as he does not study at a 'real' university. It does not matter to him that his projects and assignments will be the basis for his competences (qualifications) and a straight path to getting a diploma.

For an e-student, the world without a computer does not exist. He needs it for every activity, be it socialising, entertainment, and work (many students work under contracts for service or regular full-time employment contracts). Sometimes eating meals and talking to other people takes place while gazing at a computer screen. Although he can refuse to click on links or not respond to a chat, it is too difficult for him and 'what seems to be merely ten minutes, in fact turns to forty', and 4-6-8 hours of work extend to 16. Although the e-student still fulfils his tasks, he feels that his studying melts away. He is not able to designate time for receiving emails and logging on to online classes which are often held on different platforms.

When members of his family are fast asleep, the e-student still works. Previously, learning at night had some advantages, such as quiet surrounding outdoors and at home. Now, it turns into alienation.

He makes commitments for the upcoming days: learning from 8 am to 5 pm. Initially, everything goes just fine. He sits at his computer and contacts his university at 8 am. The following day he does it at 9 am, and after a couple of days everything goes back to normal and assignments are performed at the very last hour, deadlines are postponed, and at the same time he tries to get passing grades online.

It is good when the student notices that this home-like routine makes him tired and hampers his development and when he notifies his teachers about the fact.

The above-mentioned everyday problems related to alienation apply also to academic teachers since e-teaching during the pandemic disturbed their family and work life. It actually disrupted the entire academic culture.

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