Teaching in the Post-COVID Context. Challenges and Opportunities of Blended Learning

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Abstract
Based on the recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper intends to analyze the act of teaching and subsequently learning in today's post-COVID context, by summarizing positive and negative aspects of online education, as mentioned in various studies and surveys recently conducted worldwide. Furthermore, the paper presents the conclusions of a small survey conducted by the author during the pandemic, among students learning Language for specific purposes (LSP). The purpose of the paper is to corroborate the conclusions of these surveys, in support of the idea that the blended or hybrid approach might be regarded as an adequate solution to the post-COVID education, starting from the definition of blended learning as a mixture of face-to-face activities with online or digital tools.
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Introduction: Learning in the post-COVID context

Beyond numerous theorical approaches, the act of learning has a strong practical component that should consider a series of factors definitory for an efficient learning environment. A correlation between learning and the social, economic, cultural, technological, and even political context should exist. The recent experience of the COVID pandemic may be understood as a way in which all the factors mentioned above simultaneously influence the act of learning, leading to debates on alternative learning and teaching methods under the circumstances of an increased digital input in our daily lives. Digital learning may be understood as a learning method based on the use of digital tools to enable learners to assimilate specific knowledge in a different way, whether this may be face-to-face, distance learning (be that asynchronous or synchronous) or blended learning. Therefore, digital learning should not be

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regarded only as a form of digitizing educational content, but rather as a way of transforming the entire learning process, adapting educational methods to the new technologies available, so as to meet the new expectations of the learners.

A preoccupation for the extensive use of digital methods in the educational field appeared mainly during the COVID pandemic, when education around the world was basically forced to face a new challenge and online courses had to replace traditional face-to-face courses in a very short period, so as to ensure that learning and teaching could continue. This rapid, yet necessary transition obviously implied an implementation of digital-based learning and teaching methods in all subject fields.

Even though online courses are nowadays no longer a necessity, the COVID pandemic has left its mark on the entire education system. During the lockdown period, there were debates on the amount of learning that was lost as a result of exclusive online courses, yet now, in the aftermath of the pandemic, one may better analyze the impact of the digital input in learning and teaching. Nowadays, one may focus on questions regarding the role and effect of online learning in various age groups of students, or the changes in teaching methodology, or the impact of the lockdown on the assessment of students' progress and achievement, but also regarding the teachers' competences that needed to be (further) developed during the pandemic or the need to overcome the challenges of reduced socialization during the pandemic. In other words, the experience of the COVID pandemic on the learning and teaching process, perceived primarily by students and tutors, but also by other involved parties, such as parents and other professionals, had both positive and negative aspects, most of which revealed by means of surveys and specific studies. Learning in the post-COVID context has become a combination of traditional techniques and digital components, which leads to the assumption that a hybrid form of learning – also known as blended learning – may prove an adequate method nowadays.

1. Theoretical perspectives upon the concept of blended learning

In order to understand the concept of blended learning and whether this approach might prove indeed useful in the post-COVID context, one should first attempt to delimit a conceptual framework of the process of learning itself and subsequently of blended learning.

In time, several learning theories have been developed by researchers, among which the following five are still considered to be primary: *behaviorism*, which centers around the idea that a learner's behavior depends mostly on their interaction with the environment; *cognitivism*, which is based on the idea that learners are influenced by both external environments and internal elements, such as mental processes; *constructivism*, which focuses on the idea that students learn based on their previous experiences and knowledge, thus making learning an active, but personal and individual process; *humanism*, which is in fact closely related to constructivism, yet placing emphasis on the idea of a learner's need for self-actualization; *connectivism*, a recent theory focusing on the idea that learning occurs when people manage to create connections either with each other, or with their personal lives and daily activities. Apart from these, one could also mention: the *transformative learning theory*, according to which learners adjust their worldview and thinking the more they learn and discover new information; the *social learning theory*, centered around the idea of learning from observing others, and based on four core elements: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation; the *experiential learning theory*, which focuses on the idea of learning by doing, thus encompassing not only the concrete learning and observation, but also the conceptualization and the active experimentation, as the ultimate act of transforming an experience into learning.

As one may easily observe, the act of learning is highly complex, and depends on several key aspects, such as the typology of the learner, the content and the learning objectives, the conditions and circumstances of the learning and teaching process. Of course, such learning theories should be applied in practice as a mixture of elements and techniques, depending on the particularities of the learning and teaching environment, but with a focus on creating conditions for efficient learning. In his study, Shea (2007) tries to define efficient learning as a pre-condition for blended learning from three perspectives, or as he calls them, "lenses": firstly, the HPL ("How People Learn") framework, developed by Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000), according to which an efficient learning needs "good learning environments [that] are learner-centered, knowledge-centered, assessment-centered and community centered" (Shea, 2007: 23); secondly, the Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education, developed by Chickering and Gamson (1987), which emphasize some core elements, such as "frequent contact between students and faculty, reciprocity and

cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, the communication of high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning" (Shea, 2007: 23); and thirdly, the Community of Inquiry Model, developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001), which focuses directly on online pedagogy, emphasizing the need to develop "various forms of presence [so as] to achieve quality teaching and learning in the absence of face-to-face interaction" (Shea, 2007: 25). After briefly analyzing the three conceptual frameworks mentioned above, Shea concludes that the key elements of face-to-face learning should not be overlooked when talking about digital learning, stating that "blended learning may be considered one solution to expanding access to higher education if the quality of the learning experience is maintained or improved" (Shea, 2007: 31). Further debating on the concept of blended learning and starting from the general definition of blended learning as a mixture of online and face-to-face activities, Shea tries to formulate answers to the question of what can actually be "blended" in a blended learning environment. Among his suggestions (Shea, 2007: 31-32) worth mentioning are the following: a blending of pedagogy models and techniques, obviously starting from the various learning theories mentioned above, a blending of synchronous (i.e. real-time interaction, be that online or face-to-face) and asynchronous learning, a blending of instructional models, for example from cohort to self-paced learning), or even a blending of institutions providing the courses or of participants in the course. All in all, the extent of blended learning seems to depend on the institution culture, but also on the trainer's digital knowledge and openness towards innovation. Ultimately, blended learning can trigger meaningful innovation in education by redesigning approaches to teaching and learning.

2. Challenges and opportunities of blended learning

As shown in the previous chapter, a comprehensive theoretical approach upon blended learning is still being drafted nowadays. Despite the potential to innovate the educational field, blended learning also comes with a series of challenges, deriving mostly from the digital component. When talking about digital-based learning, one should refer to the period of the COVID pandemic. Both the negative and the positive aspects of the digital education during the pandemic are analyzed in a series of studies and surveys. Even though they were conducted mostly at a local or

regional level, thus presenting some limitations, most of these studies present common aspects, which may thus be used for the purpose of this paper.

The plurality of aspects of digital-based learning and teaching, presented schematically in the following sections, are based mainly on these studies: Romeo et.al. (2021), Magomedov et.al. (2020), Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), Rashid and Yadav (2020) and on a global survey report conducted by IAU (International Association of Universities), under the auspices of UNESCO. The choice of these studies was deliberate, since they make reference to the higher education during the pandemic in various parts of the world (Spain, USA, India, Bhutan and ultimately the IAU survey which was applied in universities belonging to *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Association of Commonwealth Universities, European University Association, Consejo Interuniversitario Nacional in Argentina, the Hungarian Rectors Conference* and *Higher School of Economics in Moscow*), thus providing various perspectives upon the same experience.

2.1 The negative impact of digital-based learning and teaching

The sudden and unprepared shift from face-to-face courses to exclusive online teaching and learning inherently came with a series of challenges, since both individuals and institutions were confronted with aspects related mainly to the technical infrastructure and the accessibility to it, but also with the distance learning and teaching skills and competences of trainers. According to the IAU survey, the limited, or even completely absent access to internet was identified "in particular, in Africa, but also in other low- and middle-income countries, […] where […] teaching and learning is fully disrupted and it seems unrealistic for those students to be able to complete the academic year" (Marinoni et.al., 2020: 25). In these cases, not only the students' or trainers' lack of accessibility to digital tools was identified as particularly problematic, but also the poor infrastructure of the institutions and the financial implications of investing in online tools and licenses. All in all, in what regards the access to internet and digital tools, the pandemic is said to have deepened the already existing economic inequalities between individuals, institutions and ultimately between states. It was under these circumstances that some institutions around the world decided to fully interrupt their activities during the lockdown, which obviously impacted the education.

Another negative aspect presented in the above-mentioned studies refers to the fact that most teachers were unfamiliar with online teaching methods, and it is beyond any doubt that online teaching requires a different pedagogy. Furthermore, given the sudden shift to online courses, the institutions themselves did not have the capacity to train their teaching staff. This resulted either in a form of "learning by doing" approach on behalf of the teachers, or according to the IAU survey, in most cases "attempting to imitate what would have been the face-to-face way of proceeding, yet using distance mode" (Marinoni et.al., 2020: 25).

Depending on the field of study, one could also identify other challenges of an exclusive online course, since there are several disciplines that rely heavily on specific technical equipment in a laboratory. Though this is not necessarily the case for foreign languages, in most situations however, the more practical aspects of any field of study could not be substituted by online learning; thus, during the pandemic one could speak of a focus on the theoretical dimension of the curriculum, whereas the more practical activities were heavily reduced or even completely cancelled. Even in the case of foreign languages, more specifically of LSP, practical activities, such as for instance simulations of negotiations and other business communication situations or various real-life situations could hardly be conducted in online courses, so among the four basic skills speaking seems to have been particularly affected by the exclusive online learning and teaching.

Alongside speaking as a basic skill within a foreign language course, human communication in its most basic form was also affected during the online courses imposed by the pandemic. Therefore, almost all studies and surveys conducted, regardless of geographical area, mentioned the lack of socialization among students, as well as the lack of personal relations between students and teachers as a major negative aspect of digital learning. In other words, irrespective of the level of study analyzed, the lack of the so-called classroom atmosphere was perceived as a disadvantage of online courses.

Finally, a recurrent negative aspect of online teaching was considered to be the teachers' difficulty to evaluate and assess the real progress of students. According to the IAU Survey, approximately 25% of the universities involved in the survey responded in May 2020 that the majority of their semester exams were "at risk of being postponed" or were "completely on hold at the moment" (Marinoni et.al., 2020: 30). Most forms

of evaluation and examination were in fact worldwide adapted to current realities, but the reduced possibility of providing individual feedback to students led to the assumption that the efficiency of an online course could not be fully assessed.

2.2 Positive impact of digital-based learning and teaching

Despite the negative aspects mentioned above, many people, especially now, in the aftermath of the pandemic, in particular of the lockdown, see the experience of digital-based learning and teaching as an opportunity to learn new methods or techniques, to adapt to more flexible learning and teaching possibilities and ultimately to explore the concept of hybrid or blended learning. In other words, among the positive aspects and opportunities provided by the shift to online teaching and learning, one should mention first and foremost the rapid adaptation of teachers and students to online methods, as well as the availability of institutions to invest in testing new tools and systems to enable distance learning and teaching. In fact, most respondents to surveys worldwide believe that the pandemic could lead to "a shift in mindset", opening "a new horizon of opportunities for teaching and learning", thus offering "a push forward in terms of exploring the potential of flexible learning and more acceptance for online learning to become a more integral part of study plans" (Marinoni et.al., 2020: 26). However, since online courses are nowadays no longer a must, this push towards change and innovation in education could be possible on the one hand, if institutions choose to invest further in digitalization, and on the other hand, if teachers themselves are willing to continue train their recently acquired digital skills.

In fact, during the COVID-pandemic, as a result of the imposed shift to online courses, teachers worldwide had the possibility to attend synchronously and asynchronously webinars and training courses delivered free by specialists in the field. An extraordinary and highly active exchange of ideas and didactic experiences between teachers around the world took place. It is most probably under these circumstances that discussions about the efficient integration of digital tools in a course came to the attention of the entire academic community. Therefore, now in the post-COVID period, when face-to-face courses are once again customary, most teachers still employ digital tools, thus implementing a hybrid form of teaching, enabling students the access to blended learning.

The implementation of digital tools and resources in a course may be seen not only as an impulse towards a diversification of teaching methods, but also as a possibility of asynchronous learning, which is regarded as an advantage by some students and could actually support the idea of lifelong learning promoted by many institutions in the educational field.

Last but not least, the rapid integration of technology and digital tools in education was possible also as a result of the cooperation between the public and private sectors, and the joint solutions they managed to come up with. If at the beginning of the pandemic, the option of online courses was regarded to "still be better than providing no education" (Marinoni et.al., 2020: 25), nowadays in a post-COVID context the act of teaching and learning worldwide can hardly be conceived without the digital input.

2.3 Results of a personal survey conducted during the pandemic

In June 2020, therefore after one semester of online courses, I conducted a small survey among my LSP students majoring in Economics. In the 43 filled-in questionnaire, the majority of respondents, i.e. 31, were students in their 3rd year of study, whereas the other 12 were 2nd year students. Therefore, all respondents had previous experience with face-to-face courses and could therefore compare the pre-pandemic learning and teaching environment with the exclusive online course.

The questionnaire contained a total of five questions – one as a multiple choice and the other four as questions with open answers. The focus of the questionnaire was primarily on assessing the students' adaptation to online courses, but also on their view of positive and negative aspects of digital-based learning. Furthermore, since all students were beginners or lower intermediate level in the study of Business German, I was particularly interested in their acquisition of language skills and knowledge.

The first question focused precisely on whether students understood the aspects taught online, especially by comparison to face-to-face courses. In their answers they had to choose between three options: "I understood well, even though the course was online", "Pretty well, though it was online", "Not so well, because it was online". As shown in the figure below, generated automatically from the students' responses, the vast majority selected the first possible answer and considered to have acquired

everything well, despite the online teaching and learning environment. Only 15.4% of respondents considered to have understood everything "pretty well", whereas none chose the third possible answer, which supports the idea that language acquisition and learning was also possible in digital format.

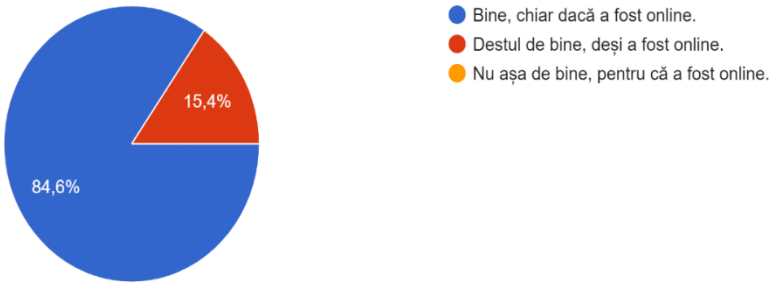

Figure 1. Answers to Question 1: "How well did you understand the aspects taught online?"

The other open-ended questions sought to identify the students' viewpoint both on the positive and on the negative aspects of the online course. A recurrent positive aspect mentioned by respondents was the use of online educational games and interactive digital tools, which not only simulated a pleasant classroom atmosphere, but also enabled some students to practice and solve the exercises asynchronously. Furthermore, some digital tools and apps used during the online course gave students the possibility of immediate self-assessment, which was another positive aspect mentioned by respondents. Last but not least, some students saw an advantage in the individual exercise-solving activity, which was perceived as a lack of pressure from peers.

Among the negative aspects, respondents mentioned, in their vast majority, the lack of socialization and interpersonal interaction. Some also perceived a less efficient training in the writing skill, which basically confirms the conclusions of the IAU Survey, since writing and speaking are both productive language skills. Therefore, it seems that the online LSP course had a tendency towards the acquisition of less productive language skills, such as listening and reading, and a greater focus on theoretical

aspects. Only few students mentioned problems with internet connectivity as a result of their current geographical localization in rural areas.
Despite its limitations, this small survey is actually in line with other studies and surveys conducted on a larger scale. This suggests that the impact of the transition from face-to-face to online education was perceived similarly by respondents worldwide, which in fact gives validity to both the positive and the negative aspects identified and mentioned in the previous sections.

3. Conclusions

Thinking about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon education, one may conclude that an exclusive online approach to learning and teaching is not a viable solution. Nonetheless, the extent to which digital tools and technology, in general, have recently penetrated the educational system cannot be neglected. The pandemic has clearly left its mark upon education worldwide and nowadays teaching and learning are seen as a combination of traditional methods, as in pre-pandemic times, and innovative, digital ones, as employed during the pandemic. Therefore, a hybrid type of learning, in other words, a blended learning could respond to the needs of the post-COVID period, the core of blended learning being precisely this integration of face-to-face and online learning activities. Furthermore, since, as shown in this paper, the pandemic has opened new possibilities for the educational system, one might even attempt new approaches to the idea of blended learning, by genuinely experimenting with what can actually be blended, as suggested by Shea in his 2007 study. In my opinion, the results of my small questionnaire confirm the opinions expressed in the studies that served as basis for this paper and, at the same time, emphasize the adequacy of implementing a blended learning approach, at least in the LSP field.

All in all, the concept of blended learning seems to be highly actual nowadays, in the post-COVID context, because it can combine the positive aspects of a traditional face-to-face learning environment with the advantages brought about by the efficient use of technology and implementation of digital tools in education.

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