A Flashback of Teaching in the Pandemic

Rosana Stan, PhD

University of Oradea, Romania

For comments or questions for the author, contact Rosana Stan at stanrosana@gmail.com

Abstract

The world of education, like every other aspect of life, was changed probably forever by the experiences of teaching and learning during COVID-19. As educators and students return to some form of normal in which teachers and students have a relatively clear understanding of what it means to attend classes at the university, I believe that we can improve education based on our experiences of teaching and learning during the pandemic. In this article, I try to acknowledge what I had to learn to be a more effective online educator, and I attempt to share some thoughts about moving forward. Many educators, with whom I have discussed some of the issues of returning to our new normal, agree with me that we should not lose this opportunity that we have to improve our institutions for our students. Clearly, if we as educators emerge from our stress-filled experiences stronger and more knowledgeable, our students will surely become more effective learners. During COVID-19 I learned some important lessons that have helped me to be more individually effective with students, and I learned that communication and flexibility skills are keys to helping our students to prosper. I do not want to just go back to a new normal, I want to be more effective as an educator in our new normal university.

Keywords: communication, online teaching, digitizing university learning, hybrid learning

In March 2020, in the second semester of teaching at the Department of Psychology of the University of Oradea (Romania), I met, for the first time, over 100 students from the first-year program. I was more familiar with the other 100 students from the second-year program from two courses I had previously taught with them. We already had completed 2 weeks of school in which we created a state of well-being, because we had discussed everything on which we were going to work, and we had established how we would take the face-to face final

exam. But all this comfort that had been enhanced by the predictability and control over our work was shattered in the 3rd week of classes, when we were forced to switch to online teaching and learning, as a measure for managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost no one knew what we were going to have to do, or what it meant to teach and learn online. In early April 2020, after an effort to enroll the more than 900 teachers and over 18,000 students at the university, our technology department operationalized the university's Moodle platform. With fear and curiosity, I began to configure my disciplines in the new "workspace". I spent over 10 hours per day for more than 2 weeks preparing materials, recording myself while demonstrating ways of working, learning how the Moodle platform and other new applications like Zoom work, and looking to keep my students close to me to assure them that we would find a solution for completing the academic year. However, I frequently felt frustrated, because I received technical questions from the students, and I did not know how to answer most of them. I always put myself in their shoes, and many times, I used a student ID to check how I could improve the course. I did not meet my students on Zoom from the very beginning, because it was an unknown app for almost everyone. We communicated through the forum and chat sections of the Moodle platform, and that meant I had to give individual feedback to over 200 students at least twice a week. It was exhausting but I was glad that I could maintain contact with my students under the psychological conditions generated by the lockdown.

Overcoming Obstacles in Online Teaching

What more could I say about other experiences with students and how we overcame the obstacles we faced? I think the most relevant points would be related to communication. Communication while meeting online became more complicated and time consuming. For example, at face-to-face meetings when I was directly transmitting the working procedures and concepts, I would clarify questions or issues for students on the spot, ensuring that most students were understanding the most important information I was giving them. Online teaching has lost some of the advantages of face-to-face oral communications. Even though the students

and I had agreed that we would use the Moodle platform as the main communication channel,

student questions came not only on the institutional email address but also from the personal

accounts, on the chat of the Microsoft Teams platform, on Facebook Messenger, and even on

WhatsApp. I felt that I had no other solution but to answer each student by understanding the

need of the students to clarify some aspects of our work, because most of their observations or

questions were pertinent. To overcome this obstacle, I analyzed which were the most frequently

asked questions and moved on to develop detailed procedures for the organization of teaching

and evaluation based on those frequently asked questions.

As far as I am concerned, this issue of how to communicate online was the most difficult

issue with which I dealt. At first, I used the free Zoom app, because the class meetings on

Microsoft Teams were not available until October 2020 at University of Oradea. The process of

communicating through Zoom was extremely unusual, because I felt like I was being seen and

heard not only by students but also by the members of their family and/or friends of my

students. There were times when the meeting was recorded, or pictures were taken of the

screen. I confess that I felt more like a TV presenter, extremely focused on my speech because

in fact I did not know for sure who my audience was. As only a few students were opening their

cameras or answering the questions I asked, my feeling of lack of control was even more

intense. But I succeeded in developing tolerance for this situation, because I chose to consider

these circumstances as a challenge and an opportunity for me to be different, to do things

differently. It proved to be a good approach, because in the end of 2020, I felt totally comfortable

with teaching in online settings, and I quickly started to observe positive outcomes in my

students. As I became more proficient and more comfortable, so, too, did my students.

Another obstacle that my students and I faced was related to the requirements of some

subjects that I teach. Specifically, each practical seminar activity involves direct interactions with

people for the purpose of psychological evaluation. Because these interactions were no longer

possible, a group of students and I generated and provided anonymous protocols of responses

as a substitute working materials. The substitute simulations helped us to overcome some obstacles, but not all challenges were overcome, because the preparation for the practical work of a psychologist cannot be done in the absence of the subject of an evaluation or intervention, who is the real person.

In the end, I consider that the unpredictable and demanding nature of the sudden transition to online teaching was a good opportunity for me to test my adaptation ability to new situations. The main lesson I learned is that clear and transparent written procedures are useful and appreciated by the students, regardless of the context of the teaching activity. I realized that as I became more proficient and more comfortable working in an online environment, my students were also becoming more comfortable and effective.

Challenge Moving Forward

At this moment I am facing a new challenge—that of integrating the benefits of online learning in the context of returning to face-to-face teaching, because the benefits brought by digitalization to the instructive-educational process are obvious (e.g., scheduling flexibility, giving students options, taking more advantage of multimedia in teaching and learning, creating online asynchronous practice, blended learning). I wish that in the future the university will make it possible to achieve a mixed approach of my work, because I consider, after my online experiences, that a blended learning structure would be more effective. Thus, all the information organized for the pandemic period could be accessed by students at any time when they have questions of a procedural nature, and the precious time gained could be used in the face-to-face meetings for a customized instructive-educational activity according to the needs of each student. For this, universities should not give up the online work platforms they have made available during the pandemic, and the teachers should keep an open attitude towards the digitalization of the education.