

IS THE FUTURE HYBRID? AN ANALYSIS OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIGITAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT. *Is the Future Hybrid? An Analysis of Opportunities for Digital Education.* The year 2020 undoubtedly marked a turning point in education. The abrupt passage to online teaching created an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty regarding the aims, efficiency, and outcome of this type of educational endeavor. Nevertheless, the two years with strict anti-epidemic measures and frustrating lockdowns have opened an opportunity to rethink the in-person traditional teaching experience. The current article wants to analyze the main concepts that provide the framework for online teaching and to answer the following research question: Are post pandemic undergraduate students more willing to use online learning? The research method is based on responses to a questionnaire survey sent to students in one subject area: legal studies. A SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis is then used to provide a framework to better understand the present and future situation of online education. The conclusion suggests that the recent online teaching experience changed students' perception on digital pedagogy, indicating a new direction to all educators.

Keywords: *hybrid education, pandemic, digital skills, online learning, SWOT analysis*

REZUMAT. *Va fi viitorul hibrid? O analiză de oportunități în educația digitală.* Anul 2020 a marcat un punct de cotitură în educație. Trecerea abruptă la învățarea online a creat un sentiment generalizat de incertitudine în ceea ce privește obiectivele, eficiența și finalitatea demersului didactic de acest tip. Cu toate

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acestea, cei doi ani presărați cu măsuri anti-epidemice stricte și restricții frustrante au deschis perspectiva regândirii pedagogiei clasice. Articolul de față își propune să analizeze principalele concepte care au contribuit la modelarea unui cadru pentru învățarea online și să răspundă următoarei întrebări: Sunt studenții generației post-pandemie mai deschiși spre învățarea online? Metodologia utilizată implică folosirea unui chestionar adresat unui grup de studenți în primul an de studiu la Facultatea de Drept. În urma analizării datelor și validarea întrebării propuse a fost utilizată analiza de tip SWOT.

Cuvinte-cheie: educație hibridă, pandemie, competențe digitale, învățare online, analiză SWOT

Motto: "A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."
(Paul Romer)

Introduction

The current article uses this statement as a starting point because it sets a rational perspective on how one should approach an unprecedented and potentially negative situation. The coronavirus pandemic was a global challenge for both communities and individuals in terms of coping with individual and collective distress while adapting to new everyday situations. Nevertheless, the Covid crisis brought to the surface broad opportunities in many sectors. In education, it put forward a new paradigm: the pedagogy of online teaching and learning. This involved an adaptation of learning practices with a sustained effort from all the actors involved: institutions, teachers, and learners. But the question is: will higher education return to known concepts and traditional methods of teaching and learning in the post-pandemic period, or will the digital transformation last beyond the pandemic?

Literature review

Why is the magic virtual world so alluring to people nowadays? To give an answer to this question we need to look at some social and psychological explanations of self-identity development in the age of networks. This introduction's aim is not to explore the topic in depth but to provide a framework for the current research. The point is to understand how technology use has shaped our lives and social interactions and to admit that it needs to be included in any educational project. Thus, the literature review focuses first on making a link between Mead's theory of social behaviorism and Turkle's idea of identity in the age of the Internet. The two visions are discussed because they help us educators explain attitudes, preferences and choices made by our digital-native learners.

In short, Mead's thesis (Mead 1967) about "self" states that the self is the result of a process of social communication that enables viewing oneself from the perspective of others. A "self" has two components: "me" (which is a phase of the self that displays a set of attitudes associated to the social group to which one belongs) and "I" (a phase that responds to "me," a construct consisting of the several viewpoints of others reflected in separate roles). Without the viewpoints of others that form the "me," there would exist nothing to which the "I" could respond. Without society's offer to act several separate roles, a self could not arise. Therefore, self is a social construct and people need to belong to a social group and to communicate with its members to develop it.

More than forty years later S. Turkle approaches the issue of self-growth and communication from a distinct perspective in a 2012 Ted Talk. She introduces the syntagm "alone together" to define the realities of a new era in which technology has subtly become part of everyday life reshaping human relationships. Without grounding her thesis on social behaviorism, Turkle also shares an interest in people's inner identity and describes a new situation in which the self is involved in a multitude of social interactions and performs several roles offered by a diversity of social platforms, games, and Apps. She thinks that the self is trapped in a network where communication is overly enhanced by using tweets, emails, text messages that all have in common one thing: they do not take place in real time. This way individuals could present the self as they want it to be instead of revealing it spontaneously as in a face-to-face conversation. In her opinion "I share therefore I am" is an illusion of companionship as far as it does not involve the demands of friendship. Control (of attitude, words, emotions) is preferred over intimacy that implies the openness of the self.

In her talk, Turkle describes a reality where technology has gone beyond its primary role to help people in various aspects of their lives. This situation takes us a step forward in researching the cause of these circumstances. Van Dijk (2006) asks a fundamental question: "What are the causes of the rise of networks in contemporary societies? (29) "He approaches the answer from two perspectives. The first is a social explanation that emphasizes the need to use networks at all levels of society: "The use of networking is an evident social need in an individualizing society. Networks can be seen as the social counterparts of individualization." (2006, 29) On the labor market networking is an essential ingredient for survival in competition (business) or societal demand (non-profit organizations). His second explanation contains a historical viewpoint according to which "Networks also cause a comprehensive restructuring of society at large. They are breaking old modes of organization as they help organizations in their search for new scale levels, new markets, and new ways to govern and control." (2006, 29). Furthermore, "networks have accelerated modernization" by supporting globalization and socialization on the one hand and localization and individualization

on the other (2006, 29). The network described by Van Dijk becomes this time the place of “convergent architectures” (Papacharissi 2011) that “may provide the stage for interaction, linking the individual, separately or simultaneously, with multiple audiences.” (304). If we think in terms of the self and its needs then, social networks provide an ideal nurturing sphere as they enable both identity expression and community building. (Papacharissi 2011, 305)

The question posed at the beginning of the literature review section is not rhetorical. The answer could be found in the theories presented that all share a red thread: the inseparable need for development of the self and communication, the feeling of belonging to a group without apparent effort, the illusion of having control over situations and relationships. As the aim of the current article is to clarify an issue related to online teaching, another question that should be asked is the following: where do social and network theories meet pedagogy and in what way are they connected? At a crossroads the self, the physical body, and the machines meet and take the same route, following a common goal: learning. In short, the connection between the theories described above lies in the fact that they form a pool of models that can be used to describe and explain the learning processes.

The next point of interest for the current research is to provide a framework for online learning. To understand its roots and specificity, we will focus on clarifying terms such as hybrid pedagogy, blended learning, and digital pedagogy.

Stommel (2012) defines hybrid pedagogy as “learning that happens both in a classroom (or other physical space) and online”. In providing this definition Stommel considers the physical space where the learning takes place. From this perspective, according to the same author, the term hybrid sometimes overlaps with the concept of blended learning. Though the two concepts are not similar. The important distinction between the two is that the term “blended” describes a practice whereas “hybrid” implies a methodological approach (Stommel 2012). For this, hybrid pedagogy has “deeper resonances” because it brings “the sorts of learning that happen in a physical place and the sorts of learning that happen in a virtual place into a more engaged and dynamic conversation.” (Stommel 2012).

Although the name contains the word “digital,” digital pedagogy is not an area of pedagogy that is reduced to the employment of technology in teaching. It is a learning management system in which the space of learning is more fluid and adaptable than teachers were used to. It is a learner centered system in which the single, classical learning space is multiplied in different pieces, each representing a learning environment for students. They should be able to choose their own tools and use the web to support their learning. (Morris 2014)

The current article’s aim is to find out if post pandemic undergraduate students are more willing to use online learning. It has three parts: a research methodology section (that describes the method, participants and the tools

involved in the study), results and discussion section (which presents the outcome of the study and contrasts the data with a recent official European Union document on the impact of the pandemic in education) and conclusions.

Research Methodology

The present research is a prospective, quantitative study using new data collected for this purpose. It is based on the hypothetic-inferential method. The main research instrument is a Google forms online questionnaire that consists of a mix of ten close-ended (multiple choice or Likert scale) questions, aiming to gather students' perception and attitudes towards online learning before and after 2020 (the year regarded as a cornerstone in teaching for both teachers and learners). Quantitative data was analyzed through descriptive statistics and interpreted by employing a SWOT analysis.

Forty-two participants filled in the questions in the survey. All of them were first year undergraduate students at the Faculty of Law, Babes-Bolyai University from which 30 were females and 12 were males. A link with the online questionnaire was sent to them via email in May 2022. The data collection time limit was set for June, the last month of the second semester of the 2020/2022 academic year. The online questionnaire was written in Romanian (as this was the respondents' mother tongue) to avoid a lack of answers due to a low level of English. Students completed it anonymously, and each student could fill it in only once. Before completion, students were fully informed about the study's aim and agreed to participate voluntarily. All questions were mandatory and no exclusion criteria were set.

The variable element of the study is the major in Law that all the undergraduate student responders have. Moreover, the research addressed legal studies students at a particular point in time, therefore students at the same university with a different major and from a different academic year could have responded differently. This issue is responsible for one of the limitations the research has. The other limitation is caused by the size of the group of respondents. Forty-two students are a small number compared to the total number of undergraduate students majoring in Law. Thus, data cannot be generalized. Despite these limitations, the research provides an insight on the degree to which perception on online learning has changed.

The research question posed was: Are post pandemic undergraduate students more willing to use online learning? Data obtained from the survey were put in a new framework employing a second research instrument meant to extend the area for the initial research question. The aim is to correlate undergraduate students' willingness to study online with an educational offer. Would such an initiative be regarded as justified? To find the answer to that question we used SWOT, a type of analysis that was initially implemented in

business to move forward with a strategic product. Its goal is to provide a template that a business can use to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for their product. In fact, the term SWOT is an acronym for these four factors. In this type of analysis, the first two factors are internal (related to organizational resources) whereas opportunities and threats, by contrast, are external realities and refer to competition, the market, or changing trends that could affect the company.

The first concern for the researcher was to find out if this type of template could be used in a completely different field, namely, in education. The study of online references related to the topic revealed that the SWOT analysis has been employed as a trusted, reliable tool in education. Stoller (2020) used it as “a time-honored tool for helping to formulate organizational strategy” in medical education related research.

Orr (2013, 383) thinks that “A SWOT analysis of a teacher education program or any program can be the driving force for implementing change. It is one tool to use in a strategic planning process.” His suggestion is to use this tool in any undergraduate or degree program to adjust curriculum, internships, learning activities or education policies. In one of his articles Kundra (2018) suggested that employing a SWOT analysis to give general solutions in planning the post-elections course of education in Fiji would be beneficial. His opinion is that, if SWOT is adapted for determining the objectives of educational planning and identifying the internal and external factors that assist in achieving the set objectives, it could be used as a reliable tool.

Results and discussion

The survey is made up of ten questions that can be grouped according to their purpose in the following way:

- One set of questions has the aim to reveal respondents’ level of familiarity with online learning before 2020 (Table 1);
- Three sets of questions aim to investigate respondents’ attitude towards online learning before and after the coronavirus pandemic (Table 2, 5, and Table 5);
- Two sets of questions want to explore the connection between the type of online interaction the respondents used before 2020s and their ability to access online learning during the pandemic (Table 3 and Table 4);
- One set of questions aims to reveal the respondent’s main difficulties in accessing online learning (Table 7);

- One set of questions wants to investigate respondents' preference of online learning activities (Table 8);
- One set of questions wants to explore respondents' opinion on the crucial element for successful online learning (Table 9);
- One set of questions aims to find out respondents' opinion on the importance of including online courses in the education offer of universities (Table 10).

Table 1. Rating of respondents' online learning abilities before the 2020 Covid pandemic

How would you rate your online learning abilities before the 2020 Covid pandemic?	n (%)
Particularly good	6 (14.3%)
Quite good	19 (45.2%)
Not good at all	17 (40.5%)

The purpose of this question was to determine if the respondents had previous online learning experience. It must be mentioned that, before 2020, online education was not accredited by the Ministry of Education in schools, therefore the generalized type of learning was in-person. In Higher Education it was accredited only for long distance and life-learning programs. This peculiarity of the Romanian system of education made the step towards online teaching extremely difficult for both teachers and students. In this context, the reasonable high number of responders that admit to having particularly good abilities (14.3%) and quite good abilities (45.2%) could be seen as comforting for the class instructor and a good starting point for future online educational endeavors. The three sets of questions in Table 2 and 5 and 6 are aimed at revealing a change of attitude towards online learning.

Table 2. Respondents' attitude towards online learning in 2020

How would you define your attitude towards online learning before the 2020 Covid pandemic?	n (%)
A useful way to acquire knowledge	11 (26.2%)
A way to acquire knowledge more useful in the future than it is now	12 (28.6%)
A way of learning that could occasionally be used to enhance traditional methods	24 (57.1%)

Table 2 contains the set of answers related to the year 2020. The results here indicate that, at the time, the survey takers did not credit it as a useful way to acquire knowledge (a low percentage of 26.2 agree with this statement). Surprisingly, more than a quarter of them (28.6%) did not regard it as a way of

acquiring new knowledge in the future. This could be an indication of the perspective the responders, as learners, have on education, which was traditional, on-site and in-person oriented. This could be the explanation for the fact that 57.1% of them viewed online learning as a collateral tool for teaching that could have been used occasionally to enhance traditional methods.

Table 5. The shift in responders’ attitude towards online learning in the last couple of years

Have the last two years changed your attitude towards online learning?	n (%)
Yes	30 (71.4%)
No	12 (28.6%)

Table 5 focuses on measuring if there is a shift in attitude after a two-year online teaching and learning experience. The answers reveal an expected and overwhelming “yes” (71.4%). This is a direct result of the fact that this type of instruction was consistently used as the main educational tool in an institutional framework during the pandemic.

Table 6. Respondents’ current attitude towards online learning

How would you define your current attitude towards online learning?	n (%)
A useful way to acquire knowledge	22 (52.4%)
A way to acquire knowledge more useful in the future than it is now	1 (2.4%)
A way of learning that could occasionally be used to enhance traditional methods	19 (45.2%)

Table 6 contains the same set of questions as table 2 except for the year of reference. This time the responders express their current opinion on the same topic. Compared to the previous data 52.4% instead of 26.2% of them think online learning is a useful way to acquire knowledge. However, 45.2 % continue to see online learning as a way of learning that could occasionally be used to enhance traditional methods. This fact could indicate a certain degree of traditionalism combined with difficulties in adaptation.

Table 3 and 4 focus on finding data on the survey-takers’ usual type of online interaction before 2020 with the purpose to reveal a connection between this and the way they approach the online experience.

Table 3. Respondents' usual type of online interaction

On what purpose did you use online interaction before 2020?	n (%)
Drafting emails	25 (59.5%)
Social media	42 (100%)
Active citizenship (petitions, civic projects, correspondence with local authorities)	6 (14.3%)
Others	5 (11.9%)

In the set of questions from Table 3 multiple answers were allowed. As results show, all the responders used online interaction to access social media, an expected answer from a generation of young people that are very dynamic users of Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok and other Apps of the kind. Second in importance (59.5%) was the use of the Internet for drafting emails. A lower percentage (14.3%) used it to get involved in community problems and act as active citizens (by filling in petitions, writing to local authorities etc.). The lowest percentage (11.9%) is rated for the use of the Internet for different purposes, not mentioned.

Table 4. The rating of the degree to which respondents' previous online interaction affected their approach towards online learning

To what extent did the above-mentioned activities help you approach online learning?	n (%)
Significantly	13 (31%)
Quite a lot	24 (57.1%)
Insignificantly	5 (11.9%)
Did not affect	0 (0%)

Table 4 shows the results for the set of questions regarding the degree to which respondents' previous online interaction affected their approach towards online learning. As outlined in Table 3, the survey-takers did not use the Internet for learning purposes. Nevertheless, they immersed themselves in a virtual space presenting some features like those specific to educational platforms (expressing opinions and feelings through chat, posts, emojis, video options, group interaction). Therefore, it could be said that online activities equip students with some of the prerequisite skills needed for online learning. This assumption is supported by a substantial number of students (57.1%) who agreed with the fact that their online activity helped them quite a lot in this respect versus 11.9% who were insignificantly helped.

Table 7 aims to reveal the respondents’ main difficulties in accessing online learning. Multiple questions were allowed.

Table 7. Respondents’ main hurdles in online learning

In your opinion what were the main hurdles in online learning?	n (%)
Lack of technology (access to laptops, software, iPads) and technical problems (poor Internet connection)	7 (14.7%)
Lack of educational apps and platforms	17 (40.5%)
Lack of initial induction training on using educational apps and platforms	20 (47.6%)
Lack of socializing with peers	24 (57.1%)
Lack of self-discipline and difficulties focusing on learning tasks during classes	31 (73.8%)

As the results show, the main hurdle for students was the lack of self-discipline and difficulties related to focusing on learning tasks during classes. A reason for this could be the lack of self-directed learning skills. These skills include developing individual learning strategies that cover time management, learning techniques, planning strategies, self-assessment, and self-reflection (Harmer, 2001). It is important to focus on students’ autonomy, which should be learned at school, but learning is always social. The next difficulty mentioned in the paragraph confirms that the lack of socializing with peers (57.1%) was a problem for most students. For many of them (47.6%) the lack of induction training on using educational apps and platforms (40.5%) or the lack of educational apps and platforms was a serious disadvantage.

Table 8 reveals respondents’ preference of online learning activities (with multiple answers). The aim here is to have a roadmap of the most suitable activities to use online. On top three we have whiteboard collaborative learning and completing an individual project followed by presentation sharing the same score (66.7%) followed by classroom debates (54.8%). The first preferred activity shows that collaboration is enjoyed as part of online learning (and is made possible with the proper platform) and the fact that this type of activities could be used to “reinforce a sense of belonging among the group members” (Harmer 2001:114). The second one is the opposite in interaction: individual work on a project. The third one is a classical speaking activity that students enjoy because it gives the opportunity to share their opinion while interacting with peers. The lowest score is attributed to writing activities, a productive skill that usually takes time and patience to develop.

Table 8. Respondents' preference of online learning activities

In your opinion, what activities are best suited for online learning?	n (%)
Case studies	21 (50%)
Classroom debates	23 (54.8%)
Whiteboard collaborative learning	28 (66.7%)
Pair work and group work in breakout rooms	6 (14.3%)
Completing an individual project followed by presentation	28 (66.7%)
Learning vocabulary by completing interactive tasks (fill in, quizzes, online games)	8 (19%)
Reading and listening activities	11 (26.2%)
Writing activities	2 (4.8%)

The set of questions in table 9 aims to highlight the essential elements of successful online learning (multiple answers). The answers give credit to the teacher who is seen as having the leading role: 78.6% think that the teaching strategy and activation techniques used by the teacher are the key factor of success in online learning. The second place belongs to the personal motivation to learn (73.8%).

Table 9. Respondents' opinion on the crucial element for successful online learning

In your opinion what element is crucial for successful online learning?	n (%)
Personal motivation to learn	31 (73.8%)
The educational apps and platforms used in teaching and learning	13 (31%)
The teaching strategy and activation techniques used by the teacher	33 (78.6%)
Others	0 (0%)

Table 10. Respondents' opinion on the importance of including online courses in the education offer of universities

In your opinion how important is it for universities to include online programs and courses in their education offer?	n (%)
Particularly important	15 (35.7%)
Quite important	25 (59.5%)
Not important	2 (4.8%)

The goal of this question is to check if respondents are interested in attending online courses in an institutional setting in a post pandemic age. This way, the usefulness of online learning is related to an outcome that implies recognition of academic effort. This could indicate how much respondents correlate learning with an institutional framework. It could be deduced that the

demands and rules established by the Ministry of Education are considered when choosing an educational offer. As the results show, an important number of responders (59.5%) confirm their interest in this type of course.

As a follow-up for the answers provided in the questionnaire, the SWOT analysis is meant to reveal the degree of opportunity for any educational institution to offer online courses/programs. The next table contains the four specific elements to this type of inquiry: strengths (what an online course offers to learners), weaknesses (what could lower the chances of success), opportunities (the positive aspects that could make the course interesting) and threats (the dangers for online learning). The analysis was performed referring to the answers provided by the researched lot of undergraduate students. It could be expanded by considering more responders. This fact would add an increased number of items for each of the four elements.

Table 11. A SWOT analysis of online learning

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
A useful way to acquire knowledge	Lack of technology and software
A way of learning that could be used in addition to traditional learning	Lack of socializing with peers
	Lack of self-discipline in learning
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
Personal motivation to learn	Lack of online study programs from universities
A positive change of attitude towards online learning	

Although the impact of the analysis is reduced because of the small number of participants, it still gives a clue about the success that online learning (seen as a strategic product) could have if implemented. To support this affirmation, we will discuss the conclusions of a recent official EU (European Union) document on how the pandemic’s impact has been valued for digital and online learning practices. If we overlap our research and SWOT analysis findings with the conclusions provided by the above-mentioned document, we notice that they have some common elements. To mention just a few:

- “The COVID-19 pandemic has cultivated a new cohort of students who were not interested in fully online learning previously, representing a sizable new source of online learners” (Capranos et al. 2021), facts revealed by the current study, see tables 2, 5 and 6.
- “The expansion of online offers needs further monetary investments, in particular in digital infrastructure and personnel,” see table 7

- The “innovative forms and formats of lifelong learning will only attract potentially interested people permanently if an online certification is recognized and/or valued in the labor market later” see table 10 in which students express their wish to have online study programs included in the education offer of universities.

Additional to these findings, a recent survey has reported that in the European Higher Education Area, most HEIs have confirmed that they have plans to enhance digital capacity (75%) and explore new ways of teaching (92%) beyond the crisis (Gaebel et al. 2021).

Conclusions

The hypothesis launched at the beginning of the study was: Are post pandemic undergraduate students more willing to use online learning? The analysis of the data collected from many undergraduate student responders provides a positive answer to the research question. This fact is highlighted by the change of attitude discussed in Table 6, which is a clear indicator that most students currently accept online learning as a useful way to acquire knowledge. The two years in which they relied on online education have made them understand the way learning could be achieved and practiced in a different environment. The second argument in favor of a positive response to the same question is given by the answers to the question in table 5 where 71.4% of the responders agree that their attitude has changed. Could we say that their perception changed because of the recent online teaching experience? We can only assume that such a logical consequence exists but there is no direct data to support it.

We think these data suggest digital pedagogy should be considered as the new paradigm in teaching, indicating a new direction to all educators. They support the statement according to which: “Driven by the need to digitalize education and training in record time, the disruption to face-to-face education reshaped established educational practices fundamentally” (Hodges et al. 2020). What is important and we should consider as teachers is that digital pedagogy is just another innovative way to engage students in learning.

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