

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Things We (Might) Lose: Content and Context of Digital Teaching in Times of Covid-19

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Abstract:

This paper investigates possible gains and losses university students experience and expect in the process of abrupt digitalisation. We base our arguments on an online-survey regarding digital transferable skill courses (summer-term 2020 N=362; winter-term 2020/2021 N=322).

Students seem to be satisfied with digital learning: They evaluate interaction in class, teacher support and teaching quality positively. This goes along with experienced advantages: no commuting, flexibility and comfortable knowledge acquisition. Simultaneously, students mention disadvantages. The biggest downside is the deficit in social interaction: Students are longing for campus life and exchange with lecturers. In winter-term 2020/2021, students were more plagued by reduced concentration, physical exertion and motivation problems. Only one third name didactic-related disadvantages.

Our findings indicate a two-way development: a feeling of fatigue and isolation during digital learning and increasingly positive perception of digital teaching. Students do not miss the academic *content* but the academic *context*: campus life and vivid exchange.

Paper:

When COVID-19 forced society to rethink ways of communicating and collaborating, higher education institutions switched almost instantly to online teaching. In Germany, it meant a big shift as academic education is prevalingly taught on-site, with only few remote programs. Accordingly, at the University of Cologne all classes – disciplinary and transferable skill courses – were digitalized. The latter are coordinated by the ProfessionalCenter (PC) for students of all faculties to enhance their employability.

Before the pandemic breakout, PC mainly offered analogue classes, based on the belief that transferable skills' acquisition would be most successful this way. When the pandemic hit, teachers had to find fast (see Hodges et al., 2020 on emergency remote teaching) alternatives to guarantee interactive, practice-based classes to guarantee the communicative, self-reflective and practice-based classes just as they did before; synchronous formats were therefore encouraged.

This paper uses transferable skill courses to investigate possible gains and losses university students expect in the process of abrupt digitalisation. We base our arguments on results from an online-survey regarding online teaching at PC, conducted in summer term 2020 (N = 362) and winter term 2020/2021 (N = 322).

Outwardly, students seem to be satisfied with digital learning. Almost three quarters state that digital learning is a good alternative to live classes. Next to a positive overall evaluation (81.8% in summer term (ST) 2020; 82.4% in winter term (WT) 2020/2021), students were satisfied with interaction in class (ST: 73.6%; WT: 77.1%), teacher support (ST: 92.6%; WT: 89.4%) and teaching quality (ST: 87.0%; WT: 91.2%). This goes along with advantages students experience: no commuting (ST: 80.9%; WT: 89.3%), flexibility (ST: 78.4%; WT: 85.0%) and comfortable knowledge acquisition (ST: 55.1%; WT: 59.4%). Those figures are contradictory to some previous findings, reporting students "hate" online classes (Ramlo 2021). However, flexibility has been previously shown as an advantage of online classes (Bettinger & Loeb 2017), allowing students to link different domains of their life, e.g. family and work.

Simultaneously, students at PC also mention disadvantages. The biggest downside is deficit in social interactions. Students mainly miss their fellow students (ST: 80.2%; WT: 91.8%), to a lesser extent their lecturers (ST: 54.8%; WT: 66.5%). In winter term 2020/2021, they were more plagued by reduced concentration (ST: 51.0%; WT: 67.0%), physical exertion (ST: 39.9%; WT: 63.1%) and motivation problems (ST: 36.9%; WT: 58.4%). In general, only one third name didactic-related disadvantages such as limited range of exercises (ST: 33.8%; WT: 28.3%) and workload (ST: 28.1%; WT: 35.2%), which is in line with positive course evaluation.

Asked in an open question "What will you as a student possibly lose if teaching continues to be digital?", students name predominantly social aspects as daily and academic exchange, face-to-face communication or creative cooperation with other students. They are longing for campus life and exchange with lecturers. Regarding social competences, students are afraid to miss the learnings "between the lines".

Thus, our findings indicate a two-way development. On the one hand, the answers reveal a feeling of fatigue and isolation during digital learning. On the other hand, the positive aspects of the digitization of teaching are increasingly being perceived. Previously, the study of Tang et al (2020, p. 1) showed that "the combined model of online teaching with the flipped learning improved students' learning, attention, and evaluation of courses". Almost all PC courses followed an interactive approach. The pandemic has shown that soft skill training in small, interactive, low-threshold digital classes is possible; a focus shall be set on a wise use of tools, possible scopes and space for interaction. The importance of proper communication, also understood as connection with students in the classroom, being approachable and responsive to students' needs, was discussed by Frazer et al. (2017).

However, even if PC strengthens collaboration and communication within its mostly synchronous classes and enables exchange - in contrary to many other online formats where learners lack any social interaction and are left alone with the material, we observe that digital teaching is not a solution for all and for ever. While around the half of the sample is in favour of live classes, 40% prefer the digital mode. University life is not only about academic knowledge but also about social

contacts. At the end, students do not miss the academic *content* in the digital teaching but the academic *context*: campus life and vivid exchange.

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