Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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The Pivotal Roles Of Communication, Interaction and Connection in Positive Experiences of Emergency Remote Teaching: Implications for Ongoing Teaching

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: The outbreak of Covid-19 has led to an unprecedented pedagogic transformation in response. Most extant literature on the effectiveness of online learning predates the pandemic and refers to non-forced online conditions or utilise existing frameworks to quantitively understand how learners respond to a unique forced online learning situation. Using a qualitative survey (N=205) and 20 follow-up interviews, this study sought to explore the experience of forced online learning more deeply. Inductive data analysis revealed that while around 60% of respondents had a better-than-expected experience of forced online teaching primarily due to well-handled communication and interaction, 28% of participants reported a more negative experience for the opposite reasons. Perceptions of teacher communication and care were also related to positive forced online learning experiences, with approaches such as video or long non-interactive zoom lectures the principal reasons offered for disappointment. A range of 'socio-material' factors acted both to amplify and disrupt smooth communication and interaction. The findings demonstrate the pivotal importance of communication, interaction, and connection in participant experiences of forced online learning. Implications for teachers and policymakers will be discussed.

Paper:

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a pedagogic transformation in response. Much of the existing literature on online learning refers to non-forced online conditions that predates the pandemic (Means & Niestler, 2021). However, much of the burgeoning pandemic-related academic literature utilises existing frameworks (i.e. Erickson & Wattiaux, 2021) is domain or subject-specific (i.e. Petillion & McNeil, 2020) or employs quantitative methods to attempt to understand the impacts of forced online teaching on learners (i.e. Means & Niestler, 2021). Though reliable, quantitative approaches potentially preclude a complete understanding of the unique nature of the COVID-19 induced forced online learning experience by restricting the full gamut of participant responses. In addition, the results of existing studies are often wide-ranging and can be challenging for the average practitioner to apply to teaching. This case study utilised an open qualitative survey (N=205) to address this methodological and practical gap, which was analysed using thematic content analysis. These data were then used to focus semi-structured interviews with 20 randomly selected informants to more deeply explore the forced online experience and consider how teachers can modify their practice to improve learner experiences and expectations of online learning.

Analysis of survey data revealed that around 60% of students experienced positive changes in attitude towards online learning due to their experiences over two semesters. Reasons were diverse, but participants most frequently reported that classes featuring interaction with peers and educators positively influenced attitudes towards forced online learning. Data from open a variety of open questions revealed a similar overarching theme. Learners cited communication, interaction, and collaborative learning as reasons for a better-than-expected learning experience. Conversely, another 28% of learners indicated that their online learning experiences were worse than expected and expressed frustration and negativity about the quality of teaching and a resulting lack of motivation, concentration, and learning in their open survey question answers. Accounts of negative forced online experiences primarily stemmed from a lack of interaction with peers and communication with educators. This finding was also confirmed and more deeply explored in the interview data.

Teacher communication and care appeared to be essential contributors to satisfaction, and these comments broadly aligned with the overarching theme of the last section. Teachers perceived as kind and caring, available for questions, answered emails promptly and offered high-quality or one-on-one or technology-mediated dialogic feedback contributed to more positive experiences. In some cases, feedback practices were viewed as superior to the pre-pandemic situation. On the other hand, limited opportunities for learners to communicate with educators or ask questions, the provision of late or inadequate feedback, pre-recorded video classes or long non-interactive zoom lectures were cited as reasons for negative experiences. Although many learners appreciated the flexibility and opportunities to review pre-recorded or recorded lectures, a similar number of comments attributed difficulty focusing and concentrating to a lack of interaction with professors and peers. Once again, this data underlines the importance of connection and interaction for a positive experience of forced online learning.

Finally, throughout the data, certain 'socio-material' factors either amplified or detracted from a satisfactory forced online experience, and these factors were also broadly related to communication, interaction, and connection. For example, the effective use of technology and teaching platforms and satisfactory hardware and internet connection appeared to support the perception that online learning was effective. Indeed, it was overwhelmingly platforms that smoothly facilitated interaction and collaboration, e.g. polling software, breakout rooms and collaborative documents, that predominantly contributed to positive perceptions. Conversely, problems finding an appropriate place to study, issues with the frequent failure of dormitory provided internet connection, and poor educator skill utilising technology for connected and interactive teaching appeared to attenuate satisfaction, motivation, concentration, and the perceived quality of the forced online learning experience.#

The remarkable reverse symmetry of these results provides critical evidence for the importance of providing connected, social, and interactive learning experiences during COVID-19 and approaching forced online learning as a community and learner-centred pedagogy of care. The data have important implications for teachers working in forced online, online, and blended conditions post-COVID-19. Furthermore, they suggest that even in contexts in which more transmissive teaching approaches may be expected, students recognize a link between teaching designed to engage learners, build collaboration and establish community, and their ability to focus, engage with

content, and learn effectively.

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