

# **Resisting Digital Change: Is it a Bad Thing?: An exploration into why university staff resist digital teaching**

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## **Research Domains**

Digital University and new learning technologies (DU)

## **Abstract**

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on higher education were complex: while the crisis offered new learning opportunities for some, it also highlighted widespread inequalities in digital competencies and technical resources. In this research paper, we unpack the complex reactions university staff members had toward digital teaching via 68 interviews with teaching staff, administrators and institutional management, working at 8 European universities. Drawing on Bovey and Hede's (2001) resistance framework, we explore different types of resistant behaviour exhibited by staff members towards digital teaching and reflect on the causes of these behaviours. This research aims to provide the scholarly and practitioner community insight into how the transition to digital teaching affected deeply ingrained teaching ideologies and practices; this insight will be used to formulate recommendations for institutions engaged in digital change.

## **Full paper**

## **Introduction**

Covid-19 brought widespread and rapid digital change to the higher education landscape. Effects of the crisis were complex: while some benefits were highlighted such as new learning opportunities and community building among university stakeholders (Benito et al., 2021; Marinoni et al., 2020), challenges were also multifold ranging from overburdened teaching staff (Elsholz et al., 2021) to vast inequalities in technical resources and digital competencies (Devkota, 2021; Laufer et al., 2021). In this research paper, we explore the complex reactions 68 university staff members, working at 8 European universities, had with the rapid digital change. Specifically, we investigate how staff members exhibited resistant behaviours towards digital teaching and unpack the drivers of this behaviour.

## **Resistance to Change**

In the literature, change at universities has long been associated with difficulties with numerous studies highlighting critical to resistant responses from university stakeholders (Anderson, 2008; Bristow et al., 2017; Kalfa et al., 2018; Kezar, 2013; Lueddeke, 1999; Sapir & Oliver, 2017), especially when change is perceived to infringe upon the designated professorial domains of teaching and research (Åkerlind, 2005; Lane, 2007; Laufer, 2019). The recent accelerated transition to digital teaching has allowed scholars to challenge assumptions made about the resilience of universities (Bartusevičienė et al., 2021), and also to review our understanding of resistance to change, a concept that has traditionally been viewed as a barrier to overcome (Scholkmann, 2021). This insight is especially relevant given the increased interest both amongst institutions and governments in continuing with the use of digital teaching formats post-COVID-19 (Tilak & Kumar, 2022).

To understand the multifaceted nature of resistance, we draw on the framework from Bovey and Hede (2001). Resistance, according to these authors, can be exercised both 'actively' and 'passively' and consists of open and concealed behaviours. Active resistance includes open behaviours such as opposing, arguing, and obstructing as well as the concealed behaviours of stalling, dismantling, and undermining. Passive resistance refers to open behaviours such as observing, refraining, and waiting as well as the passive behaviours of ignoring, withdrawing, and avoiding.

## **Research Methods**

In this study, we conducted 68 interviews with university staff - teaching, administrative and support staff as well as faculty and central management. The interviewees worked with or in 8 diverse study programs (e.g. social and political sciences, arts, education and law), which had used educational technologies to various extents prior to the pandemic (from beginners to advanced users). The study programs are located in different types of higher education institutions (private / public, small / large institutions) and different European countries. The selection of diverse study programs as case studies was guided by the comparative case study design from Barlett & Vavrus (2017), in which cases are selected based upon the heterogeneity principle. The interviews lasted on average 1 hour, were recorded and transcribed, and personal information anonymized. The data was analysed collaboratively by the researchers with a combination of both theory and data-driven codes.

## **Preliminary Analysis**

First observations of the data indicate different manifestations of passive and active resistance among the university staff. Resistant behaviours were often subtle and displayed passively or in a concealed manner. For example, we observed 'stalling' and 'observing' behaviours: respondents choosing not to fully engage with digital teaching and using tactics such as putting forth only the minimum effort to teach online, or deciding to 'wait-out' the pandemic before investing efforts in redesigning their courses. We also identified active resistance in the form of 'arguing' in which respondents declared that digital teaching went against their personal teaching ideology, was not appropriate for their subject matter or in line with the mission of their institution (e.g. an applied university).

Moreover, we found that these resistant behaviours were often linked to intense emotional responses the digital change triggered for respondents. In particular, teaching staff expressed overly negative emotions towards digital teaching: common associations were feeling overburdened and overwhelmed - using terms such as "very challenging", "extremely depressing", "nightmarish" and

“infuriating” to describe their experiences. These reactions were in part prompted by fear, several respondents described having a fear of failing - e.g. appearing incompetent, providing a poor learning experience, and struggling with the demoralising “black tile problem” - lecturing without students putting on their cameras.

These first takeaways from the data shed light on how educational technology can uproot deeply ingrained teaching ideologies and practices. Acknowledging and understanding the validity of these emotional responses to change, and how they may contribute to resistant behaviours, is an important step for institutions wishing to continue down a digitalization pathway.

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