Lights and Shadows of Studying Online: University Students' Perspective

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Abstract The outburst and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced every aspect of contemporary life. Since March 2020, education has moved to the online mode. Practically overnight the teaching and learning activities shifted from the physical to virtual spaces, which brought about both positive and negative opinions about this form of education. The chapter discusses advantages and disadvantages of distance teaching from the university students' perspective. Eighteen MA students attending a teacher training programme, majoring in English Philology, participated in the study. Their opinions were gathered by means of an online questionnaire that was administered twice: the first time at the end of the first semester of online teaching, the second time at the end of the second semester of online teaching. The collected data were both quantitative (statements on the Likert scale) and qualitative (answers to open-ended questions). The students' views show a complexity and dynamics of the situation incurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. They realise that online teaching has many advantages, for example saving time and money, having time for reflection about the activities they are engaged in, or time management. Yet, they also perceive the disadvantages of the situation which are related mostly to work overload, lack of face-to-face meetings and physical discomfort, for example eye-pain and poor physical condition.

Keywords COVID-19 pandemic · Higher education · Distance learning · Online studying · Students' opinions

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1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has touched every sphere of human existence, changing the familiar face-to-face modes of activity into not-so-familiar distance ways of work and communication that have been made possible by the developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The new situation required a new approach as the imminent threat that the pandemic has carried resulted in limiting contacts among people, in strict sanitary regulations, in lockdown, and eventually in turning to the use of ICT wherever possible. The entire world was in the state of emergency. In spring 2020 remote education worldwide became a reality which caused multiple problems and challenges. The most difficult was the fact that there was no choice – only online mode of delivery was possible. In addition, teachers were not prepared to switch to online teaching practically overnight. Neither were the learners. This obviously caused a lot of confusion, stress and despair.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss university students' opinions about online studying when they were in their MA programme. The students are skilled in the use of ICT but mainly for personal purposes, as many of them are regular users of social media sites, information resources and other affordances made possible by the Internet. Yet, their experience with online learning and teaching is fairly limited. Therefore, it seems justified to probe into their views and opinions concerning this form of education.

The chapter opens with the discussion of distance education, its definition and typology, followed by digital competences that are necessary to deal with ICT in various spheres of life. Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on education are also briefly discussed along with a short overview of extant empirical research. Then the study on the university students' opinions about online learning is reported.

2 Distance Education (DE)

At the end of the twentieth century DE was defined as

> covering the various forms of study at all levels which are not under a continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and teaching of a supporting organization (Holmberg, 1994, p. 3).

The above definition highlights the students' independence from teachers (tutors) as well as the physical distance between the participants of the educational process. In addition, DE has always been supported by the use of technology which makes communication between physically and temporally distant learners, teachers and institutions possible (Anderson & Dron, 2011).

The spread of DE worldwide provides educational opportunities to those who, for a variety of reasons, cannot participate in regular classroom teaching. DE has always been dependent on technological affordances and its earliest forms were

based on postal services that were becoming more and more efficient. DE is almost 300 years old. In 1728, correspondence teaching was advertised in the *Boston Gazette* while in the 1840s, Sir Isaac Pitman initiated a system of shorthand by mailing texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards and obtaining transcriptions from his students in return (Holmberg, 2005). The so-called correspondence courses were immensely popular although distance learning was not much recognised and treated as a sub-form of education (Tait, 1996). Only when the British Open University was founded in 1969 had the barriers of academic learning been broken. As Weinbren (2014) observes, its ethos was to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. It has gained a considerable popularity and educated a large number of students (Prasanth, 2003).

The development of DE has been analysed within the so-called generational framework, first proposed by Nipper (1989). He distinguished three generations of DE that depend on the mediating technology and are labelled correspondence, broadcast and computer. The first generation (correspondence) of DE was based on print and postal services. Its overarching aim was "to offer educational opportunities to those without easy access to education institutions" (Anderson & Simpson, 2012, p. 3), such as, for example, women and working class representatives. The second generation of DE is marked by the use of radio and television broadcasting that greatly expanded the possibilities for transferring knowledge at a distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). This was followed by the third generation that made use of interactive technologies to enable conferencing, both synchronous and asynchronous. The development of digital telecommunications, computer technology, satellite TV and multimedia technology has had an increasing impact on learning and teaching practices.

In contrast to Nipper, Taylor (2001) proposed another approach to the development of DE. Thus, the third generation is based on telelearning that involves audio and video conferencing while the fourth generation exploits online learning that accounts for flexibility. The fifth generation uses "additional aspects of 'intelligent' digital technologies" (Anderson & Simpson, 2012, p. 2). Regardless of the classification framework, the first two generations of DE are followed by computer-mediated education that undergoes changes along with the new developments and affordances of ICT.

DE has also an interesting and long history in Poland. In 1776 the Jagiellonian University offered vocational courses for artisans. Since 1882 the Flying University in Warsaw, acting illegally, offered self-study courses for women. Maria Skłodowska was among its graduates. In 1906 it was legalised and transformed into the Association of Higher Academic Courses. After Poland regained independence, in 1920 it was renamed and called Free Polish University (*Wolna Wszechnica Polska*). At the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, other institutions dealing with distance education appeared, for example, the Association of Academic Courses for Women, Universal University Lectures and the Association of Higher Scientific Courses. Then, in the 1960s, educational television called "School programmes" was launched and the lectures it offered were conducted by scientists from large academic centres. Between 1966 and 1971, Television University

(*Politechnika Telewizyjna*) broadcasted preparatory courses for candidates who wanted to enter higher education institutions as well as supplementary materials for students (Goltz-Wasiucionek, 2011).

To sum up, DE has a long history and is a worldwide phenomenon. It provides educational possibilities to people who otherwise would be excluded from (further) education due to inhabiting underpopulated areas (e.g. Australia), insufficient material resources, dropping out of the formal educational system, disabilities, personal reasons, and many others. It is available anytime and anywhere. Moreover, it supports one of the major needs of the twenty-first century, namely lifelong learning which is indispensable in the times of great economic, social and cultural changes. The changes mean new situations in life as well as in a workplace and to cope with them, education is necessary for all. It is not limited to young age only – it spans across lifetime and is a key to the twenty-first century (Delors, 1998).

Technically, DE currently has at its disposal numerous resources that make access to knowledge easy and cheap. Students can interact with other students as well as with teachers/tutors without any problems. Learning and teaching resources, tasks and activities can be placed on educational platforms, discussed by teams, on fora, or individually. Everybody can learn at their own pace that is consistent with their own goals and individual characteristics, anytime and anywhere. Most DE takes place through the Internet, and uses social media and web 2.0 services to learn in groups and individually, using desktop and mobile devices (Brolpito, 2018). However, to fully exploit technological affordances of the digital age in DE, it is necessary to have appropriate digital competences.

3 Digital Competences

Digital competences are defined as a "set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, strategies and awareness that is needed when using ICT and digital media" (Ferrari, 2012, p. 84). They are also known as digital literacy or e-competences and have been the focus of interest of international organisations such as UNESCO, European Union, or OECD and resulted in compiling lists and descriptions of these competences. The ones identified by OECD (2005) are aimed at living a successful life in a well-functioning society and are divided into three categories. The first one includes interactive use of language, texts, symbols, knowledge and technology. The second refers to interacting in heterogenous groups which refers to maintaining good relations with others, cooperation, team work as well as the ability to solve conflicts. The third category is related to acting autonomously which is based on people's awareness of their environment, of social dynamics, the roles they play and wish to play which require their individual decisions, choices and actions. In this framework technology is but one of numerous competences for the present world.

The frameworks proposed by UNESCO (2018) and European Union are more focused on competences for digital literacy. Thus, according to UNESCO (2018), the following competences are necessary:

- operating devices and software: physical operation of devices, functions and features of hardware and software;
- information and data literacy, including locating, retrieval, storage, management, and organisation of data and information;
- communication and collaboration that involves interaction through digital technologies, participation in social life, engagement in citizenship actions, co-construction and co-creation of knowledge through collaboration;
- digital content creation, including self-expression through digital means, modification and improvement of information to create new content;
- safety manifested in protecting physical and mental health, privacy and well-being, as well as being aware of cyber dangers;
- problem-solving;
- career-related competences that include the use of digital tools for a particular field of activity.

The framework presented by European Commission (2007) is less extensive and includes five groups of competences that overlap with the ones discussed above, that is information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety and problem solving. The frameworks briefly discussed above refer to smooth functioning of all the citizens of increasingly more and more digital reality. However, in the DE context, online students need more specific digital competences. Da Silva and Behar (2020) took the challenge and proposed a model of digital competences for online students in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, based on theoretical considerations and empirical data.

The model covers six areas, that is "introduction of digital technologies, digital communication, network information management, digital health and security, attendance and digital citizenship, and creation and development of digital content" (Da Silva & Behar, 2020, p. 11). For each area there are three levels of digital competences (functional digital literacy, critical digital literacy, and digital fluency) broken into 14 specific competences that are based on knowledge, skills and attitudes. In addition, three levels of proficiency (initial, intermediate and advanced) were introduced for each competence. Thus, functional literacy refers to the use of desktop and mobile devices, network communication capabilities, search and treatment of information as well as efficient and safe use of desktop and mobile devices. Critical digital literacy, in turn, includes tools for interaction and collaboration in network, strategies for evaluation and sharing of information, organisation and planning that are necessary for setting priorities and goals as well as specific routines that result in student autonomy. In addition, there is a digital profile that helps online students cope with information that accounts for their various digital identities. This is complemented by cooperation in virtual learning environments that is mainly focused on teamwork skills and digital communication. Digital fluency refers to content production, data protection, networking relationships, virtual resilience (ability to cope with unexpected changes, obstacles and difficulties), and teamwork that requires the students to interact with others in "a socially acceptable way" (ibid., p. 14).

The frameworks and the model imply that digital competences are complex, multilayered and dynamic. Da Silva and Behar's model has been validated which means that it can be used by DE institutions to equip online students with requisite competences that are indispensable for successful studying in online contexts which are a dominant form of DE nowadays (Demiray & İşman, 2014).

4 COVID-19 Pandemic

First reported in the second half of 2019, the virus has completely changed our lives. Its spread resulted in school closures to ensure safety. In March 2020, 109 countries closed schools, which affected almost 667 million learners (42.4% of all learners) worldwide. Duration of school closures varied. In some places schools were closed for 6 weeks (Papua New Guinea), in others – for 73 weeks (India). In Poland, schools were closed for 43 weeks (UNESCO, 2021). Forced into lockdown, educational institutions took the only possible measure to continue education, that is they switched to virtual, online learning and teaching, also referred to as emergency remote teaching. The change took place almost overnight, leaving no choice either for teachers or for learners. It has to be remembered that choice is at the heart of DE. Yet, the stakes were high and online mode was the sole possibility to provide and continue education. The challenges of the new educational reality focused on the organisation of the teaching process, provision of equipment and adequate training for teachers, support for learners in need, and communication and cooperation with other institutions, among others (Reimers & Schleicher, 2020). All the parties involved in the educational process needed equipment and skills. Moreover, the change has also impacted emotions of learners and teachers.

A number of studies were concerned with learners' responses to the emergency remote teaching. Alvarez (2020) observed that technological issues (access to internet connection and technological devices) along with financial problems and emotional support interrupted engagement in learning. Learning engagement appears to be positively influenced by such factors as perceived closeness with the teacher, influence of peers engaged in the same mode of learning as well as the perceived control over the learning process. All these factors contribute to subjective well-being that is correlated with learning engagement (Yang et al., 2021). Well-being, a central concept in positive psychology, refers to having a good life which flourishes "by increasing positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment" (Seligman, 2011, p. 12). Learning engagement is also enhanced by a synchronous mode of online learning (Nguyen et al., 2021), adaptability and positive academic emotion, manifested in searching for learning opportunities and resources (Zhang et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had effects on students' mental health and the level of stress. Thus scholars have investigated learners' emotions and found that stress and anxiety about the course of studies and their completion were

reported by the participants. Yet, online classes lessened these negative emotions as the students realised their education may be continued (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). Aslan et al. (2020) carried out a cross-sectional study on a sample of 358 undergraduates from 14 universities in Turkey and found out that the students reported high perceived stress, mild generalized anxiety, and low satisfaction with life. Physical inactivity and anxiety appeared to be significant predictors of perceived stress.

Kukul (2021) carried out a qualitative study that aimed at examining students' opinions about the transition to DE during the pandemic. From their perspective, the transition to DE was successful but they were worried about educational efficiency which is connected with the manner of teaching or structuring courses. There are no interactive elements in the material provided for asynchronous tasks. In addition, the students are dissatisfied with the level of in-class and out-of-class dialogues. This implies that the teachers need training and preparation to teach effectively online to have satisfied and committed students.

Teachers' actions and behaviours during a rapid change to online teaching have been investigated by Jelińska and Paradowski (2021c). In an attempt to understand how teachers manage the challenge, they surveyed 1500 teachers from 118 countries. Their analysis allowed them to distinguish two groups of teachers, that is a group of more engaged and better coping teachers and a group less engaged and worse coping teachers. The group which was more engaged and coped better with the transition to online learning includes the teachers who had some prior experience with distance education, worked in higher education institutions and taught synchronously, in real time. Moreover, they had more teaching experience and lived in developed countries. It also appeared that males were more willing to share their online materials in social media posts than females.

In another study, Jelińska and Paradowski (2021b) were interested in the teachers' perception of students' coping with emergency remote instruction in the light of such factors as the instructors' gender, age, length of teaching experience and education stage. They also intended to find out whether these perceptions varied due to the teachers' attitudes to remote teaching, defined in terms of the perceived effectiveness of this mode, prior experience with remote teaching, synchronous and asynchronous mode of instruction and its impact on teachers and students. The results show that in the male teachers' opinion, students coped with remote instruction better than in the female teachers' opinion, with students at the tertiary level of education coping the best. Also, the teachers who perceived their remote instruction as effective did not think it was difficult or problematic for students. Teachers who taught synchronously perceived their students as coping better than the ones who taught asynchronously. Also teachers with prior experience in remote teaching thought that their students coped better and had fewer problems than the teachers with no prior experience with remote instruction. Factors such as teachers' age, length of experience and appraisal of the relative situational impact on students and teachers were not connected with differences in perception of student coping.

In yet another study, Jelińska and Paradowski (2021a) analysed well-being of teachers engaged in remote instruction during the pandemic. They collected information concerning sociodemographic factors, the shift to remote instruction, the teachers' "personal experiences, behaviours, attitudes, physical and mental health, and personality traits" (p. 5). As far as negative emotional states – sadness, irritation, strain, emotional instability along with signs of tiredness, collectively referred to as negative affect – are concerned, females reported stronger negative affect than males. Teachers with partners or families experienced less intense negative affect than single representatives. Negative affect is also age-dependent but not related to professional experience. The results also show that negative affect is significantly and positively correlated with higher situational anxiety and situational loneliness but negatively correlated with work and life satisfaction, productivity and coping with the situation.

The studies by Jelińska and Paradowski are extremely important for the understanding of the impact of the pandemic on education worldwide due to the fact that large numbers of participants from various countries filled in the questionnaires, thus sketching the macropicture of the situation. This shows that we all have been affected by the pandemic that is not over yet and we need to be ready to switch to online learning and teaching any time.

The selected studies, briefly addressed above, show that online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic is related to technical affordances (availability of devices and internet connections), digital literacy of teachers and learners as well as to a host of sociodemographic and psychological factors that account for smooth and effective remote instruction. These were survey studies and they examined remote instruction at the outset of the pandemic. The study reported below aimed to find advantages and disadvantages of online teaching from the point of view of students engaged in this form of instruction. Another goal was to answer the question whether extended participation in online instruction has any impact on learners' opinions about this form of studying and attitudes to it. In contrast to studies by Jeleńska and Paradowski, it provides the micropicture of online studying in the higher education institution during the pandemic.

5 The Study

The study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1. What are advantages and disadvantages of online learning in the eyes of students involved in this form of studying?

RQ2. How does extended participation in online studying affect students' perception of advantages and disadvantages?

To answer these questions, a small scale study was devised. It involved MA students in one of the universities in the south of Poland.

5.1 Context and Participants

In autumn 2019, I started a regular MA seminar with a group of students who already held their BA degree. I also ran a seminar with a group of part-time students. The classes took place at the University and the work went smoothly – all the students completed the first semester. Then, in March 2020 – the second semester of the MA programme – face-to-face teaching was abruptly replaced by online instruction. Initially, the university authorities did not specify what this instruction was supposed to look like but as the pandemic was gaining momentum, it became evident that remote teaching is not a matter of few weeks but rather long months. Remote education was a challenge to me and my students alike. Since the very beginning of remote teaching (March 2020), I was teaching online, in real time (synchronously), to give my students the feeling of continuity, safety, participation and belonging. They needed regular meetings to prepare and write their MA theses in the allocated period of time.

To find out how my students perceived this form of studying, I decided to collect their opinions after one semester of online instruction, in July 2020. Then, to see whether a long exposure to online instruction had any impact on their opinions, I collected their opinions after two semesters of online teaching (February 2021).

The participants were English Philology students enrolled in the MA Teacher Training programme which means that not only did they work to get their MA degree but they were also getting qualifications as teachers of English as a foreign language. In the part-time group, the majority of students were teachers themselves. In July 2020, 12 MA students (only females) in their first year filled in the questionnaire and in February 2021, 18 students filled it in. Their mean age was 27.83 (range: 23–47, SD: 6.77).

5.2 Instrument

To collect students' opinions, a survey with closed statements and open questions was designed. Part One of the survey included 35 items using a Likert scale (How strongly you agree with the following statements, where 1 meant *I totally disagree,* and 7 meant *I totally agree*). The items focused on a number of issues concerning the students' confidence about online learning, their digital and language skills, time and cost, learning, work, taking care of others, interpersonal relations and health.

In Part Two, four open questions addressed advantages and disadvantages of online teaching and learning, reasons for missing face-to-face meetings and advice for improving online teaching. In Part Three, demographic data were collected. The survey was administered via e-mail (June 2020) and Google Forms (Feb. 2021).

5.3 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse answers to closed items. To reduce the number of variables, some survey items were aggregated and the results were compared by means of a U Mann-Whitney test to see the effect of time and experience with online studying on such factors as: confidence, language skills, digital equipment, time and cost, learning, work and caring for others. Answers to open questions were subject to content analysis. Respondents' answers were carefully read, similar responses were grouped together and on this basis categories for analysis were established.

5.4 Results

Quantitative Results

The means and standard deviations of students' answers to closed items on June and February administration of the survey are included in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics show that the respondents were technically well equipped, they had computers, microphones and headphones as well as access to broadband internet connection. Cameras allowed them to see others and be seen by them. Interestingly, in the first semester of online studying they declared that they prefer studying at the university but after two semesters they were less definite about it. With the passage of time devoted to online learning they realised how much time and money they saved studying from home. The same refers to the feeling of happiness from studying at home as well as the level of satisfaction which increased after two semesters (item 3). Realising the advantages of studying from home, the students became more positive about studying online (item 35, June M = 4.00, Feb. M = 6.00;). The results also show a decrease in the amount of written tasks that the students had to complete. The first semester of online learning was heavily marked by the written tasks while the second semester seems to be marked by other forms of DE. Their feeling of anonymity was in the middle of the scale, oscillating around 3.5 points, which suggests that some of them felt anonymous and some did not. This observation is additionally supported by a high value of standard deviation. It has to be borne in mind that for some items standard deviations are quite high which means that the students varied in their opinions.

To get a more holistic picture of the students' opinions, selected questionnaire items were aggregated into the following groups:

– confidence: about using communication tools (Skype, Teams) for learning and about English proficiency (items 1 and 2);
– digital equipment: appropriate internet connection, including broadband connection, computer with a microphone, camera, headphones; a place/room of one's own to study (items 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 28);

Table 1 Closed items – means (M) and standard deviations (SD)

	June 2020 (N = 12)		February 2021 (N = 18)	
Item	M	SD	M	SD
1. I feel confident about the use of communication tools for learning (Skype, Teams)	5.42	1.24	6.39	0.61
2. I feel confident about my English proficiency	5.58	0.79	5.67	0.77
3. I am satisfied with online learning	4.58	1.44	5.94	1.40
4. I prefer studying in a real classroom, at the university	4.58	1.44	3.61	1.65
5. I learned a lot from online lectures	4.42	1.38	5.55	0.78
6. My oral English skills have improved	4.42	1.08	4.94	1.39
7. My reading skills have improved	4.33	1.07	5.17	0.98
8. My writing skills have improved	5.08	1.00	5.11	0.68
9. My studying was based on reading and writing	5.67	0.89	5.11	0.83
10. I have appropriate internet connection to participate in online classes	4.67	1.43	6.28	0.83
11. My computer has a camera	6.58	1.16	6.83	0.38
12. My computer has a microphone	6.67	1.15	6.83	0.38
13. I use headphones during online classes	3.75	2.60	3.83	2.23
14. I have broadband internet	4.75	2.05	6.22	1.06
15. I had to buy a new computer	2.00	2.00	2.11	1.68
16. Online teaching saved my time	4.18	2.40	6.05	1.21
17. Online teaching saved my money	4.92	1.73	6.39	1.14
18. I felt happy staying and studying at home	4.08	2.02	5.83	1.25
19. I enjoyed the time with my family	5.58	1.56	6.22	1.26
20. I felt anonymous	3.42	1.88	3.39	2.17
21. I used the camera to let my colleagues see me	3.33	1.15	3.89	1.71
22. I was happy to see my colleagues on screen	4.50	1.73	5.17	1.46
23. I felt overloaded with written tasks	6.17	1.03	4.50	1.82
24. Apart from studying, I have to earn my living	4.00	2.26	4.11	2.72
25. I had to take care of my family	4.00	1.95	3.39	2.25
26. I had to take care of my neighbours	1.83	1.58	1.33	0.48
27. I had to take care of my friends	2.42	1.37	2.22	1.52
28. I have a room of my own where I could have online classes undisturbed by other people from my environment	5.42	2.15	6.11	1.32
29. I miss face-to-face encounters with my group	4.75	1.81	4.67	1.88
30. I am employed by an institution	3.42	3.00	4.39	3.01
31. I am self-employed	1.83	1.99	2.72	2.74
32. I had problems with time management	4.42	1.56	3.39	1.72
33. My eyesight has deteriorated	4.67	1.77	4.67	1.64
34. My English proficiency has improved	4.75	1.21	4.89	1.45
35. I would like to continue online learning next semester	4.00	2.21	6.00	1.64

– language skills: confidence about proficiency level in English, development of individual language skills (items 2, 6, 7, 9. 34);
– learning: based on reading and writing; knowledge gained (items 5, 9. 23);time and cost (items 16 and 17);work (items 24, 30, 31);caring (items 25, 26, 27) (Table 2).

The results show that statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were found with respect to two aggregated items, that is digital equipment and time and cost. Involvement in online studying might have motivated the students to acquire better equipment necessary to attend classes. The passage of time made them realise that online learning saved both their time (no need for commuting) and money (they did not need to pay for accomodation in the university town, for example).

Tables 3 and 4 include the participants' opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of studying online.

Convenience, flexibility, efficiency and safety seem to be the most important advantages of online studying. After one semester of online classes the students appreciated the fact that they were able to attend classes from any location, they had more time to think about their life and learning, they could observe nature (self-reflection), they appreciated teachers' efforts to make classes interesting and involving. Their answers also imply that the teachers modified their approach to evaluation and final credits. After two semesters of online classes, safety became most important. At that time (autumn and winter 2020/21), the number of new infections and the number of deaths was very high (koronawirusunas.pl) and many students personally experienced the effects of the pandemic and realised how fragile life is. They were aware how much time and money they saved. The time they saved could be spent with their families and also they had an opportunity to work at their own pace, using the materials provided by instructors.

Technical problems with broken internet connection, microphones or cameras were identified after both the first and the second semesters of online studying. Another disadvantage concerns the absence of personal, face to face contacts and interaction that cannot be replaced by written messages.

After one semester of online classes the students were concerned mostly with the kinds of tasks assigned by the teachers and the manner in which their work was

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and U Mann-Whitney tests results for aggregated items

	June 2020		February 2021			
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	Z	p
Confidence	5.50	0.85	6.03	0.60	- 1.69	0.09
Digital equipment	**5.30**	**0.98**	**6.02**	**0.49**	**- 2.19**	**0.02***
Language skills	4.97	0.65	5.15	0.68	0.32	0.75
Learning	5.41	0.67	5.05	0.69	1.25	0.21
Time & cost	**4.68**	**1.82**	**6.22**	**0.49**	**- 2.10**	**0.03***
Work	3.08	1.83	3.74	2.10	−0.79	0.43
Caring	2.75	1.37	2.31	1.10	0.85	0.39

Note: The items in bold show statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$

Table 3 Lights of studying online

June 2020	February 2021
Convenience, efficiency and flexibility	Convenience, flexibility and safety
Classes could be attended from anywhere	Saving time and money
More time for self-reflection	Safety from the threat of the virus
Videos and presentations during the lectures were interesting and helpful	Time for family
Fewer exams, more written tasks to get the credit	Possibility to work at one's own pace with the materials provided by the teachers

Table 4 Shadows of studying online

June 2020	February 2021
Too many written tasks	Lack of personal contacts and interaction (real hugging instead of writing "Hugs")
Teachers only assigned tasks for the students	Long hours in front of the screen
Insufficient explanation of some issues	Strained eyes
Some teachers did not care	Backache
Time had to be shared between learning and home and family duties (not when at the University)	Lower motivation
Technical problems	Technical problems
Face to face, not screen to screen communication welcome	

assessed. They also noticed that some teachers did not invest enough effort to assist them in the times of emergency. They had to learn how to manage their time which they had to share between studying and home and family duties. However, when they have classes at the university, they do not have to worry about household chores and other non-academic obligations.

After two semesters of online classes the students realised that spending long hours in front of the computer screen has negative effects on their health, resulting in strained eyes and backache. They also reported a drop in their motivation.

As for the reasons of missing personal contacts (the third open question), in June 2020 the students wrote that they needed what they called "a normal conversation" and human interactions, they missed their friends and they longed for the sense of normalcy, dramatically reduced by emergency isolation. More participants (7) opted for face-to-face than screen-to-screen contacts while for the minority it did not matter. One student wrote:

> *Attending university classes is much more interesting and motivating than just doing some tasks or watching lectures on Teams/Skype*

Another one added:

> *It is better to have face-to-face contact because you are more focused on that person you are talking or listen to, during online lectures you could switch off your camera or another student could do it so you cannot see him directly.*

Similar comments appeared in February 2021. The students again highlighted the importance of personal encounters with others. They also observed that body language and nonverbal communication significantly contribute to successful interaction. They wrote the following:

We are social animals.
I like my friends and my group.
I miss going out with friends as often as I used to do and spending breaks together.

In the last open question the students gave advice on how to improve online teaching. First of all, the time spent online should be reduced because of negative effects of long hours in front of the screen on the students' health. Online teaching would be more effective if teachers gave precise instructions and guidelines to students, if the course and classes were well-structured and planned, if requirements were clear and if teachers diversified ways of presenting materials. In addition, classes should be interactive and the students should be more involved. They may create a website, a blog, or make a video related to certain topics covered during classes. Actually, making classes more interactive appears in many answers which may imply that interactivity helps to discuss problematic issues, ask questions, relate to what is known and to construct knowledge. The students also stressed the importance of the teacher who is the key element of the educational process because they are responsible not only for the knowledge, skills and competences that the students acquire, but also for emotions and mental health, as shown in the following opinion:

> *Personally, if it's possible, teachers can try to be more friendly. Let students feel that the teacher is approachable. Then the students probably would like to have more interactions with the teacher. As due to some limits of online teaching, students may feel that the teacher is "far away from them" – "physically and emotionally". For instance, they may feel that that the teacher is not only "behind the scene" but also does not want to have any emotional connection with the students. Besides, because of the situation now, students can easily experience some negative emotions or sometimes it can be worse. They need someone to help them. As a result, teachers should care more about the mental health of the students, especially in this challenging situation. The emotional support from the teacher is very essential and necessary, from my point of view.*

5.5 Discussion

As far as the first research question is concerned, it may be concluded that both students and teachers learnt very quickly how to use online platforms as shown by the fact that the students' satisfaction with online learning in February 2021 increased in comparison to June 2020. Studying online has also contributed to the development of digital competences, which is supported by a high level of confidence that the students declared. In addition, 85.7% of the students graduated on

time which also demonstrates that they have successfully developed the necessary digital literacy skills (cf. Da Silva & Behar, 2020; European Commission, 2007; OECD, 2005; UNESCO, 2018). Engagement into a variety activities and tasks contributed to the development of their reading and writing skills.

Studying from home means saving time (travelling) and money (accommodation in the university town) but also confines people to one place – some felt imprisoned within the walls of their rooms. On the other hand, staying at home they could strengthen family ties and relations, support others and get support from them. Having saved time, some participants started to earn their living, also using the online option, as shown by the increasing number of employed or self-employed students. They had more time to reflect on nature, and the quality of their life.

Synchronous mode of teaching was an asset as it organised students' participation in classes as well as made their work systematic, which is associated with effective learning (cf. Alvarez, 2020; Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021b; Kukul, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021). Indeed, learners at tertiary level coped well with the challenges of emergency remote teaching.

According to the findings, effective online education depends on a number of factors such as technical equipment, for example. Yet, the teacher appears to be even more important than ever as they shape the teaching-learning process by the decisions they make, materials they use, modes of presentation of the materials and also by motivating and involving learners into the process. Moreover, they are expected to cater for the students' emotional well-being. This is possible when concern about the students leads to interaction among them and teachers. Interaction is not always present in online classes (cf. Kukul, 2021) but it should be there. Even more so that students appear to be willing to actively participate in online classes with materials they prepare on their own.

The darker side of online teaching demonstrates negative effects of this form of education. The longer the students sit in front of the computer, the more they miss face-to-face communication, the more tired they become, the more strained their eyes are, the less physically fit they feel. There are also technical problems like a weak internet connection, the mike/camera that does not work properly, distractors resulting from household activities, pets asking for students' attention, and so on. These distractors are absent in lecture halls.

Moreover, student emotions and their mental well-being have also emerged as an important factor in online learning. Stress and anxiety, anonymity, tiredness and loneliness accompanied by the lack of personal face-to-face contacts and interaction account for the negative affect. To lessen these effects, it is necessary to respond to students' affective states, to show they can cope with the situation and to encourage them to notice their own satisfaction with the things they have accomplished (cf. Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021a).

Answering the second research question, the inevitable conclusion is that experience with online learning and teaching develops digital literacy, digital technologies, and digital fluency (Da Silva & Behar, 2020) but it also makes students

more reflective and self-aware as they realise that spending too much time in front of a computer screen has negative effects on their physical health and social relations. Seven months that elapsed between the first and the second administration of the questionnaire show changes in students' opinions about, views and perceptions of online studying. With the passage of time digital skills and technical issues stop being problematic while other challenges emerge, for example a strong need for interpersonal contacts in real space and time. In addition, education in the state of emergency requires changes in approach, structure, materials and teaching methods that are tailored for the needs of online students living in the twenty-first century.

6 Conclusion

Despite negative effects on learners, teachers and the teaching/learning process, online classes became the only safe and broadly accessible way of providing and continuing education when the COVID-19 pandemic was ravaging the world. Today we are all very much aware that it is not over as the new mutations of the virus keep appearing. Therefore, it is necessary to be ready to take the challenge of online teaching and learning when such a need arises. When positive learning experience is the goal, varied pedagogical techniques are an option. Moreover, it appears that synchronous and in-person online learning allows social-emotional reasoning that is so highly valued by students (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Basing on a survey and interviews with her students, Basford (2021) suggests that pandemic times require specific behaviours. Teachers are encouraged to be flexible and compassionate and to show that they care for their students. When they are not certain about how something works, they can show it to their students and ask them for help. Teachers are advised to help students understand what is going on in the world and help them feel that they are connected.

Online studying has weakened a sense of community. Being a student means belonging to a community of students which has its habits, pastimes, traditions and rituals. These most frequently involve physical presence at certain times in certain places. Participation in various virtual communities does not seem to be a good replacement for real life communities where interpersonal contacts, interaction, physical closeness and humour are indispensable for communication. Yet, sometimes there is no choice. Therefore it is important to be connected and feel connected.

I think the following quotation is a perfect ending of this chapter:

> The COVID pandemic has held up a mirror and shown us that we remain far from making our societies more just, equitable and inclusive. (...) But, COVID has also reinforced the conviction of many that mutual support, the cooperative sharing of resources, and collective action provide the right moral coordinates and give good reason for hope (Sobe, 2021).

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