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Online teaching in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Because of COVID-19, online teaching has become a necessity for most educators in higher education. Before the pandemic, the technology was merely accepted and adopted by a few educators, hence only being used to a small degree compared with traditional face-to-face teaching. However, as an emergency online teaching strategy was implemented to support students' progression, many educators transferred their lectures online *as is*. Various concerns occurred, leading to an investigation into how experienced online teachers promoted participating behavior in their classes, what challenges they perceived as a result of COVID-19 and how those were handled. These are important factors for adapting to the new normal, which is defined as the changes and adaptations that have occurred in higher education, including a shift toward a more flexible and adaptable approach in the educational experience. The study was conducted using semistructural interviews with six educators who met the following criteria: teach online in universities (colleges), have positive relations to online teaching, and have participation among/with students. Here, participation refers to contributing in discussions, asking questions, and/or commenting via voice, chat, or other interactive exercises such as roleplay/using whiteboard in Zoom. Findings suggest that attitude and experience are important factors for promoting participation in an online setting and contributing to a new normal after the pandemic. Challenges such as expectations and black screens were aspects for which no one had prepared and, hence, were difficult for educators to manage. Some strategies used included asynchronous resources, role play, and external tools to teach students and establish rapport.

Keywords Online teaching · Higher education · Educator · Expectation · COVID-19 · Attitude

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The history of remote education dates back to the 1960s (Boston, 1992; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). This is a practice has been evolving for decades, starting with correspondence courses and telephone-based instruction (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Parker et al., 1980). It has become increasingly popular among universities (colleges) because of its cost efficiency (Mottet, 2000). Still, since the beginning of online teaching, the easiest way to transform a lecture into online was simply to use it *as is* online. This meant that little to no change was made from face-to-face (F2F) to online lectures. However, Duchastel (1997) argued that this approach (i.e., online teaching) may fail educators in helping them successfully teach their students. Since then, online teaching has been thoroughly researched and has developed many terms such as distance learning/education, web-based learning, virtual learning, and online learning/education, to name a few (Moore, 2019; Zhou et al., 2022). In the present study, online teaching was used as an umbrella term and referred to teaching on a technological platform involving videoconferencing (Zoom Video Communications, 2022), including interactive activities (e.g., sound, whiteboard, Padlet, or chat). More specifically, the learning environment can be designed to accommodate both synchronous (real-time video conference systems) and asynchronous (pre-recorded presentations) models of instruction.

To date, online teaching has rarely been used. This may be because technology has only been accepted and adopted by a few educators (Zhou et al., 2022). However, in the early twenty-first century, research on the phenomenon appeared to slow down, with few studies regarding online teaching being published (Moore, 2019; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). It was not until the recent pandemic that online teaching was forced to resurface as a major research field. A quick literature search in the ERIC database showed that online teaching publications had increased considerably after COVID-19, with over 2000 articles published in this database in 2021. However, the impact of online teaching remains insufficient to date (Tang et al., 2021). Findings suggest that many teachers refuse to abandon the traditional (i.e., F2F) approach (Tang et al., 2021). The main obstacle is a lack of motivation to access online teaching tools, specifically due to educators' limited knowledge about how to use online platforms and their low self-perception (Mohamad et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2021). Educators with low self-perception regarding their online teaching competencies lack confidence in their abilities to effectively perform lectures online (Tang et al., 2021). In addition, the lack of different strategies for teaching online was a contributory factor to the lack of adoption of teaching online (Mohamad et al., 2015).

As a result of COVID-19, most universities (colleges) were forced to suspend their F2F classes and implement an emergency online teaching strategy (MOtS: Mohmmed et al., 2020; UNESCO et al., 2021). MOtS referred to universities' (colleges') ability to educate their students without the use of F2F classes. Prerecorded presentations (asynchronous) and/or via videoconference systems (synchronous) were the preferred method of supporting students' progression during COVID-19 (Longhurst et al., 2020). Without disregarding the efforts educators put forward during the pandemic, research suggests transferring F2F lectures into online teaching without adapting them online may not be enough to sufficiently maintain the quality of the education (Duchastel, 1997; Moore, 2019). Furthermore, many classes were canceled, exams were changed last minute, and both students and staff were isolated because of

lockdowns and social distancing (Longhurst et al., 2020; Zhu & Zhang, 2022). Also, students' participation depends on their motivation to study online, which is the most challenging aspect of online teaching (Tang et al., 2021). Given that many students were forced to shift to online classes due to COVID-19 and MOtS, the current state of student motivation to enroll in such classes remains unknown.

COVID-19 provided an opportunity for great change and adaptation to a new normal: developing online resources, identifying and using technologies, and working from home (Longhurst et al., 2020). Zhou et al. (2022) state that universities are responsible for continuously developing and maintaining the use of online tools and creating the new normal (e.g., online teaching), which was also the only possible option during the pandemic. Because the pandemic has disrupted traditional ways of teaching and learning, forcing individuals to re-evaluate their experiences and find new ways of understanding and engaging with the educational environment, the *new normal* can be defined as the changes and adaptations that have occurred in higher education, including a shift toward a more flexible and adaptable approach that may also lead to a deeper awareness and appreciation of the complexity and richness of the educational experience. Acceptance of online teaching by educators has been a concern; however, most teachers were asked to acclimate to the new circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Zhou et al., 2022). Thus, the current study aims to investigate how experienced online teachers promoted participating behavior in their class, what challenges they perceived as a consequence of COVID-19, and how those were handled, eventually leading to a flexible and adaptable approach.

1 Theoretical framework

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of online teachers during the pandemic, the current study employs a phenomenological framework. Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition that emerged in the early twentieth century, primarily through the work of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938; Svendsen and Säätelä, 2007). Drawing on Husserl's method, phenomenology is a philosophical framework that seeks to uncover the essential structures of human experience by analyzing the ways in which people perceive and make sense of the world around them (Moran, 2000). The framework emphasizes the importance of context and how it shapes individual experiences, highlighting the importance of investigating experiences within the specific social and cultural contexts in which they occur (Gill, 2020; Moran, 2000). It involves a careful analysis of subjective experience, with a focus on the ways in which individuals perceive, interpret, and make meaning of the world around them (Gill, 2020; Moran, 2000). In the context of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenology was used as a methodological approach to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of educators in this new environment. By suspending preconceived notions and beliefs, phenomenology emphasizes understanding the experiences of educators in a deeper and more nuanced way by focusing on how they perceive and interpret their new teaching environment (Gill, 2020). Overall, phenomenology provides a useful framework and method for understanding the experiences

of educators during the COVID-19 pandemic and can help inform efforts to support them in this new teaching environment.

2 Background

Online teaching allows students to pursue their studies, regardless of location and, in some cases, even time (e.i. asynchronous lectures: Moore, 2019). The goal was to make education more accessible and flexible for both students and teachers (Oliver, 1999). This strategy has also proven to be cost effective, providing financial benefits for educational institutions (Mottet, 2000). Since then, various approaches to online teaching have been developed, starting with the initial transfer of lectures as is (Duchastel, 1997). Today, online teaching encompasses the use of asynchronous resources and blended classes, during which researchers have found a recipe for how to successfully teach an online class (Holmen, 2017; Holtskog, 2021; Hrastinski, 2009; Moore, 2019; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Despite the numerous strategies, the importance of having a clear structure and plan for each aspect of the lecture cannot be overstated, particularly in online education, where the absence of F2F interaction requires a more deliberate approach to teaching and learning (Holmen, 2017; Holtskog, 2021; Hrastinski, 2009; Moore, 2019; Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

Many teachers face difficulties with online teaching because of the lack of student feedback (Bailenson, 2021; Mottet, 2000), and the literature on promoting participating behavior among students has been written in a simplified and general manner, as it often suggests a *one-size fits all* approach. This can make it challenging to effectively implement strategies in diverse educational settings with varied student populations (Holtskog, 2021; Hrastinski, 2009). Furthermore, the specific nature of each assignment and its relationship to the lecture topic create a challenge for the literature to provide step-by-step guidance because online teaching strategies can vary greatly depending on the subject.

It is important to note that some classroom practices are equally relevant in online and F2F interactions. For instance, feedback and practice are necessary in all forms of teaching (Moore, 2019). What is unique to online settings is the use of cognitive tools and presentations (e.g., Mentimeter) that enhance students' accomplishments (Moore, 2019). However, it is crucial to ensure that these tools promote students' cognitive abilities and not become a one-way interaction, such as giver–receiver (i.e., interactive presentations). Interactions must be planned in online teaching. Although research has shown that interaction leads to improved student outcomes, it is equally important to plan for such behavior (Moore, 2019). However, strategies to promote participating behavior appear to be lacking in the research field (Hrastinski, 2009).

When the shift was made to online teaching platforms, in an effort to sustain student progression during the pandemic, many failed to consider important factors such as teaching approach, didactical approach, attitudes, and diverse student populations (Glass, 2017; Stuart et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022). Consequently, many teachers faced difficulties transitioning from F2F interactions to online teaching (Oliveira et al., 2021). It highlighted the need for educators to adapt their teaching methods and utilize online platforms effectively (Oliveira et al., 2021). The COVID-

19 outbreak triggered a significant shift, pushing online teaching to the forefront of educational practice yet again, as schools and universities worldwide were compelled to adopt online teaching as a necessary response (e.i. MOtS).

3 COVID-19 and the constantly changing World

Student participation can vary between F2F and online classes. For instance, in class, students may raise their hand to ask a question or comment, whereas on Zoom Video Communications (2022), there are multiple opportunities to participate. A student can use the *raise hand* button, write in the chat, raise their hand on camera, or unmute themselves to speak. The lack of physical presence in online interactions can also create difficulties in identifying cues that indicate when someone is about to speak, contributing to hesitations and the possibility of overlapping conversations. These options do not take into account specific learning designs or educator preferences, such as programming, use of apps, assessments to determine a student's learning style, or use of asynchronous resources. The use of asynchronous resources is a quickly advancing strategy in teaching online and often serves as a supplement to the main lecture (Elliot et al., 2020; Moore, 2019). Some educators also use asynchronous lectures, providing students with more flexibility in completing online courses (Moore, 2019). However, this approach limits students' ability to ask questions if they require clarification (Zhu & Zhang, 2022).

As stated, online teaching became a necessity for both students and teachers to reduce the spread of COVID-19 (Tang et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2022), giving students pressure to have online learning readiness (OLR; Tang et al., 2021), which refers to students' ability to study online based on their preferences, level of technological confidence, and ability to engage in an online environment (Smith et al., 2003). One important aspect of OLR is that students must choose to be online, however, during COVID-19 students were forced to take online classes due to safety concerns and restrictions on in-person learning, which limited their ability to choose leaning environments and disrupted their educational experiences. Students normally have an opportunity to evaluate the intended learning outcomes and teaching methods (i.e., online, blended, or F2F classes) before enrolling in a program. To make changes to these structures, guidelines must be followed (e.g., students have the right to express their opinions). However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, these guidelines could not be followed, leading to ethical challenges. First, laws and regulations are in place to secure predictability and protect students' personal information (European Union, 2016), and these laws should always be enforced. However, in this unusual situation, changing classes to an online format was a necessity to support students' progression. Second, research suggests that one's level of education affects ORL (Tang et al., 2021), with graduate students being more motivated than other students. Nevertheless, peer interactions also have an impact; thus, educators should facilitate these interactions when possible.

Third, *black screens* were a widely debated topic during the COVID-19 emergency remote teaching strategy, causing frustration and exhaustion among teachers (Bailenson, 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). The debate centered on whether teachers

could demand that students have their camera on during lectures. However, students also reported feelings of exhaustion, and the term *Zoom fatigue* became the official terminology (Bailenson, 2021). Different educators used different approaches, with some institutions providing guidelines on how to handle this issue (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Some argued it is counterproductive pressuring students to have their camera on because of the potential embarrassment of their home environment, lack of privacy, or poor internet connection (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Others stated that nonverbal cues between students and teachers are important for learning and rapport building (Bailenson, 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). However, students themselves reported that their appearance was the main reason for keeping their camera off. Students also had concerns for other individuals' privacy because others could walk behind the student during a livestream (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Bailenson (2021) has found that Zoom fatigue resulted from sensory overload after viewing a person's mirror image for a period of time. The reflection caused individuals to activate fight or flight responses, leading to a more critical evaluation of oneself. Verbal and nonverbal feedback is important and is minimized during online lectures (Bailenson, 2021). Additionally, both students and teachers need to work harder to send and receive nonverbal cues (Bailenson, 2021). Nevertheless, students reported having a more interactive, safe, and beneficial classroom environment with their cameras on (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021), and it also contributed to reduced multitasking, self-control, and a better student–teacher relationship (Sederevičiūtė-Pačiauskienė et al., 2022).

Another key issue for students not having their camera on during online classes was *the General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR). This law aims to protect personal data, including, but not limited to, their voice and name (European Union, 2016). This argument left both students and teachers in an ethical conflict. On the one hand, recordings were not possible if students did not turn their video off, change their name on Zoom, and/or gave their consent (European Union, 2016; Gherheș et al., 2021). On the other hand, having cameras on was sometimes part of creating cohesion, participation, and learning in class (Mottet, 2000; Tang et al., 2021). Yet Feldman (2020) questions the possibility of establishing rapport with someone who cannot be seen. In light of the available literature, the present study aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of online teaching within the frameworks of synchronous and asynchronous teaching, as well as the ethical challenges that arose because of COVID-19. Contributions to how society adapted to the permanent change brought about by the pandemic are also presented.

4 Methods

The objective was to explore the experiences of educators, so a phenomenological approach was deemed the most appropriate methodology for this study. Phenomenology focuses on the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals that are mainly involved in conducting interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To collect data, an interview guide was developed, which included open-ended questions designed with the principles of phenomenology to elicit detailed descriptions of the teachers' experiences with online teaching (Gill, 2020; Obling, 2020). Semistructured

interviews were then conducted with experienced online educators who had been teaching online for at least three years. The interviews were designed to elicit rich descriptions of teachers' experiences, perceptions, and interactions of the challenges and opportunities in online classes (Obling, 2020). The present study conducted a total of six semistructured interviews (two completed online, four F2F: Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The interview duration ranged from 45 min to 1 h and 10 min. The participants were recruited using the snowball method, in which each teacher recommended that individuals who met the inclusion criteria participate in the study (Robson, 2002). The participants were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: lectured online at universities (colleges) and had high rates of participation in their online classes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling was used to ensure rich data (Obling, 2020). In addition, all educators taught pedagogy and/or psychology and were both male and female. The level of experience among the participants varied from 3 to 20 years of teaching online. To protect their identities, each educator was assigned a pseudonym: James, Sofie, Britney, Stan, Emma, and Frank. All educators were employed within the Institute of Education. James had been teaching both in person and online since 2015, while Britney had been teaching online for nearly 15 years. Sofie began teaching online in 2017, and Frank had approximately seven years of experience. Stan and Emma were the most experienced with online teaching, with approximately 20 years of experience.

Participating behavior was defined as active engagement in discussions, asking questions and/or commenting via voice, chat, or other interactive exercises such as roleplay, or using the whiteboard feature in Zoom. Educators' experiences in online teaching varied, with some having extensive experience and others with a few years of practice. All educators had either been or previously taught F2F classes, making them familiar with both online and in-person didactics. Each educator used Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, 2022) as their main form of online teaching, along with asynchronous resources.

Data were collected during the summer and fall of 2021 in Norway. The interviews were transcribed by an external transcribing company, which anonymized the transcriptions by removing names, cities, and other identifying characteristics. All data were analyzed using NVivo. Before the recordings were deleted, they were listened to while reading through the transcripts to verify anonymization of the data and adjust for any misunderstandings in the material. Transcripts were then sent to each participant for verification. Annotations (notes) were added in NVivo in instances where tone, body language, and so forth could be important for later analysis.

The collected data were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) as a means of examining patterns and themes within the data. The data-driven nature of thematic analysis, in which the focus is on the data itself rather than preconceived ideas or assumptions, can support the researcher in maintaining a focus on the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Adopting a phenomenological framework for the analysis allowed for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the educators with online teaching during the pandemic (Obling, 2020). The flexible format of thematic analysis allows researchers to examine similarities within the data and combine techniques from various qualitative viewpoints (Guest et al., 2012), providing the opportunity to gain a comprehensive understand-

ing of educators' experiences with online teaching during the pandemic. The resulting themes and patterns were related specifically to the educators' experiences in this context, and the phenomenological approach allowed for a rich description of their experiences.

4.1 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using an inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022). This approach involves starting with the data and using it to generate theories, concepts, or explanations (Guest et al., 2012; Nola & Sankey, 2014). The focus was on exploring the lived experiences of educators with online teaching during the pandemic to identify essential themes and patterns that emerged from their experiences. This approach is consistent with the phenomenological framework, which also aims to explore participants' experiences and identify essential themes and patterns (Braun et al., 2022; Gill, 2020). The analysis was conducted in several stages:

1. Initial familiarization: The first step was to become familiar with the data by conducting a rough read-through. During this stage, irrelevant data were excluded (Braun et al., 2022), and the code *relevance to the article* was assigned to paragraphs and data related to educators' experiences with online teaching during the pandemic (see Appendix A).
2. Initial coding: The assigned codes were then reviewed to identify patterns and themes. The process involved several iterations of reading the codes and combining similar codes into broader themes (Braun et al., 2022). The following main themes emerged from the data: COVID-19, attitude/expectations, strategies, educators' information, and online teaching.
3. Reorganization of codes: The main themes were then re-examined and reorganized to create a clear and structured overview of the data. Underlying codes, such as black screens, equipment, ethical challenges, resources, students, and positive outcomes, were also identified and grouped within the main themes (see Appendix A).
4. Final thematic analysis: The final stage involved examining the main themes and codes one last time (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and grouping them into three overarching themes, which will be presented in the results section.

The inductive approach to thematic analysis was used to ensure that the focus was on the data and that the themes and patterns that emerged were the primary focus of the analysis. The approach employed in this study allowed for the integration of techniques from various qualitative viewpoints and enabled an examination of similarities within the data, free from the constraints of a single perspective (Guest et al., 2012). Overall, the inductive thematic analysis approach used in the present study allowed for remaining open to the meanings and themes that emerged from the educators' experiences with online teaching during the pandemic, which is a fundamental aspect of the phenomenological framework (Obling, 2020).

5 Results

5.1 Mutual expectations and attitudes: a necessity toward online teaching during COVID-19

The educators emphasized the importance of clearly establishing expectations in both F2F and online teaching. This includes specifying the type of lecture (such as interactive, guided, or presentation of theory) and reviewing expectations at the beginning of each online class. As James stated, "If I know I am keeping an online class, only presenting theory [pause] then my expectations [for participation] isn't high. I am just lecturing, and questions are being asked where they need clarification." Other educators agreed that expectations were important, though expectations varied based on the level of interaction required. Stan found it useful to synchronize students' "expectations, and wants and what they need, with how we design our teaching." Some noted that classes with a more interactive format have higher expectations of student participation and may have a need for necessary equipment. One teacher, Britney, highlighted the importance of having a digital writing board for all online students to effectively perform her teaching, guidance, and evaluation responsibilities.

Guidelines were established at the start of the semester; however, educators had varying priorities in terms of expectations for their students. For instance, some educators expected sound and video to be turned on. Frank, in particular, emphasized the importance of interaction in group settings. He stated that each student needs to "be prepared and maybe have their video and sound on, [pause] that you participate actively especially in group settings [pause] that your contribution is important." Emma also established expectations for her students to actively engage in online group settings, making these exercises mandatory, whereas lectures were optional and typically recorded. Each group session was designed to include a requisite learning experience, such as reading an article, viewing a video, or conducting interactive learning activities. Emma's expectations were clearly communicated and linked to specific learning outcomes, which were crucial for successful course completion. "It just happens naturally. Because it was important for their learning experience. So you see, I never had the feeling that the students wasn't prepared. Cause we sat and talked about professional issues – five people online."

A subject frequently raised by educators was the significance of students clearly articulating their expectations. As stated by some educators, students who are more mature in their studies tend to have more pronounced expectations. Sofie mentioned that "[they] often sacrificed something to get their education, either taken time of work, taken a leave of absence or quit their job. It cost something to get this education, and then they are expecting a solid learning experience." This notion of students clearly communicating their expectations was deemed significant by other teachers as well: "I always say something about my own expectations and, also [pause] give them an opportunity to give their expectations to me and possibly evaluate my lectures" (i.e., Britney). However, because of COVID-19, some educators were unsure of what and how much they could expect from their students, as Stan stated:

> [During] covid lockdown, it has been a bit unclear what kind of demands one can make. Because people maybe have kids at home, they have a home office thing. They are not online students, where you can expect them to have their camera on and be [pause] students. … Somewhere under the lockdown I lowered [pause] I became a bit considerate in what I asked. Or how clear I was.

Because no clear guidelines were given on the subject, educators had to choose their own strategies for teaching during COVID-19.

5.2 Teaching online during COVID-19

During COVID-19, some educators experienced challenges in transitioning from F2F to online teaching, as James explained, "… it's not a big difference online, the closeness and communication between the body – the use of the space. That's different. But as the situation were, it wasn't possible." As James explained, although there were differences in closeness and communication compared with F2F teaching, it was still possible to use much of what he had established in the classroom. In some cases, the teachers had to prepare two separate lectures—one for F2F and one for online—"…some of them are emergency solutions because of corona." Some educators, including James and his colleagues, developed hybrid solutions to accommodate the constantly changing situation. However, James found that their work with digitalizing a professional workshop was the most rewarding. "Not because we want to do it that way again. It is best in person, but when you had to, you just had to – and it went very well." This was an aspect Sofie supported as well. She transferred completed tests to an online document so that students could analyze them. Although this exercise worked best for F2F, it was a good substitute in the current situation. Others found that bending the given guidelines had a positive effect: "[L]ast year I had hybrid classes, even when it wasn't allowed. [pause] because if there are students on campus, I think its idiotic that they can't sit in the room" (Sofie).

Britney discovered that developing new didactical methods had inspired her to start teaching online and was developing a new online degree during COVID-19. Her experiences led her to assist many of her colleagues in their own online teaching endeavors: "[F]irst we need to view what approaches we can or cannot bring online," following up with attitude toward online teaching. According to Britney, a key aspect of successful online teaching is to approach it with a mindset of *how can I do this online* instead of asking *if this can be done online*. By having this mindset, less experienced teachers were able to transfer F2F lectures with the help of coworkers, creativity, and old equipment. However, the educators acknowledged that some teaching methods are better suited for online delivery than others, and having the right attitude toward online teaching is crucial. COVID-19 has led to a significant increase in the use of online teaching.

Other challenges during the pandemic included assignments that could not be completed through online means, despite a positive attitude. For instance, tasks that typically required the use of school equipment were now restricted to materials that were readily available at home. As expressed by James, "[I]f they had worked on campus, they would have learned art display within a room." This resulted in sig-

nificant changes to certain assignments for both the students and teachers. Stan and Frank encountered challenges in these circumstances because employees were forced to work from home, leading to minimal coworker interactions. This made collaboration more challenging. Emma noted it was difficult to get to know new coworkers, and she believed coordination between employees would decline "if we don't make sure we get some good places to gather again." However, some individuals perceived the prepandemic meeting scenarios as inefficient and saw COVID-19 as a positive change in making them more efficient.

As a result of COVID-19, many students had to interrupt their practical training, and all F2F classes were transferred online. Some students reported feeling isolated and unable to create connections with their peers. In response to this feedback, some leaders took the initiative to make personal phone calls to check in on these students. As contemplated by James, "I think it is important [pause] what shall I say, to get a closeness to the educational program in a way." Emma also problematized the ability to engage in discussions before class started and set the tone for her semester: "One of the problems at the moment, when new students have arrived without requirements of physical attendance [was the lack of rapport building]." This was not the case for all students because some had chosen to pursue their studies online, even before the pandemic. As Sofie stated, "I do think that those who chose an online study during corona have a much better viewpoint than those who didn't [pause] because they made the choice up front." Thus, students who started their classes in the fall of 2020, particularly those who were enrolled in in-person classes, found it harder to build relationships and create connections with their peers. Sofie mentioned, "[T]he ones that started last fall, found it harder to be in [breakout room], for instance. Because they mostly knew their own study group. Although the groups outside, they didn't know."

When the students were allowed to return to campus, there were other aspects to consider, and in some cases, online teaching was perceived as a preferable option to F2F classes. An example of this could be seen in blending groups and providing opportunities for students to get to know each other better. For example, "On campus we had to have the same groups because of infection control and everything. That was very nice about online. You got to get to know each other at random." In this situation, Sofie was referring to the use of breakout rooms, in which educators can choose to randomly set up groups.

It is important to note that teachers received pressure from students to record their lectures. Some teachers felt compelled to offer this service because of the situation, while others did not. The response to COVID-19 resulted in a discrepancy in the strategies used to promote participating behavior within the classroom. Because of the students' varying personal circumstances, the teachers implemented asynchronous or synchronous lectures. As Emma stated, "[P]eople had kids at home … when everyone was thrown online, we had to offer recordings of lectures." However, Emma was adamant that asynchronous resources should be used as a complement to synchronous lectures rather than as a replacement. She also added, "[My view] was challenged, everything that I believed about online teaching. And it will be interesting now, to see, what are we going back to, in a way."

5.3 Battle of the black screens

COVID-19 presented a range of challenges and opportunities. One such challenge was black screens during online lectures when students refused to turn on their cameras. The educators had differing opinions on this issue. Some found it manageable and believed their focus needed to be elsewhere. A few teachers viewed it as a symptom of students feeling insecure and unfamiliar with each other. Others found black screens difficult to teach without seeing their students' faces and receiving feedback through facial expressions. This made it challenging to adjust lectures and breaks to accommodate students. Another aspect was the black screens during group activities. There was a consensus among educators that the students needed to have their camera on during such activities for the sake of building connections and participating effectively. Stan made a valid point: "My experience is what really helps [prevent] black screens for real, is that it's a group that know each other and isn't too large." Therefore, Sofie emphasized the significance of having icebreaker activities to help students get to know each other, such as using random breakout rooms in Zoom: "One aspect is that I get to know them, it is of course important. But they get to know each other as a group is what's most important." Depending on whether the teacher is familiar with the student group, the issue of black screens during online lectures becomes more apparent: "[I]f it is a group I don't know from before, I have an issue with the black screens, and with getting people to talk at all … I have to break them up in smaller groups." (Sofie).

Despite expectations of student participation, some still refused to do so. James stated that this was not unique to online classes and that he always began his lessons by reiterating the expectation for students to have their cameras on, but he did not spend time focusing on those who did not comply with this request: "[T]eaching online makes it more difficult because the communication form is so [different]. And it demands that you somehow let go, or not hide behind [pause] the screen in a way." Sofie pointed out that the issue of having to participate in virtual meetings also applied to coworkers. She argued that, because of COVID-19, all meetings were transitioned online, and "many was attending without camera. And then in a different setting they are complaining that the students don't have their camera on."

Asynchronous resources were used to encourage participating behavior during a live lecture. However, Sofie stated the following:

> They worked with asynchronous on Monday, and then we meet on Tuesday, its fifty people in the room. And it's still fifty black screens. The in a way the asynchronous resources haven't worked as a preparation so that we can create, have a more dialogical lecture.

Because of the pandemic, some students refused to turn on their cameras during online lectures, forcing educators to adopt a podium-type lecture. Although this was not an issue with the lectures that were set up this way, it was challenging for teachers who had prepared a different design. The ability to give assignments and then divide into groups became a necessary skill to encourage participation online.

6 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate how experienced online teachers promoted participating behavior in their class, what challenges they perceived as a consequence of COVID-19, and how those were addressed to accommodate for the new normal. The findings from the present study suggest that online teaching can be challenging for many teachers, even those with prior experience. Nevertheless, educators seem to have a remarkable ability to adjust to change. All educators were expected to make adjustments to their teaching methods because of COVID-19. This highlights the significance of having a positive attitude toward change, as demonstrated by Britney. A positive attitude can facilitate the successful navigation of online teaching. Less experienced teachers with a positive attitude will, according to the educators, have an easier time transitioning to online teaching. Also, the educators hoped to inspire others to be able to establish a positive attitude toward online lectures. This aligns with the concept discussed by Moore (2019), who mentions how interactive presentations can have a positive effect on students and how educators used many tactics to support students' participation. These factors are central in adapting to the new normal in higher education, which refers to the changes and adaptations made in response to the pandemic, including a more flexible and adaptable approach to the educational experience. Despite the challenges of transferring lectures online and the potential for unintended learning outcomes, educators demonstrated their adaptability and resilience in continuing to provide quality education during the pandemic. The teachers used examples, such as asking students to have external accessories like an electronic drawing board or how to make Zoom the centerstage and use students' display as a way to express themselves. This approach provided teachers with the ability to demonstrate alternative learning processes and promote participation. According to Duchastel (1997), transferring lectures online may decrease the quality of education because some aspects are impossible to transfer online. However, with a positive attitude and help from experienced online educators, small tweaks to traditional teaching methods can make a major difference. To this end, the educators in the present study found that minimal effort was needed to make the original lecture into an online lecture that worked well. This included transferring completed surveys to online platforms so students could analyze them. Although some challenges were encountered, the educators generally found online teaching to be a suitable alternative in light of the current situation.

Other aspects explored were the use of asynchronous resources. Some educators received pressure from students to record their lectures because of COVID-19. Although some recorded their lectures willingly, others found that this was not possible because students' participation demanded their physical voice (European Union, 2016). The use of such resources was a valuable supplement to the online lecture (Zhu & Zhang, 2022); however, as a substitute for synchronous lectures, asynchronous restricts students' ability to participate. Considering the importance of fostering connections within student groups, recording lectures can negatively impact student–student and student–teacher relationships. Expectations surrounding participation were crucial; one educator stated that she recorded her lessons, giving

students the choice to attend synchronous or asynchronous lectures. As the GDPR regulation states, every person must consent to being recorded, and as such, students also had the freedom to choose to have their cameras off or on during these times. However, there was an expectation among most educators that cameras must be on during group interactions to engage in student–student interactions and participation. On the one hand, it is important to get to know everyone in the class; however, to prevent black screens in main lectures, it is also important for every student to know each other. Educators have approached this challenge in different ways. Some found that forming fixed study groups was the best way for students to collaborate and participate in class. Others focused on the class as a whole and wanted everyone to build connections among all students. Research supports the idea that feeling safe is an important factor in promoting participation (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Feldman, 2020; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). The educators used several types of designs to promote participation. One such method was using small groups to foster cohesion among students and create a sense of safety for communication. Although all the educators were experienced online teachers, this could be difficult for inexperienced teachers.

Because of the sudden shift to online classes caused by COVID-19, teachers faced difficulties because they were not provided with clear guidelines from management on what they could expect from students. As stated by the educators, setting clear expectations was challenging because the students had varying home environments, including, but not limited to, kids. This resulted in a discrepancy between students' and teachers' expectations because many students did not originally enroll in online courses. Also, the issue of students' OLR (Smith et al., 2003) added to the complexity of the situation. Expectations within the F2F classroom were previously established, but expectations during online teaching were not created. Therefore, a lack of clarification on guidelines could challenge educators' authority in online classrooms. Castelli and Sarvary (2021) encourage teachers to set a good example, finding that camera use should not be mandatory but a cultural aspect set by teachers; they also report the importance of having institutional guidelines for support. However, the lack of clear guidelines on camera use during online classes created uncertainty among educators. In the future, guidelines for online teaching should continue to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of students and educators while also promoting effective and engaging online learning experiences.

Different teachers had different views on camera usage, leading to a lack of predictability for students and adding tension in determining what can and cannot be demanded of them. Furthermore, many students who signed up for F2F classes were not prepared to study online, resulting in a mismatch of attitudes and values toward how lectures should be conducted. Therefore, attitudes and values regarding how lectures should be portrayed were not established. This was not an issue in classes originally designed to be online. However, as Bailenson's (2021) research indicates, students may be experiencing sensory overload, which may contribute to why they choose to turn off their cameras. Nevertheless, Zoom Video Communications (2022) offers a feature called *hide my video* that allows students to turn off their video views while still allowing others to view them.

All students had to make sacrifices to varying degrees to participate in higher education. However, the findings from the current study suggest that those who made the most sacrifices also had higher expectations for the quality of lectures. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to be clear about what students can expect. COVID-19 brought this issue to the forefront. As stated, most educators found it difficult to set expectations in the middle of the semester. Educators have resolved this in different ways. Some chose to request that students put their camera on and reminded them occasionally. Others valued group interactions and made cameras mandatory in the specific setting of lectures.

Even though experienced teachers struggled with online teaching, they utilized various strategies to overcome the challenges of online teaching. One tactic was to use breakout rooms as a substitute for the main lectures with the whole class. An educator noted that it is more important for students to get to know each other than for the teachers to know the students. Most educators agreed that student interactions were crucial, which has been supported by Tang et al. (2021), who show that student interactions can increase participation among students. Furthermore, the educators stated that, with strong peer interactions, the use of black screens during lectures would decrease, as confirmed by previous findings (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

7 Conclusion

Despite the challenges faced during the transition to online teaching, many educators have embraced the new normal of more flexible and adaptable approaches to online teaching. This offers opportunities for continued growth and development in the future as teachers continue to explore innovative ways to engage students in online learning environments. Many educators have now taught at least one class online with varying levels of success. This study highlights the different teaching approaches that can promote student participation in online classes. It is recommended that educators new to online teaching seek assistance from experienced colleagues to help them adjust to and incorporate new ways of creating a participatory environment. In traditional F2F classes, participation is primarily verbal communication, while in online settings, it offers a range of different communication methods. As a result of the pandemic, educators have developed a new skillset for online teaching that will likely continue to be utilized in a variety of ways as higher education moves into the future.

To promote participation in online classes, it is important to set clear expectations. Although these expectations may differ among teachers, clarity is key. COVID-19 presented a challenge in this area, and those students who were unprepared to be online needed to acquire these skills regardless. Educators approached this challenge in different ways, with varying opinions on what was deemed important to promote participation. Research has shown that black screens in online classes can hinder the establishment of rapport with students. However, it is equally important to consider in what settings cameras should be mandatory. A positive relationship with students can both prevent black screens and encourage participation.

The new normal of online teaching has led to more experience for educators, which can lead to a deeper understanding of how to be more flexible, understanding, and engaging with the educational environment. The most significant finding in the present article, as perceived by educators, is the importance of attitudes toward online teaching. A positive attitude can make navigating challenging situations easier. The educators in the current study were solution focused and viewed the pandemic as an opportunity to challenge their teaching methods and adapt to change. Some educators also noted that those with a negative attitude struggled more with online teaching; the focus was that this cannot be done online.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the traditional ways of teaching and learning in higher education, leading to the emergence of a new normal that involves changes and adaptations to the educational environment. This shift toward a more flexible and adaptable approach has also led to a deeper awareness and appreciation of the complexity and richness of the educational experience. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, some higher education teachers have successfully adapted to online teaching and have embraced new teaching approaches that promote student participation in online classes. As we move forward, it is important to recognize that online teaching is here to stay and will continue to be an integral part of education, even after the pandemic. Therefore, it is essential for educators to continuously improve their online teaching skills to provide the best quality education to their students in this new normal. Seeking assistance from experienced colleagues, establishing expectations, and engaging in continuous learning and professional development in this area will be critical in adapting to the changes and challenges.

7.1 Limitations and future research

All direct quotes from the educators were translated from a different language, leading to some oddities in language structure. However, the original quotes have been double-checked to ensure the accuracy of the information and to protect the original quotes and make the study more valid. Although small sample sizes are beneficial in interview studies, because they provide a rich source of information (Morrow, 2005; Nielsen, 2020), the results cannot be generalized to the population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and must be considered in the specific context in which they were collected.

Verbal and nonverbal feedback is crucial for creating a sense of connection with other students and teachers, which is minimized in online lectures. An interesting finding was the concern expressed by the educators about the potential for isolation because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to check in on students. This highlights the importance of maintaining close relationships, even in online settings, and could be a worthy area for future research. Additionally, it would be valuable to study the impact of COVID-19 on learning outcomes compared with students who previously studied online.

Appendix A

Codebook from NVivo

Name	Description	Files	References
Covid-19	Challenges, and mentioning about the virus	6	95
Black screens	Everything related to camera off	6	23
Challenges faced	Challenges that arose because of covid-19	6	38
Online teaching	Attitude, expectations, strategies etc. related to online teaching	6	99
Expectations	To/from students	6	28
Interest - motivation	Interest and motivation for online and digital competence	6	23
Strategies	The use of different tactics to promote participation, such as "can do" attitude, asynchronous or synchronous resources and different tools	6	102
Course specific strategies	Strategies specific to the genre	2	7
Non-specific strategies	Strategies that can be used on all type of lectures	6	24
Students	Information related to students, such as group dynamics	6	45
Relevance to article	First time read through	6	113
Educator information	Length, genre etc. related to workplace	6	31
Online teaching	Different approaches related to the start of online carrier	5	15
Start	when and for how long educators started online teaching	5	6

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