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Editorial

Teaching Psychology during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Challenges for Online Courses

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Abstract

The forced transition to online teaching and learning, caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic, was sudden and difficult for many teachers and students who had to adapt to new ways of interacting. Our purpose is to describe some specific challenges and recommendations for online teaching and learning in the field of Psychology, especially for those who never had this kind of experience before. The quality of learning was not an issue identified by current students, but the content quality and the opportunities for social interactions during online courses were revealed as real problems by scientific research. Teachers are expected to act as facilitators, content experts, organizers, or technical helpers, and all these may become sources of frustration. The convenience of online courses for students could diminish the worries connected to learning outcomes, but we have to admit that not all teachers are prepared, willing or able to adapt to online classes.

Keywords: Online teaching; psychology students; COVID-19 pandemic

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Online and blended activities were the top choices of schools and universities during the spring and summer of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers and students had to adapt and use new ways of communication, of sharing information, of evaluation and feed-back. For most situations, this transition was sudden, because the available time to transfer the courses from a face-to-face format to online was less than a couple of weeks.

The main problem at the beginning of the lockdown was that most schools and universities didn't plan for this, and suddenly a lot of people never involved in online teaching and learning had to use computers in a different manner than before and they had to become accustomed to and use e-learning platforms.

> "*It is true that the online transition was sudden and many were pulled out of their comfort zone, students and teachers alike, and totally lacking the face-to-face experience led us to be lost in the virtual library, no matter how hard we tried to arrange every piece of online information.* [...] *The current situation is forcing us to adapt and, no matter how hard we would like to return to the old ways, the actual plan is different, unfortunately. I am sure that constructive efforts are made for us to succeed and I am sure that the confusion from this spring will eventually have a happy ending. We have to accept the situation. Only the color has changed, the fruit will remain the same.*"

Maria, Psychology student, 3rd year of study

In this paper, our purpose is to describe some specific challenges for teaching online psychology after years of face-to-face educational experience. Of course, some of these challenges are common for all teachers and students who forcefully migrated to this kind of interactions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although there were universities that offered psychology courses for years now, that was an administrative decision for them and a personal decision for students to participate to such courses. It was an assumed choice and not a forced one, so we expect that the reactions of both teachers and students to be different in this situation.

Very few scientific studies focused specifically on the (forced) online experiences of Psychology students. Searches in the PsycInfo, Science Direct and Web of Sciences databases revealed that recent studies focused on the mental health effects of lockdowns, or on the online experiences overall, not necessarily for students in Psychology. Not even studies that targeted online experiences of future psychologists didn't take into account the pandemic, but the personal choice of the students. For example, Garip et al. (2020)

concentrated on self-regulated online learning, and on the facilitators and barriers of this process. The authors used semi-structured interviews with 6 participants, mature and looking for a career change (the small number of participants was explained as a result of the phenomenological approach of the research). The interviews revealed that a self-identity of the online learner is developed in this process, balancing his/her other every-day roles. The freedom of online asynchronous learning was seen as a facilitator, and the feeling of isolation was perceived as a barrier of this experience. The authors recommended teachers to strengthen the self-regulation of learners by making them more aware of their motivation for studying psychology or by developing individualized assessment tasks. However, as the decision to take online classes was personal and not forced, they should be treated cautiously in this new context.

During a work-group we organized during an online course with graduate students in Psychology, we identified the following positive outcomes of online studying: time and money saving; easier exams; convenience (no time lost with going from one place to another, great for those from other cities); finally understanding the children's experiences. The negative outcomes were the lack of social breaks, the difficulties of organization and coordination, the smaller chances for interactions during classes, the lack of a proper connection or tools to access the online content, money that should be invested here. The quality of learning was not an identified issue (!).

Online courses and learning outcomes

Even if the discussion on the effect of online courses on learning outcomes is not new, it was seriously refueled since March 2020, even if it is not yet visible in the scientific publications. Serious concerns are raised about the efficiency of online courses and the quality of learning, and perhaps a look at past studies on this topic would be helpful.

A detailed analysis of the components of learning online vs. face-to-face was offered by Paechter & Maier (2010). For example, the coherence and clarity of online content was perceived as superior. The opportunities of communication were evaluated differently, according to their purpose: better online to disseminate information between students, but better face-to-face when an agreement or a joint solution was required. The teacher-student interaction was generally preferred to take place face-to-face (for developing a positive relation, or for the construction of knowledge), but students appreciated the fast exchange of information in the online classes. The acquisition of knowledge and skills was perceived as

superior for online courses only when self-regulating processes could be involved (e.g., the opportunities to process the contents according to their own preferences and available time, or the possibility to monitor their progress). Face-to-face interaction was perceived as more efficient for conceptual knowledge acquisition.

In an impressive research using more than 1 million students (!), Dziuban & Moskal (2011) concluded that the learning experiences of students was not a decisive factor when they evaluated their learning outcomes. The results didn't imply that the levels of satisfaction were similar between online and face-to-face experiences.

So, the quality of online learning is not perceived as an issue by students, as we have also observed from our experience. This is also consistent with previous results obtained by Zhan & Mei (2013). For example, the academic self-concept (i.e., students' perceptions on their competence in a specific academic domain) did not differ between students that participated to face-to-face learning experiences and students that participated online. The researchers explained the results speculating that personality characteristics played a major role in the formation of the academic self-concept and that the learning environment might not be a variable strong enough to influence it. So, perhaps the learning environment might not be as important as we believe. Maybe a more important variable is the content quality, as showed by Hassanzadeh et al. (2012). The higher is the quality of the information, the higher is the satisfaction of the users and their willingness to use the same channel of information again.

Besides the „simple" knowledge acquisition, we should be interested if critical thinking or curiosity are challenged by online teaching. Tix (2016) explained that all courses (online included) have the power to elicit emotions that may lead to long-term knowledge and creativity, given that some conditions are met. For example, the content should attract the learners' attention, appealing to a few key-emotions. The content should *surprise* the readers, it should elicit their *interest*, and create *confusion*, as prerequisites for a deep-learning process. These should be completed by *awe*, which involves a perception of something that is so different of what the person already knew that the previous knowledge or actions are no longer adequate. Some of the materials that are offered online have the potential to generate awe, no matter if they are text, audio or video based. Perhaps an important characteristic of students is their capacity to immerse in the world created by the online resources, and this could be connected to 4 crucial characteristics for online student success: technological knowledge and skills, an independent style of learning, motivation, and literacy skills (Kerr et al., 2006).

Teachers and students working together

We have to understand that the forced online teaching and learning became part of our educational experiences and we should build from here, even if this is new for us. As teachers, we have to learn from what went wrong and what was good during the spring of 2020 and make an effort to keep our students close and engaged. Even if the economical factor is the main reason, it is still good enough. Students need our support to complete their training and we should give our best, even if this means an extra effort. We will offer a lot of recommendations further on. Not all of them are expected from one teacher to be completely respected, we are human beings after all...

Compared to the face-to-face interactions, the online courses bring new challenges for teachers and they may become frustrated with the additional tasks that are needed to be done. The previous used content might need modifications (e.g., new structure, new design) to allow online interactions, group interventions etc., because the possibility of online learners' interaction is an important predictor of satisfaction with virtual courses (Asoodar et al., 2016).

> "*There were situations when the courses were uploaded just like that on the e-learning platform* [Moodle]*, with no explanations, or we received tasks with no feed-back for our responses... This wasn't very efficient, because we couldn't understand and process the information as well as we wished to*".

Tania, Psychology student, 2nd year of study

In the online environment the opportunity to interact with other students is a distinct and crucial component of learning, because many tasks require students to work together, to share knowledge or outputs for a final common project (Cho & Kim, 2013).

Lee et al. (2011) discussed three types of student support that could influence the perception of their online educational experiences. (1) the instructional support, which includes guidance, providing access to relevant resources, answering students' questions, or offering timely feed-back; (2) peer support, which involves students offering help and guidance to each other, even for non-academic problems, thus creating some sort of online learning community; (3) technical support, which includes helping students overcome technical issues, such as logging into their online accounts, registration for different courses or activities, uploading assignments etc. In order to become effective, the support should meet

some specific criteria. For example, teachers should pay attention that they are working with different types of learners and so they should try to offer, when possible, different types of content, with easy access (e.g., which don't require additional software to read, hear of view).

Compared to the face-to-face experiences, online students need a higher degree of social presence (i.e., the perception of one's relations with the others), if we aim to develop their sense of achievement and academic satisfaction (Zhan & Mei, 2013).

Of course, some courses are "harder" than other, and according to Arbaugh (2013) teachers have to work harder on their facilitating role for these academic disciplines. They have to be perceived as content experts in "harder" disciplines and discourse facilitators in "easier" ones. Overall, students are expecting counseling and support, in order to become satisfied with a course, to build knowledge and improve competences (Paechter et al., 2010).

The online interactions offered new ways of conducting students' evaluation, although for the time being the online technologies are mostly used to move the traditional types of assessment into the online (the same usage was observed by Guerrero-Roldán & Noguera, 2018). However, the current technologies offered by common platforms (e.g., Moodle) allow more refined approaches to evaluation, under the condition that teachers are able and willing to use them.

Young & Norgard (2006) conducted a research to assess the quality of online courses, using more than 200 students, and they were able to make some evidence-based recommendations: the online courses of a learning program should have a similar structure; the online meetings should allow for interactions not only between teachers and students, but also between students; technical support should be available; a strong online community will facilitate timely communication.

The efforts may seem much, but the rewards are high. For example, here is an evaluation from a student in Psychology from our university:

> "*My experience was interesting. Generally speaking, during these online courses my respect for teachers increased, when I saw their interest and passion for their profession. I noticed that most of them made great efforts so we could understand the courses. I especially believe that the individual feed-back offered for each student was useful and each of us can learn from our mistakes. I also think that the availability of our teachers made a difference and the Zoom meetings were useful, being as close as possible to those face-to-face. There were situations when the courses were uploaded*

> *just like that on the e-learning platform* [Moodle]*, with no explanations, or we received tasks with no feed-back for our responses... This wasn't very efficient, because we couldn't understand and process the information as well as we wished to*".

Tania, Psychology student, 2nd year of study

Live courses

Small online classes of no more than 15 participants were recommended by Russell & Curtis (2013) for foreign language learning, because in larger classes the teachers' presence was not perceived as satisfactory by students. We believe that it not different for Psychology.

A lot of e-platforms support live meetings between participants. Teachers should actively participate to online meetings and identify practical means to apply the theoretical knowledge that was (maybe) previously posted on a e-learning platform.

There are some general recommendations for working in such live meetings, some of them are the result of personal experience and some of them are the result of feed-back from students.

The issues caused by technology should be minimized or eliminated at the beginning of the courses, with an overview of the available tools and rules of dealing with technological breakdowns. Mohammadi (2015) identified some technical requirements for the online courses: to be aesthetically attractive, user friendly, reliable and secure, to offer the possibility of content printing and transfer to other applications without being logged out, and overall to attract students' interest.

Before the meetings or during the initial organization minutes, students should add the proper first and second names to their icons (e.g., John Smith instead of Galaxy A6). Thus, colleagues and teachers can remember their names and address them appropriately, and, the host of the meeting can generate a usable attendance list. If rules of discussions and interventions are important, these should also be clarified from the beginning. Perhaps the answer to simple "Yes/No" questions would be easier to obtain if students show a thumbs up or down gesture. Be careful when sharing your screen and pay attention to your opened windows. During the meeting, if group discussions are required, perhaps using the breakout rooms offered by the application would be a solution, then use the e-whiteboard to record the conclusions of each discussion group. Before ending the meeting, a feed-back from students

for future meetings would be nice, it will improve their participation and sense of engagement.

Prompt feed-back should be offered continuously and the moments of prolonged silence should be avoided. Timely responding to emails or other types of messages and immediate feed-back bring teachers closer to students and facilitate their efforts and willingness to work on e-learning platforms.

> *"We had a very good communication with teachers, whenever we needed help, and I can say that the online interaction was very satisfying."*

Maria, Psychology student, 3rd year of study

The convenience of online courses

The convenience of online courses might be an important factor in diminishing the concerns about organization and learning outcomes, especially for students who already took several online courses because they were working or had other arrangements (Young & Norgard, 2006). The more experienced students were in online courses, the more they were satisfied with the learning outcomes and the overall experience, even if initially they had the feeling that they weren't learning enough.

For shy and introvert students, the online-based and blended interactions could be more efficient, allowing for more privacy and more time to reflect and ask questions. Young & Norgard (2006) explained that in this condition other reactions to someone's words are hard to see or even hidden, so it may appeal to some of the students.

Online courses may fit better in the students' schedule and they are time-saving (virtually, no time is spent between closing a course and going to the kitchen to cook a meal). Students have the perception that their time is not wasted, including during the online evaluation procedures (Novo-Corti et al., 2013). The asynchronous format of some of the online courses might attract students who are working or have to take care of their children, at home.

> *"I was one of those fortunate students because I worked from home for years, and also because I am self-taught and I easily adapted to situations that are congruent with my development.* [...] *The situation allowed a good engagement in my job, and I was efficient at work and during the university activities."*

Maria, Psychology student, 3rd year of study

It is not an easy task for students to work online, neither. For them, the transition to an online-based learning requires resources that should be prepared over a longer period of time: a reliable internet connection, a device that supports acceptable video streaming, and a minimal understanding of e-learning platforms (Abramson, 2020).

The technological skills, the quality of the online connection and the general frustration with technology could reduce students' engagement in learning and their willingness to come back to the e-learning platform (Karaman et al., 2014).

There are factors that teachers and students cannot control during their online interactions. For example, the university support and services could be a major source of frustration, and this is bad news, because these are important predictors of learner satisfaction (Asoodar et al., 2016; Hassanzadeh et al., 2012).

Conclusions

With almost 20 years of experience of face-to-face teaching, I was surprised that, as my discussions with students revealed, the main problems of online learning were not the learning outcomes. The scientific literature already supported this, but it still was hard to believe. Although it wasn't a comfortable situation, students adapted and tried to make the best of it, and what they missed were their interactions with teachers and colleagues, the breaks, or the free face-to-face discussions.

The challenges for teachers were high and will remain high in this condition of forced lockdown. A lot of content adaptation needed to be done and there still is room for improvement. Teachers should design their online courses to be engaging and positive, they should try to develop deeper connections with students, to learn good practices from other instructors, to rethink the evaluation process, to choose the right technology and specially to keep the changes manageable (Abramson, 2020). Students' contribution to online meeting is harder to follow and evaluate, compared to the face-to-face interactions, and this adds to the general frustration. A professional teacher should be an expert in designing the learning material, in stimulating the learning motivation, and in facilitating the collaboration between students (Paechter et al., 2010).

However, we have to be realistic and admit that not all teachers are skilled for online teaching and that some of them are not willing to take this step in the near future.

"[...] *Online teaching doesn't match the face-to-face experience, where time gives color to every word and the information is easier to grasp."*

Maria, Psychology student, 3rd year of study

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