

STUDENTS' CHALLENGES DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This article looks into the challenges that students have to face in the context of global pandemic which required essential changes in the way society and universities work. The purpose of the research is to find ways to offer university support appropriate to the students' needs so that they can continue studying without significant losses but with some gains.

The data of the article is based on a larger study, "Students' accommodation with the university field" (2018-2021) which was carried out in our department. This research was implemented to stress the difficulties in accommodation which some of the students face when they enter university, but because of the situation generated by the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, it focused on the new university reality. During these years, the research was based on personalized discussions with students and on their spontaneous communications.

The research started for a need to immediately accommodate us the professors both to the online school and to the student's needs who were confronted with a social crisis for the first time in their lives. The result of the research made us make some changes which were meant to improve the educational relationship no matter the social conditions.

Keywords: professor training; research; professors' role; students' accommodation; educational difficulties in pandemics, social-educational changes, online education

1. Introduction

The pandemic and the way it was managed globally, brought about a lot of sudden changes for the students. In March 2020, students could no longer attend school and they started online courses. The universities did not foresee that the lockdown will be on the long term and that they should have some available unique platforms to interact with students. Professors have tried to find personal solutions to continue their activity. The provincial students had to leave their boarding houses and go home.

The stress of the rush moving was enhanced by the difficulty to adapt to different learning platform for each course and seminar. Some professors were not able to teach and they sent the materials online for the students to learn. So, students were overwhelmed with materials, homework, study tasks and they lacked explanations, practice and the possibility of seminar

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corrections. The work tasks were often sent anytime, not in accordance with a schedule as students were used to.

The sudden hours for receiving homework, the difficulty of interaction with professors, the absence of human contact as well as the multiple educational platforms which had to be consulted, have generated a state which students called “of overwhelming”, “inability to cope”, “desire to give up” and “fear”.

There have also been situations in which professors maintained unchanged their direct interaction with students despite being online. They kept to the schedule, the tasks were the same as the ones announced at the beginning of the term and their relationship with their students was similar. These situations represented a “normality mark” for students and they were helped to organize themselves: not to lose “the count of days in isolation”, not to not skip nights and days” as they were tempted to do in lockdown.

Also, students had the opportunity to share their fears and insecurities and to find echoes in their colleagues and professors who felt the same. Students- school professors, had a model of interaction and useful platforms which they could use with their own students in online classes.

Professors supported on another, they shared experiences and they tried to put into practice some common strategies in order to simplify their relationship with their students. They joined forces to work on unique platforms and in accordance with their schedules, they renounced at their tasks and they stressed the educational offers, they changed their evaluation methods focusing more on the students’ permanent activity rather than on exams. The majority noticed that this effort made for students also helped themselves to normalize their lives in the pandemic.

Therefore, despite insecurity and lack of initial organization, professors and students found themselves fighting the same battle.

2. Aim and methodology of the study

The study “Students’ challenges during the pandemic” was done spontaneously as a qualitative research-action.

The study was framed into the existing research “Students’ accommodation with the university field” (2018-2021) which expands at university level research projects which were carried by the Institute of Educational Sciences: “Child’s accommodation with the stages of mandatory education” 2012-2013 as well as “Professor’s responsibility in moral-affective shaping of young people” 2011.

The *methods* used in our research were: the analysis of data which came from students and professors through the communications from the online courses, seminars and from professors; department meetings.

All students from the psycho-pedagogical program, around 240 students in each year of study, students aged 19 to 55 years old, around 60% of students who changed their accommodation in lockdown, 76% women and 24% men.

The *tools* used in research were: directed discussions (on topics like “ways of study in pandemic”, “specific fears and difficulties in pandemic”), spontaneous discussions, didactic games, essays made by students, the observation of students’ participation in online activities, checking the school documents to make sure students are involved in certain stages (grades, numbers of interventions in seminars, attendance), students’ expectations, suggestions and observations.

The *purpose* of the research is to create a coherent strategy of patterning a climate which is beneficial for the increase of the quality of education in the psycho-pedagogical program even in conditions of social change and online communication.

The *main aim* of the project is to highlight the main difficulties that students are faced with in pandemic in order to identify the support ways which universities and professors can use.

The specific aims of the project are:

- Identifying the main support elements which can be offered to students in the context of pandemic;
- The support of professors in order to create and maintain an online educational environment which benefits future professors;
- The support of collaboration among students in the context of online school;
- Ensuring an online environment for communicating difficulties and for their remedy without stress conditions.

The beneficiaries of the research are students, professors and those educational factors that want an improvement in the online training environment in the pandemic context.

The main students' challenges in lockdown

The widespread fear

Most of the students, being young, had a timid speech in the beginning. At first, they were very trusty and with positive attitudes. Being surrounded by a speech full of fear from their parents', their communities' and the mass media part, they came to internalize the state of fear.

During lockdown, most of the students claimed to have experienced different physical and mental state such as changing day with night, (they were awake during the day only for the educational activities), drug and vitamin abuse, abuse of watching alarming pieces of news, food abuse or lack of appetite, headaches or abdominal pains, ear infections, panic attacks, exhaustion, they feeling they cannot handle school tasks, fear of getting sick, fear of becoming violent, fear of going crazy.

The students also claimed that fact that they thought of dropping out of school at least one time. The fears regarding their personal lives and of their dear ones made school importance less of a priority.

Pressure from family

Almost 90% of the students stayed in lockdown with their families (their birth family, their new family or with a member of their families). 10% of students stayed with their friends or alone.

Most students felt "suffocated" by their family environment, they lacked intimacy, personal space, they felt disturbed by the some of the family members' behavior. All of them thought of a major change at the end of the pandemic.

Normally, family members but also students spent a large part of the day outside. The pandemic brought them together 24 hours a day, on an indefinite period of time! They experienced difficulties in sharing their work space, difficulties in complying with the other's rest, difficulties in sharing family tasks and of sharing work resources.

A personal quiet room with internet access and a personal computer are minimum requirements for study. Nevertheless, few students had these conditions.

Students often had to fight with family members to ensure their space and resources to attend courses. The idea of giving studies up appeared in the context of the need for quiet.

The frustration of social interaction needs

Most of our students are young and in an exploratory stage of relationships. The pandemics, interrupting the possibility for young people to see each other, brought a big frustration in a very vulnerable period of their lives.

Most of young people, isolated in their birth families, said they felt “suffocated”, “hopeless”, “on the edge of a cliff”, “without anything of their own”. Being in the upsurge of their youth, yearning for social interaction, available to know new people, the students found themselves frustrated in their natural expectations.

Beyond students’ declared expectations to ensure a career in a domain of interest, during the pandemic they discovered that entering a university was connected with undeclared but decisive expectations. They were thinking that they will make new friends at the university, they will build a stable relationship, they will spend more time at school and with their peers, they will meet personalities in the domain of interest and they will be part of social projects. It is for sure that the new context of online school stopped the realization of these expectations and students’ motivation to attend university became weaker and weaker.

The change of educational education

The students were used to studying in a specific manner to the direct educational interaction. The pandemic brought a new paradigm: online learning.

Online learning was understood differently by each and every professor and students not only had to adapt to a new paradigm but also to their professors and their tasks.

Courses and seminar materials which had been used before were no longer valid in lockdown. Students could go to libraries which offered study materials, they attended workshops where they worked under guidance, they attended practical courses where they had the opportunity to benefit from specialized correction. The direct interaction with their professors and colleagues from the seminars helped them clarify some aspects less understood. All these left an uncovered space in their educational relation.

Lots of students felt that they could not cope with the new educational system or they felt extremely urged.

The uncertainty of future

Most of the students, being young, face a social crisis for the first time in their lives. It is certain that it made them determine to reorganize their priorities and to restructure their values.

If society can change so dramatically from one day to another, the long-term training for a foreseen environment depending on the present, can no longer be understood.

The lack of a reasonable purpose in students' lives made them incapable of mobilizing themselves as before not only for school activities but also for participating to family life. The state of isolation which appeared a social solution was taken personally by a lot of students who also isolated themselves from their families, friends and school environment.

The difficulties of adjusting to the general state un insecurity and to the changes of values in society during the pandemic had affected students and they were unable to focus on their professional training.

In these conditions, it was obvious that the university environment had to take into account the general situation that students are part of in order to adjust to the new needs. When the old educational marks did not work anymore, new ones had to be established.

Also, in this context of change, it was obvious how much we need real educational relationships, a personalized environment of growth and evolution the security of which is dependent on our ability to support one another and to share our experiences.

Solutions to accommodate students to online learning

In order to support students to continue their studies and to be involved in their personal training, we had to understand what they face and which challenges they deal with. Depending on these, we, professors, could organize ourselves in a coherent, consistent and ensuring training group which also proved helpful with our own difficulties.

Our research has pointed out a lot of support opportunities for students. Some have been instantaneously approved by some professors and then have been generalized while others have been carefully thought of and planned. As this is a research-action, the evaluation of the effects was carried out after the implementation of each measure in part. We also tried not to insist on useless actions and to perpetuate only what is truly functional.

The safe environment

“People cannot make changes per say to train themselves thoroughly if they need to adapt to an unsafe environment which is very demanding.” (S. Farca, “About the fear of the unknown”) As the social environment from the pandemic was based on fear, on isolation and on changing the interaction manner, the university environment had to compensate for it.

Surely, the educational relationships were also changed in accordance with the social demands but the need for creating a virtual space in which didactic activities and interaction with students could be carried out as normally as possible was very stringent.

The schedule was followed strictly and the interactions from courses and seminars were done as usual. There have been students who at the end of the course said amusingly: "I now realize that I am at home and not in the classroom."

As there have been less changes in the schedule, the students could organize their family time better. Also, all family members who wanted to could attend the courses as auditors. The parents-students could supervise their children during the courses. Some children wanted to be involved, they had tasks: to draw what they see on their screens, to paint what draws their attention, to make an object out of bread crumb... The grandparents who wanted to made icons painted in plates, some parents interfered by asking thematic questions about education and they were content to see that they could understand their children-students much better.

School opened towards the family out of the need to ensure a safer environment, full of opportunities for its students.

The school that entered students' families has become less artificial, it has returned to its basic educational role of creating learning and training opportunities with the natural joy of discovery.

New educational offers

The professors were available to structure the bibliography materials in order for them to be accessed online by the students. The libraries and the workshops were inaccessible and so professors and students discovered virtual libraries much richer and better structured than the real ones. They found interesting tutorials, filmed classes at the most prestigious universities in the world, articles and interviews. Professors themselves wrote articles, made written and films materials which could support the learning activity and which could make studying more pleasant. So, here we have a rich set of educational resources in this difficult situation.

The young students who are better skilled at the online technological environment helped their professors to manage the interactive platforms and the search for materials. The professors found themselves initiated by their students who were patient, modest and willing to pass on their knowledge.

The discussions from the courses and seminars were continued in family and the family members got involved in discovering new bibliography resources and they also ensured technical support as good as they could.

The collaboration among professors done through virtual classes was much better. Each professor has access to the materials posted by their colleagues and they could coordinate their activity without overlaps and based on their already acquired knowledge. So, there were a lot of various educational materials, there was a less redundancy between the content of the courses and a larger focusing on the studying interests expressed by the students. The collaboration between professors and between professors and students was more intense. To these was added the collaboration with the students' family members who were able to be involved as much as they wanted to.

The professors' opening to learn one from another, from their students and from the students' family members created an educational climate in which "learning to learn" became a way of life which also inspired students to apply their knowledge, to play with the new concepts, to experiment, to look for new educational resources for the newly created community.

The individualization of the educational process

The online environment brought about new possibilities to individualize education. Each student chose from the professors' offer what best suited them, they organized their study time and they mobilized themselves according to their personal needs.

Students could go back to their natural way of learning in which attention was distributive and more activities are done simultaneously.

As attention can be focused only by passion or by fear, it was certain that the students who had to attend in the amphitheater, unable to move or speak during courses, became quickly bored. Now, they were able to listen to the courses while they were doing artistic activities as well as household chores, while they were driving their cars or they were looking after their children. They received parcels, they answered their phones, they answered the request of their dear ones, they cooked, they ate, they cleaned or they knitted. Listening to the course was like the old fairy tales told around the fire, in the community in which every member had different responsibilities within the group.

On this occasion, we observed that students not only got bored but they also became more involved, they asked more interesting and extremely appropriate questions, they gave more creative and more appropriate answers than in normal conditions. Most of the students said they could remember the content of the course better as they associated them with the activities that they were doing. We, professors, observed that students selected exactly those

pieces of information they needed in their lives and on which they interfered with their own mental experience.

Most students' interventions and questions represented general issues on which other students also need some clarifications. So, students managed to set the courses and the seminars towards their areas of interest bringing the professor in the reality of their learning needs.

The online communication with students had different layers: in large groups, in small project work groups, seminar groups of individually. Also, there have been organized videoconferences during courses and seminars as well as sending video, audio and written materials. There have been made corrections on individual pieces of homework and on group projects. Students also created their communication groups which proved to be very efficient in establishing some relationships.

Conclusions

The data of our research show that although, the students became anxious, depressed, preoccupied by other problems and less motivated for school three months later after the beginning of the pandemic, the changes in the educational approach have helped them to regain their interest for study.

Students' interest for study helped them to be more confident, more opened and less anxious. A student said that all his illness disappeared once the school had started in November. Another student remarked that his life had normalized and another one said that he had become more tolerant with his family members once he saw how much understanding he got from his professors.

"School is like life" says Dewey and now, because of the pandemic, this saying has become a reality. It was necessary to give up on everything that was artificial in school in order to keep a relationship with students and the effects have generated a growth in the quality of education. Students have been more involve, more personal, more natural and much more creative.

We, professors, have learnt to trust our students, not to judge them based on artificial standards and to collaborate more with one another. This is a stage in which we learn a lot of new things, we have become more tolerant and more creative.

Trying to normalize students' lives we also normalized ours. Trying to adapt to the new conditions, we formed new competences. Trying to discover new opportunities for students, we found ourselves.

Students and professors together, in difficult conditions, discovered that education is not about the customary procedures but it is about lively involvement in training yourself and the others. We noticed that:

- the training process is more natural when it is integrated in students' lives and daily activities. Therefore, school cannot give up its laboratory artificiality without losing the students' attention;
- the educational relationship is much more normal when it is not unidirectional and professors learnt from students, ask for their support and count on their experience;
- school is more efficient when it is open to all family members and when it is integrated naturally;
- education is capable of offering healthy preoccupations in stressful conditions and can normalize life when this is needed;
- school cannot be a source for the future if it is not valuable for the present. Each moment spent together with students is important "here and now".

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