INSTRUCTORS' AND STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF REMOTE LEARNING AT AN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN CROATIA

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Abstract

The increase in the popularity of remote learning, fueled by emergency remote learning during the pandemic, raised several questions about what prevented it from being implemented in educational institutions for a longer period of time. Considering the technological developments in the field of education achieved in the 21st century, there remains a paradox of why physical learning is the preferred method. Thus, this study aims to investigate the instructors' and students' experiences of remote learning at an international higher education institution in Croatia. To gain a better understanding of various experiences, interviews were conducted with three instructors and two students. The interviewees mentioned how emergency remote learning presented a challenge due to various reasons, two of which are primarily due to the lack of interactions. The results show that the main barrier both sides experienced was the lack of interpersonal relationships and lower engagement levels. Moreover, other perceived disadvantages included a lower attention span, issues with monitoring academic dishonesty, and technological constraints. The main advantage was the flexibility of remote learning which included less time spent on commuting. Based on the results I conclude that the institution should either restructure current curriculums for remote learning courses or slowly start discontinuing remote learning delivery modes.

Key words: remote learning, emergency remote learning, instructors' and students' experiences, lower engagement levels, lack of interpersonal relationships, flexibility

1. Introduction

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of global educational institutions were forced to close off their campuses and switch to remote learning. Roughly four years later, a significant number of these institutions reverted to in-person learning. When considering the overall technological development in the 21st century, it remains paradoxical why educational systems are slow to keep up with technological innovations such as the idea of remote learning.

The barriers that cause remote learning to be perceived as unattractive can be found in the pool of research that was conducted during and after the pandemic, some of which are

presented in the literature review. Nonetheless, this study provides a distinctive viewpoint by exploring the experiences of instructors and students at this particular institution which is well-equipped for this shift, primarily because of its experience with its online learning platform and online lecture delivery for some courses before and after the pandemic. By focusing on this setting, insightful information can be obtained about how well-prepared institutions and people, such as this institution, handle the barriers of remote learning. Thus, the main aim of this study is to investigate the instructors' and students' experiences of remote learning at an international higher education institution in Croatia. Numerous factors were considered, such as technological constraints, concerns with academic honesty, lack of student engagement, and relationships as the main ones, among others. The experiences and opinions on remote learning were researched through a qualitative method approach utilizing interviews with instructors and students as a means of data collection.

2. Literature Review

The idea of distance learning gained traction with the technological innovations that emerged in the 20th century (Martinez-Garcia et al., 2023). Education that is delivered completely online is defined as an external delivery mode (Gillet-Swan, 2017). These external delivery modes could also be termed remote learning, in which students receive learning and assessments from their homes (Imran, 2023). Bidder et al. (2016) explored the idea of blended learning (combining external delivery modes and face-to-face learning) and found mostly positive student perceptions at a Malaysian university.

Remote learning became a global topic of discussion in January 2020, when a novel coronavirus disease started spreading globally. Numerous educational institutions across the globe were forced to rapidly transition to external delivery modes. This raised several concerns including technological inequality among students, instructors' technological and adaptational skills, concerns with fairly assessing assignments, and the level of anxiety among students (Sahu, 2020). However, Tulaskar and Turunen (2021) defined this transition as emergency remote learning (ERL) and differentiated it from pre-pandemic remote learning. They described the main characteristics of ERL as being an improvised version of conventional remote learning. That is because, in comparison to remote learning, ERL lacked structure, and was not standardized when being incorporated into curriculums. Moreover, it used third-party software such as Zoom and Google Meets that were not strictly designed for academic purposes.

Students were, as well as their instructors, forced to adapt to the setting of emergency remote learning. Lischer et al. (2022) suggested how the enjoyability of remote learning during the pandemic largely depended on the student's discipline and independent work. Gillis & Krull (2020) studied the issues that students faced at an elite American university. For one, technological issues were uncontrollable for a lot of the students no matter how well-equipped each student was. Moreover, for instructors to simply understand the technology was not enough. Instructors required training to adapt learning strategies to different types of technology. Instructors tried to mimic live classroom discussions by delivering lectures synchronously via video meetings; however, this yielded less engagement among students than other types of strategies such as online discussion forums.

Churchill (2020) expressed how instructors who were not using digital assessment before remote learning struggled with the grading of assignments. Instructors found it time-consuming to make quizzes more challenging, create different versions of exams, and generally develop strategies to prevent cheating. Instructors also expressed their dissatisfaction during in-class communication as they experienced pauses that slowed down class discussions and found students being less engaged. Internet connection issues were a major concern as they emerged unpredictably and reduced the efficiency of the lecture. Lastly, the faculty-student relationships significantly decreased as there was less face-to-face communication and a lack of trust which was a consequence of cheating.

The reviewed research articles provide an understanding of remote learning compared to other delivery methods. Additionally, the studies differentiate emergency remote learning from conventional remote learning and outline its perceived disadvantages through the perspectives of students and instructors. As seen in the study conducted at a Malaysian university, remote learning, when implemented through a structured curriculum, had more perceived advantages and generated positive perceptions. On the other hand, emergency remote learning's lack of structure carried more disadvantages some of which included a lack of interpersonal relationships, technological issues, and digital assessment strategies.

3. Method

3.1. *Research aim*

This research aims to investigate the instructors' and students' experiences of remote learning at an international higher education institution in Croatia.

3.2. *Research questions*

This research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the experience of remote learning at this institution?

2. What are the remote learning advantages?

3. What are the remote learning disadvantages?

4. How do student engagement levels differ in remote learning in comparison to in-person learning?

3.3. *Sample*

The participants involved in the interview were three instructors and two students at an international higher education institution in Croatia who were involved in at least two courses delivered through remote learning. The sampling method used for the research was convenience sampling. All of the instructors and one student did remote learning during the pandemic.

Instructor A is a female professor in her 40s delivering courses in the Global Business Management program in Zagreb. Instructor B is a male professor in his 50s delivering courses in the Hospitality and Tourism Management program in Dubrovnik. Instructor C is a male professor in his 40s delivering courses in the Web and Mobile Computing program in Zagreb. Instructor C regularly delivers courses in a remote learning environment even after the pandemic.

Student A is a female senior enrolled in the Global Business Management program in Zagreb and did three semesters of emergency remote learning. Student B is a female sophomore enrolled in the Global Business Management program in Zagreb and did two courses in a regular remote learning environment.

3.4. *Instrument*

The instrument used for the study was a structured interview conducted over Zoom. The questions included in the interviews were similarly structured but were slightly adapted to the interviewee's role. One set of interview questions was designed for the instructors, the second set for the student who did not do emergency remote learning, and the third set for a student who did emergency remote learning.

The total number of questions in the set for the instructors was eight. In the set for the student who did not experience emergency remote learning, there were six questions, and for the student who did remote learning, there were eight questions. The first four questions in all three sets addressed personal experience, advantages, disadvantages, and how to overcome those disadvantages in emergency remote learning. Student B answered the same questions only adjusted for regular remote learning.

Instructors were then asked about academic dishonesty and the difference in academic records of students when comparing remote to in-person learning. The next two questions for instructors regarded student engagement levels during remote learning and the effect of remote learning on interpersonal relationships with their students.

Subsequently, students answered questions on their interpersonal relationships with peers and instructors. Moreover, one question for students addressed their engagement levels during remote learning. Student B had to compare her engagement during asynchronous versus synchronous remote learning. One question for student A was about certain methods that helped her overcome her coursework during emergency remote learning.

The final question for all three sets regarded their overall opinion on the potential future use of remote learning at this institution.

3.5. *Procedure and analysis*

All of the interviews were conducted in March 2024. The participants for the interview were contacted and invited to participate either in person or via social media chat services. Once the participants agreed to do the interview, a time slot was agreed, and a Zoom link was sent out. Once the participants joined the Zoom meeting, I recorded the audio through Zoom computer recording. The average length of all five interviews was approximately twenty minutes. The data was analyzed in the week from April 8th to April 15th, 2024.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. *Challenging experience with emergency remote learning*

The first word that came to the mind of student A and instructor B was "challenging" when being asked about experiences during emergency remote learning; however, due to different reasons. For student A, it was her first year at this institution, and the fact that she came from a small town made things more difficult for her because of the additional uncertainty she had to face. For instructor B, the main challenge was the technological

constraints he was dealing with while delivering the lectures: "One of the initial hurdles I faced was the limitation posed by my home internet, which was unfortunately quite poor." However, he understood that remote learning was the only option at the time: "It was put upon us that we have to move online because it was the online way to deliver our program and not disrupt the entire academic year." Instructor A shared the same opinion as she described that she was glad that there was an opportunity to continue with the academic year. Even though it was challenging at first, instructors B and C mentioned how the students reacted positively to the change. Instructor B stated how the students were cooperative and understood the situation while instructor C said that they were afraid in the beginning but reacted well to the change. On the other hand, instructor A stated, "People got more fatigued through time and outputs were diminished, professors and students got less involved."

4.2. *Flexibility*

All five participants mentioned flexibility as the main advantage of remote learning. As Figure 1 depicts, remote learning's flexibility contributes in three different ways. Student A mentioned how less commuting and saving time to get to college was a great advantage and that it allowed students to do other things: "For people who were working, it was great." She also mentioned how she had time for her own extra activities: "I found myself some new hobbies that would fill in the blanks of that first year of college." Instructor A also outlined comfortability that was supported by flexibility as one of the advantages: "There was an advantage in terms of at what time you teach, where you teach, commuting, and being very comfortable." Student B mentioned how remote learning helps her visit home more often and makes it easier to manage her day: "As I am not from Zagreb, I can be at home and can listen to my lectures without wasting time on commuting to college which makes it easier to efficiently manage all my other tasks." Instructor B supported that claim by agreeing how emergency remote learning allowed him to continue the lectures with some of his students who were situated all over the world and were not allowed to travel: "I had students from China, UAE, Europe, and the US and they were stuck, so being in a remote learning mode was a great approach that helped us overcome geographical barriers." Lastly, instructor C concluded that remote learning helped in saving a lot of time on commuting; however, he does state certain cases where people (not necessarily students) do not perceive this as an advantage: "You save time for any kind of travel, although I know some of my friends who lose one hour and a half per day on driving but they like it just because they are all alone; they have time for themselves."

Remote Learning	In-person learning
Saving time	Limited geographical access
Comfortability	Constant commuting
Less commuting	Less time for extra activities

Figure 1. The flexibility advantages of remote learning.

4.3. *The lack of interpersonal relationships*

All five participants mentioned how remote learning, in general, left a negative impact on their interpersonal relationships. As Figure 2 depicts, the lack of interpersonal relationships meant different things for different groups of participants. Instructor A said, "One thing that I hugely missed were the chats before and after class in the hallways." She continued by explaining how the lack of informal communication also affected her by not letting her get to know the students as well as she does in person. Student B supported that claim by stating how she is currently finding it hard to meet people during remote learning courses: "I have no idea what some of my peers from a remote learning class look like." Instructor C agreed by explaining, "A fun fact is that the seniors I have now are the first generation to do emergency remote learning and did not know each other for the first year." Student A highlighted this as a big issue due to her generally being a social person: "You could not meet people, you could not go to coffees after class, you would stay home all day, and it was pretty challenging for me because I am an open person." However, instructor B pointed out that the lack of social interaction had mostly a negative impact but gave him some additional perspectives. He found some methods to improve the efficiency of interactions with students while away from the campus. He has been using these methods since emergency remote learning: "There were no emotions or empathy exchange, which was really negative but I started to use tools such as Viber or WhatsApp and I found this to be very productive, very effective, and much better than emails."
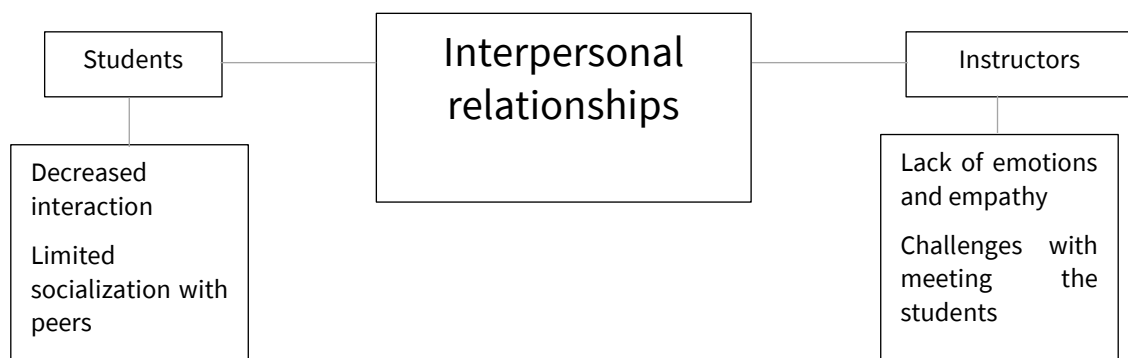

Figure 2. The negative impact on interpersonal relationships for each participant group.

4.4. *The decrease in student engagement levels*

All of the participants mentioned how the overall student engagement level during remote learning is lower in comparison to in-person learning. Student A said that she would usually switch off during online classes and have a shorter attention span: "I struggled with attention, especially with professors who didn't ask us to turn on our cameras; I would switch off during the online class and that was it." She went on to explain how she felt less encouraged to participate in class discussions: "In the online environment, you just shut up and you do not ask questions and I think that was really the turning point for some students because they could not express themselves." Instructor C agreed by stating how the students did not ask as many questions due to the lack of body language: "If you are in person then I just make eye contact and the students feel like they need to comment on the discussion." Instructor B explained how, again, the lack of nonverbal cues allowed students

to be less engaged in his class discussions: "It is not just what you hear but also what you see. A nonverbal cue or the ability to provide real-time feedback is so much better in an in-person environment." Lastly, student B also explained how she currently struggles with remote learning courses, particularly with lower engagement caused by a lack of personal interactions: "As there are no face-to-face interactions, sometimes I see that I am not engaged as I would be in class." As Figure 3 depicts, in-person learning involves a lot of body language that is not available in remote learning.

Figure 3. An example of nonverbal cues during in-person learning.

Black female teacher looking at schoolgirl raising hand, https://www.pexels.com/photo/black-female-teacher-looking-at-schoolgirl-raising-hand-5905458/

4.5. The future implications for remote learning at the international higher education institution in Croatia

All of the participants were leaning towards the fact that, currently, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages in the remote learning environment. However, this does not necessarily mean that, at some point in the future, this institution will completely avoid remote learning. Instructor B explained how remote learning will be consistently present in different shapes but he does not expect to completely replace the current way of learning: "While it may not replace traditional in-person learning entirely, I think that remote learning is here to stay for a long time." One of the barriers he pointed out as currently standing in the way of remote learning's standardized implementation is academic dishonesty: "Will providers like ChatGPT be able to reduce the temptation for students and academics to use AI for wrong reasons?" Student B stated, "At least for what we have now, remote learning can be implemented if organized properly but I think it will never be the same as in-person learning." Instructor A said that she was offering asynchronous methods for senior students and that there was a possibility for it to be a good alternative but academic dishonesty became a recent issue with the emergence of AI: "With the existence of AI, that all kind of went up in smoke because a lot of students were cutting corners and used AI to generate assignments." However, she explained how synchronous learning methods might still be a possible solution: "I feel like synchronous methods have potential but sections should be smaller so that students feel more visible." Of course, considering that the method of this study is limited in its sample size, a good way to generalize these perspectives would be to triangulate the data and include a method that would allow for more perspectives.

Through, for example, a questionnaire, the opinions on the future implications for remote learning at this institution could be more generalized. Figure 4 depicts the common perspectives of three participants on the future implications of remote learning at the international higher education institution.
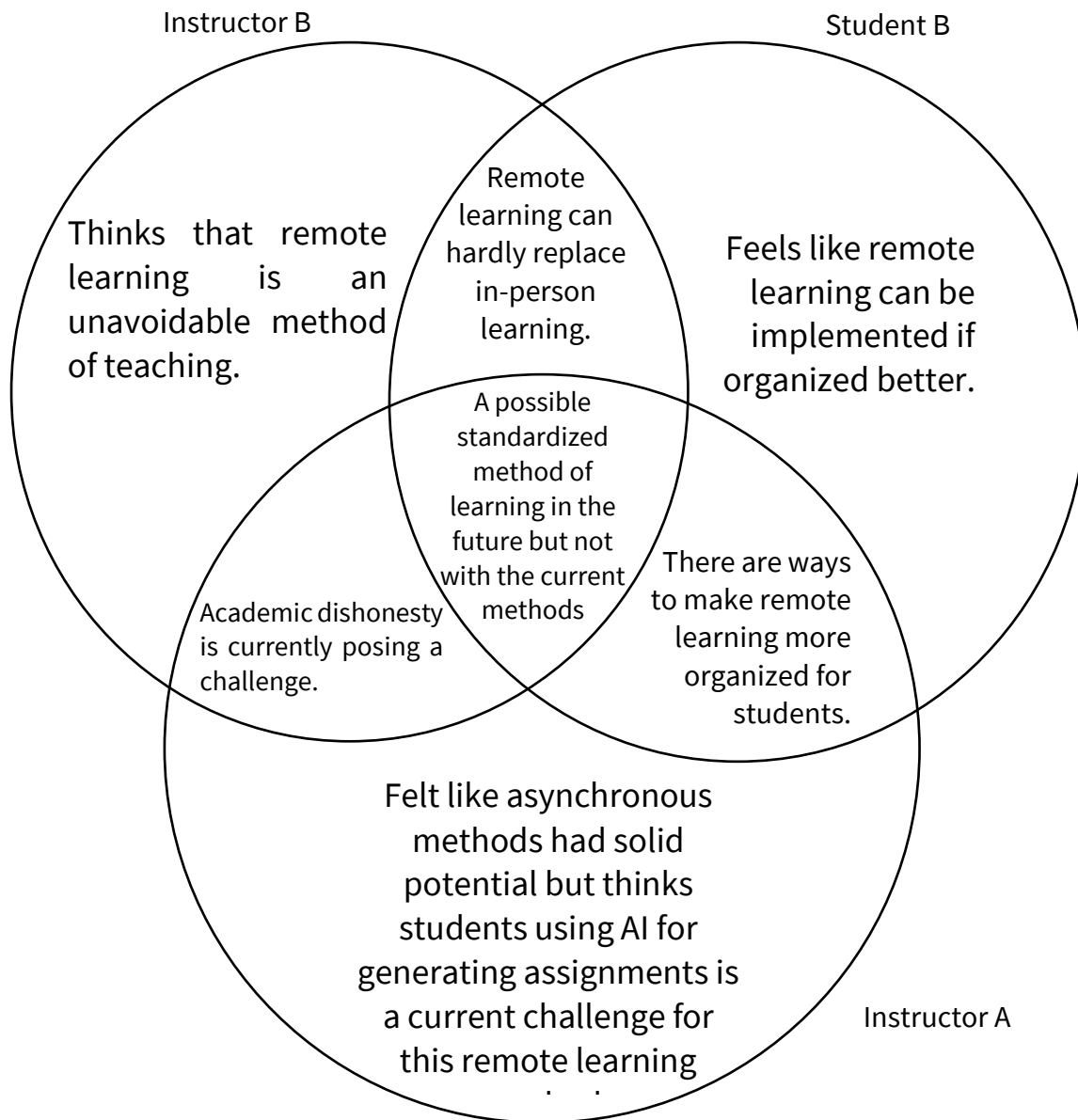
Instructor B   Student B

Thinks that remote learning is an unavoidable method of teaching.

Remote learning can hardly replace in-person learning.

Feels like remote learning can be implemented if organized better.

A possible standardized method of learning in the future but not with the current methods

Academic dishonesty is currently posing a challenge.

There are ways to make remote learning more organized for students.

Felt like asynchronous methods had solid potential but thinks students using AI for generating assignments is a current challenge for this remote learning

Instructor A

Figure 4. Perspectives on the future implications of remote learning at the international higher education institution

5. Conclusion

This study gave insights into the experiences, perceived advantages, disadvantages, and future implications of remote learning at an international higher education institution in Croatia. One of the keywords that repeatedly emerged during emergency remote learning was the word "challenging". Some of the main challenges, as pointed out by the students and instructors, behind emergency remote learning included poor interpersonal

relationships and lower engagement levels as the main ones, along with technological constraints and issues with monitoring academic honesty. The major advantage mentioned was the flexibility of remote learning in terms of utilizing time that is, otherwise, wasted on commuting. Through student B, insights were gained into how the same two major (lower engagement levels and poor interpersonal relationships) challenges are still persistent in remote learning after the pandemic. This enables us to additionally conclude how remote learning at this institution after the pandemic has not been able to differentiate from the methods used in emergency remote learning and does indeed require further restructuring in order to bridge the gap between remote and in-person learning. The essential implication of this conclusion is that this institution should consider either deciding to restructure current curriculums for online courses or, at least for the short-term, take a step back from remote learning delivery modes altogether. By doing this, the institution would allow itself the necessary time to wait for technological advances that could enable a more comprehensive and effective way to deliver lectures, providing a satisfactory imitation of in-person lectures for both instructors and students.

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