



WHO'S AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF? IS E-LEARNING EDUCATION SUCH A HUGE THREAT NOWADAYS?

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Abstract: *Technology is something that we've been taking for granted for quite a while now. We cannot imagine our lives without a smart phone or without spending hours online chatting with friends, searching for information, staying up-to-date with the latest news. However, when it comes to online education, reluctance, mistrust and suspicion are the key words normally and constantly associated with it. My paper, as a consequence, attempts to debunk the negative opinions that have grown up around E-learning methods and activities, focusing on the usefulness and effectiveness of such multimedia courses. It also intends to differentiate between different age groups or types of learners in order to emphasise the suitability of online training options in education for certain categories of learners.*

1. PRELIMINARY ISSUES

One cannot start the discussion on the issue of E-learning without setting the scene which actually led to the necessity of compulsorily using online educational techniques and methods to the detriment of the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning environment. 2019 was the year when people all over the world began being exposed to coronavirus disease COVID-19, the fifth documented pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic. Being highly contagious, spreading rapidly and continuously evolving in the human population, the virus forced people to preserve a certain physical distance during their daily routines, the obvious, normal result being the transposition from the natural environment to the online, virtual reality of activities that lend themselves to it.

This, however, could not have been possible without the aid of technology. And fortunately, this (i.e. technology) is something that we can easily claim to be quite familiar with, having constantly surrounded us for quite a long time now, being, without any shade of doubt, an intrinsic part of our lives. Marshall McLuhan's term "global village", coined in 1964, that sees society as a nervous system interconnected by the influence of electronic technology is still relevant today, if we are to believe Maiken Attwood's words:

We receive news in real time, (rather than waiting for the 6pm news) and we can even communicate with nations on the other side of the world from our phones, or laptops and now even our watches, we have hundreds of apps and websites dedicated to sharing and bringing information to one another. What once was broadcasted on television is now uploaded on YouTube, shared on Facebook or streamed live from online news websites. The emergence of the Internet has influenced the global village, especially as we rely heavily on it due to the characteristics of electronic technology [1].

2. TECHNOLOGY AND EDUCATION

The educational process has not been deprived of the benefits of technology, either. Plenty of classrooms all over the world have been and still are equipped with data projectors, interactive whiteboards (IWBs), built-in speakers for audio material that is delivered directly from a computer hard disk and computers with round-the-clock Internet access. Whenever teachers want their students to do a bit of research on their own or find anything out, a search engine like Google is always at hand and the results can be shared among all the members of the classroom.

In his book *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Jeremy Harmer [2] speaks about the so-called technology pyramid (*Figure 1*), bringing into view Jill and Charles Hadfield's 'reversed pyramid' of resources which attempts to arrange in a certain hierarchy (the highest position being dedicated to the greatest level of technological advances, while the lowest suggests a minimal level or no resources at all) all the technological means that might be available in the teaching-learning process or the ones that teachers might make use of in their attempt to transmit information and create and develop skills (in)to their students. However, the pyramid is just a tentative attempt to organize things at a certain moment in time, as the pace at which technological change advances is, as far as Jeremy Harmer [2] is concerned, "breathtakingly fast", some of the elements included on the list above having already become obsolete as we speak. The conclusion that Jill and Charles Hadfield reach, though, is that even if the resources that are presently available are definitely amazing, the human component is what really matters, being the "richest, [and] deepest seam of gold" that teachers have at their disposal [2], irrespective of all the other variables included in the process. And one cannot

ignore the fact that many classrooms in both, the ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ world do not have access to modern technology. As a consequence, online teaching or even a hybrid scenario that combines traditional and innovative educational techniques, giving thus the students the “best of both worlds in which to grow academically”[3] is not always possible. In addition to this, one should always keep in mind the fact that teaching outside the classroom walls has both advantages and disadvantages that can be applied to all those involved in the process.

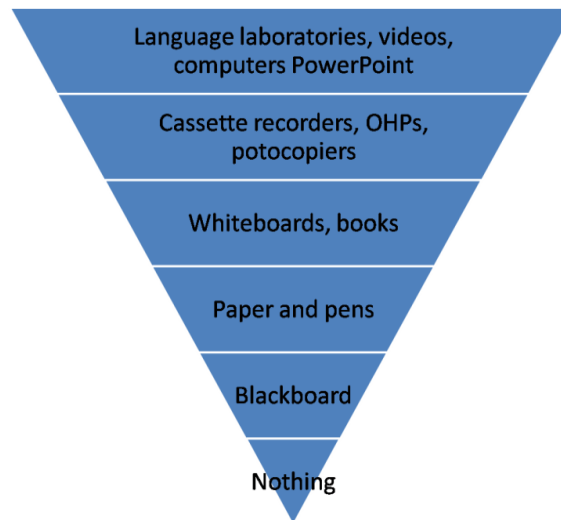


Fig 1: Reversed resources pyramid

Distance education can be defined as a form of education in which the main elements include “physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication.”[4] The same thing is also expressed by Lewis, Whitaker & Julian who see this form of education as the “delivery of the educational process to receivers who are not in proximity to the person or persons managing or conducting the process.”[3] The literature in the field registers plenty of advantages or strengths that can be associated with this type of cyber learning environment.

3.ADVANTAGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

a. Student related

Gary James [5] begins his article that attempts to gather in an as thorough as possible list all the advantages and disadvantages which designing, developing and delivering web-based training might involve by postulating that “never before in the training world have so many delivery options been available with so much information and knowledge to convey to our trainees.” The first advantages he registers are **extendibility, accessibility and suitability**, these three elements rendering the idea that any training programme that users might have in view can be proceeded through at the target audience’s own pace and place. The material can

be accessed at any time and as much as needed. As Mike McNaughton claims, “distance learning affords educational opportunities to individuals unable to attend conventional classroom settings.” [6] This category includes disabled people, those living away from universities and colleges, forced to commute daily or those with various time restrictions whose physical attendance in class may be prevented by their schedule. People with work or family responsibilities can also be included in this group of beneficiaries of online education systems. Focusing on the same accessibility and suitability direction, Chris Evans and Jing Ping Fan [6] speak about three main advantages of online learning:

- a. learner-determined location for learning – students being in the position of choosing their own place of study;
- b. learner-determined time of learning – students having the possibility to create their own individual learning schedule, without depending on a pre-established university timetable;
- c. learner-determined pace of study – students being able to adjust their own rhythm of study without being conditioned by the pace of the other members of the study group.

Ease of participation is also seen as an “appealing attribute of the cyber classroom.” [3] One cannot ignore the fact that the conventional classroom environment may sometimes seem intimidating for certain students, they refusing to actively participate in face-to-face classes. Student participation is, however, different in the online environment where “student chat-rooms and forums can provide these individuals with increased confidence and are often less intimidating.” [6]

b. Technology related

Assuming that your audience has access to the Internet and the proper gadgets to connect to a browser, one can mention **easy and affordable training delivery** as another advantage of web-based training, along with **direct access to many other training resources** [5]. The Internet grants access to the largest library in the world, offering the students the possibility to get in touch with the latest findings and researches in the fields they might be interested in. Another advantage would be the **ease of content update** [5], as the changes that one may choose to make in relation to the content of the material they are delivering to their students are immediately available to the learning audience. The **collaborative and exploratory learning environments** are also worth mentioning among the strengths of online education as they provide students with the chance of networking with people across nations while facilitating their “exposure to other cultures”[7]. The **quicker and cheaper turnaround** of finished product is another advantage that Gary James adds to his comprehensive list, this element stressing the easiness of delivery of various assignments students are expected to submit as a result of the educational/instructional process they are attending.

c. Educational institution related

There are also benefits that the educational institution offering online education programmes can take advantage of. The **lower cost** involved and **no need for physical space** are two of the most important ones, the former pointing towards the increase in the number of students attending these courses, while using the same or fewer resources than traditional environments, while the latter underlines the lack of bureaucratic hassle generated by the constant need of enlarging the physical space especially in the case of large classes of students [8].

4. DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE LEARNING

a. Student related

One cannot discuss the advantages of online learning without focusing on the other facet of the problem, i.e. its disadvantages. One of the greatest threats of online educational processes is the **risk of isolation** or the **loss of traditional classroom face-to-face interaction**. The question we should all ask is: Are computers actually replacing human contact? In his 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner [9] suggests that people learn differently depending on the specific type of “intelligence” they possess. He proposed seven types (linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, and the personal intelligences, i.e. the interpersonal and intrapersonal ones). In an article dedicated to this very theory, Kendra Cherry [10] updates the list of intelligences proposed by Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner by including a new type of intelligence, the naturalistic one. Returning now to the cyber learning experience, one can easily notice the fact that for certain types of learners, mostly those that learn via the tactile/kinaesthetic modality, learning online is not the ideal environment. These students value body movement, physical actions as well as creating things with their hands; they remember by doing rather than hearing or seeing. Lessons delivered through “abstract symbols, de-contextualized and cast on a two-dimensional screen” [11] are quite unintelligible to them. The same thing is true for those possessing an interpersonal intelligence. They are good at understanding and interacting with other people, resolving conflicts in group settings and creating positive relationships with others [10]. They benefit a lot from team-work and group-work activities, interaction being the one that facilitates, in their specific case, the learning process, and this is exactly what the online environment has difficulties replicating, i.e. the student/instructor interaction as well as students interacting with their peers [6]. Online education thus becomes quite an impersonal environment that fuels students’ feelings of isolation.

According to Stelzer and Vogelzangs [6], the above mentioned feeling of isolation directly impacts students’ motivation levels. Sitting alone in front of a computer, they are more

prone to distraction, losing their interest and concentration, unless the online course material is interesting enough. However, students' motivation level and their ability to concentrate in front of an emotionless gadget go hand in hand with the age group they (i.e. students) belong to. If we are to paraphrase Jeremy Harmer's view on the matter of students' age and the differences that characterise different age groups in terms of learning abilities and preferences, we should begin by saying that age represents a decisive factor in teachers'/instructors' decisions about how and what to teach [2].

Thus, young children learn differently from older children, adolescents and adults. They learn indirectly rather than directly, which means they absorb information from everything around them, rather than focusing on the precise topic they are being exposed to, their understanding of a certain issue is not exclusively the result of someone explaining something to them but their ability to process everything they see, hear, touch and interact with. They crave attention and approval from the teacher, having a limited attention span which means that they can get easily bored, losing interest after a few minutes [2]. The adolescents' learning potential is definitely greater than that of young children, but they may be "considerably more difficult to motivate and manage, and it takes longer to build up trusting relationships." [12] The adult learners, however, are more disciplined than other age groups, being often prepared to struggle on despite boredom. They have a longer concentration span and they are also more motivated. Many adults, as Harmer [2] claims, are "able to sustain a level of motivation by holding on to a distant goal in a way that teenagers find more difficult." Adults take more responsibility for the learning process, getting involved into the proposed activities voluntarily, so their motivation seems to be "relatively stable" [12], depending less on the teacher's ability to make these activities attractive or provide incentives.

In the light of the above mentioned characteristics that define different age groups in terms of their learning abilities and preferences, one can easily claim that the online learning environment suits better adult learners who willingly get involved into the learning process, having their goals clearly stated from the very beginning. Penny Ur [12] associates the relationship between instructors/teachers and their adult trainees/students with a business relationship: the teacher has a commodity which the learner is willing to pay to acquire. The latter, consequently, knows what he/she wants and the level of concentration and motivation is relatively stable throughout the process.

The pace of study has already been mentioned as one of the advantages of online learning, giving students the possibility to set their own individual pace without being held up by slower students or vice-versa. However, this pacing mechanism can also be seen as a threat in the cyber classroom, many students not being able to preserve or stick to this self-imposed studying rhythm outside the typical college routine, the obvious tendency being that of dropping out of collage at a higher rate than their fellow students enrolled in traditional face-to-face learning environments [13].

The higher dropout rates registered during the last few years (especially since the pandemic outbreak) have been more and more often related to this unfriendly, unfamiliar and sometimes terrifying forced online experience. However, this does not seem to be the only cause of this harsh reality.

In our country's specific case (i.e. Romania) school dropout rates have always been a worrying issue. According to D.P.'s article "România educată, surprinsă într-o imagine statistică. Cifrele îngrijorătoare ale abandonului școlar" („The educated Romania seen through statistics. The worrying figures of dropout rates”) [14], Romania is the third country in the European Union, along with Malta and Spain in what concerns the high dropout rates registered, the number of boys dropping out school being higher than the number of girls, while only 36% of the children living in rural regions choose to attend school. The decreasing number of the country's population during the last decades has definitely influenced the school population: recent studies have found that the school population in Romania during 2019-2020 school year registered 3.5 million students, the number falling 18.5% in comparison with the figures recorded a decade ago. In addition to this, the rural regions occupy the highest position in relation to students' lack of participation in the educational process. According to Mihai Peticilă [15], dropout rates have increased at all levels of the education system, the country losing almost a quarter of a generation in eight years of school. National school dropout rates are still a reality and they can also be related to people being forced to use online education, at least in Romania's case. As a country with relatively little industrial and economic activity and where people generally have low incomes, the idea of students having online access, as well as frequent access to a computer, laptop, smart phone or other gadgets is still a desirable aim.

b. Technological implications

The **lack of access** either due to logistics or economic reasons, will exclude participants from the cyber class, this being one of the limitations for online programs that are reliant on Internet access [3]. Quality transmission is another problem that telecommunication systems have to face, the reality being that both trainers and trainees are still constrained by the available technology. If the content of the lesson to be delivered relies on a lot of video, audio and graphics and the quality of the Net delivery is poor, the learners will become frustrated, losing interest in the instruction.

Another disadvantage that is often ignored or taken for granted is **computer literacy**. The premise on which online learning functions is that both students and trainers (teachers/professors/educators) are or have to be computer literate, which means they have to possess not only keyboarding skills, but also the ability to communicate proficiently through reading and writing, as “the majority of communication that takes place in an online environment is written” [6]. Lack of such expertise, however, brings about a “feeling of cognitive overload”, as far as Brace-Govan and Clulow are concerned [6], which, is often the result of students experiencing

difficulties of learning the software for online courses and thus being unable of meeting deadlines and accomplishing tasks.

c. Instructor and course content related

As we have already mentioned, computer literacy can be applied not only to students but also to teachers. Not only do the latter have to be adequately prepared for the technology-rich learning environment they are supposed to create and deliver, but they should also be ready to assist students in case of technological problems. They have to dedicate time and effort to create online materials that might be appealing to their students, which means that those in charge with the designing and implementation of courses online not only have to be knowledgeable of the subject area they are teaching, but also acquire and possess new teaching skills, such as “learning to facilitate online interactions and assess students’ online learning.” [16].

In addition to what has already been mentioned so far, one should also keep in mind the fact that **E-learning is limited to certain disciplines**, being more suitable for social sciences and humanities, rather than scientific fields such as medical science or engineering where the degree of practical experience should be high.

d. Educational institution related

In the article “Distance education: advantages and disadvantages of the point of view of education and society”, De Oliveira, Torres Penedo and Pereira [8] identify some of the disadvantages or weaknesses that might affect the educational institution offering online courses. The first mentioned is the decrease in the quality of the teaching process, as students no longer have the opportunity to actively contribute in the preparation and development of the lessons. During conventional classes, students can participate actively bringing their own experiences and subject expertise, asking questions and thus offering the teachers the possibility to accurately assess their level of knowledge. The direct consequence is the teacher becoming aware of his/her students’ progress and their need (or lack of it) for extra consolidation. The online environment, however, does not offer the students the possibility to change the parameters of the lesson. The feedback the teacher gets takes longer, this being another drawback of the cyber learning experience. Another problem identified by the above-mentioned authors is the prejudice many students and teachers still have against online courses, they being considered ineffective when compared to traditional classroom activities.

As it became obvious up to this moment, there are both advantages and disadvantages of cyber learning. Being forced by the pandemic context to adopt the online version and due to the technological advances that have taken place in the information world, people have become aware of and better informed about the choices that exist for their education. Even if the education system provided via the Internet, mostly in the developed countries of the world, has already become a tradition, in the developing countries (such as Romania), forced by external

circumstances to resort to an online system, there are still doubts about the efficiency of such web-based programs and the quality they can provide.

In order to assess students' satisfaction in relation to the online experience they have been going through during the past two years, a research has been conducted covering a sample of 146 Philology students enrolled at Technical University of Cluj-Napoca, North University Centre of Baia Mare, Romania. The aim of the research was to find answers to several crucial questions, as follows:

1. Did you participate in the online activities organized by your institution during this pandemic period?
 - a. Yes, in all of them
 - b. Yes, partially (as I did not always have access to the Internet, computer, laptop, tablet, smart phone)
 - c. No (as I did not have access to the Internet, computer, laptop, tablet, smart phone)
 - d. No (I was not interested in this kind of activity)
2. Do you consider that cyber learning can replace the traditional face-to-face activity that normally takes place in the classroom?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Can be an additional activity
 - d. I am not interested in this kind of activity
3. How do you appreciate the online learning experience you have been through during the last two years?
 - a. Attractive, useful, appropriate
 - b. Unattractive, inappropriate
4. Which are the greatest threats/weaknesses of the online system?
 - a. Professors' access to technology
 - b. Students' access to technology
 - c. Professors' low level of digital competence
 - d. Students' low level of digital competence
 - e. Inability to keep students motivated and involved
 - f. Changing the course content and activities so as to suit the online environment
 - g. Assessing students' progress and involvement
 - h. The amount of work and high level of stress associated with cyber learning
 - i. Managing time and deadlines
5. Do you think that once things return to normal cyber learning should remain a part of the teaching-learning process?

- a. Yes
- b. No

Based on the results of this research, indicative data for this form of education have been collected. The most significant findings are listed below:

- For the first question (*Figure 2*), 82% of the respondents chose the first option, clearly stating their interest and total participation in the online activities provided by their institution.

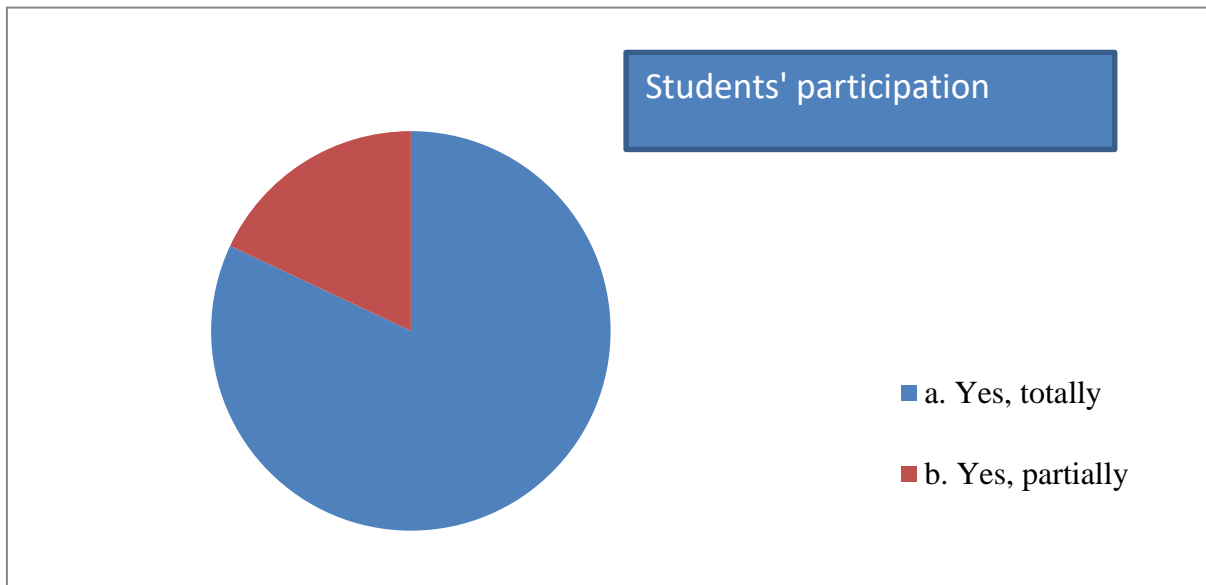


Fig 2. Students' participation

- The answers received for the second question (*Figure 3*) show that the great majority of students (59%) would rather see the online experience as an additional one, going hand in hand with the traditional face-to-face environment, while 27% see it as a viable option, ready to replace the on-site scenario.

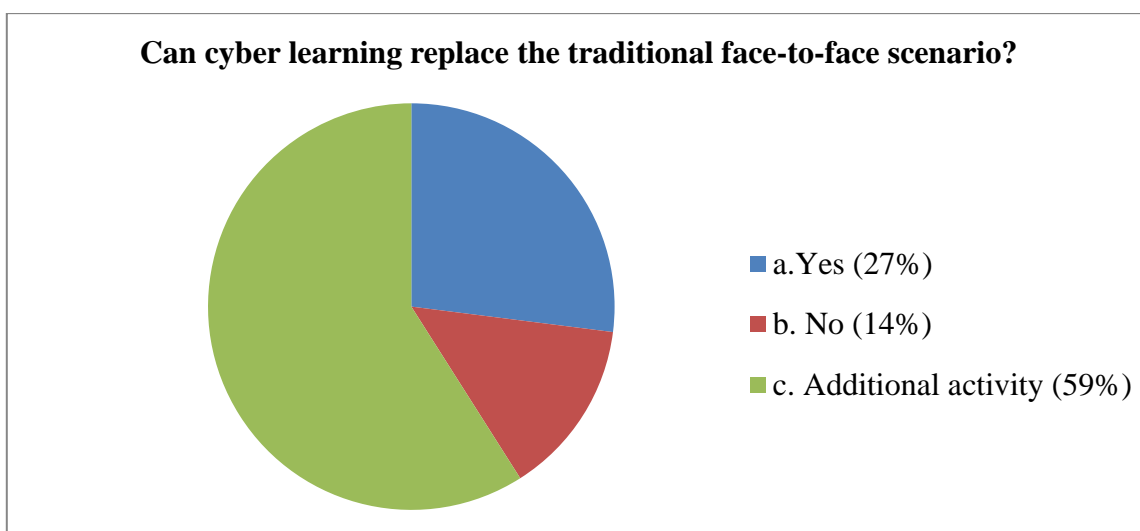


Fig 3. Cyber learning vs. Face-to-face

- The third question (*Figure 4*) underlines the idea that students (76% of the respondents) appreciated the online experience as useful and appropriate in comparison with only 24 % that resented it.

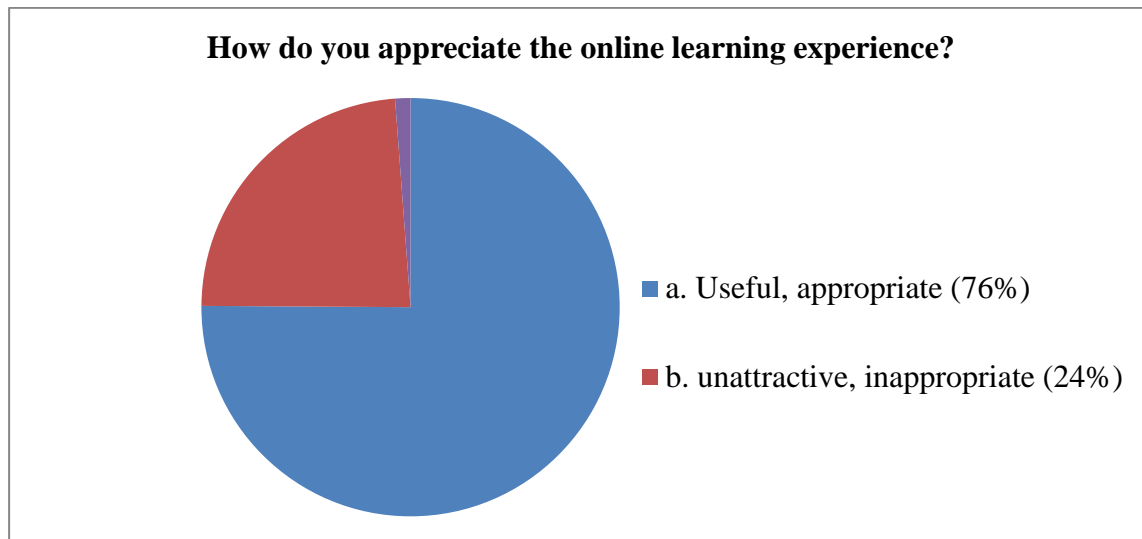


Fig 4. Online learning experience

- The fourth item (*Figure 5*) registered different options, the opinions of the students being quite varied, this fact underlining the idea that there are still improvements to be made if one is really interested in the success of this type of learning experience.

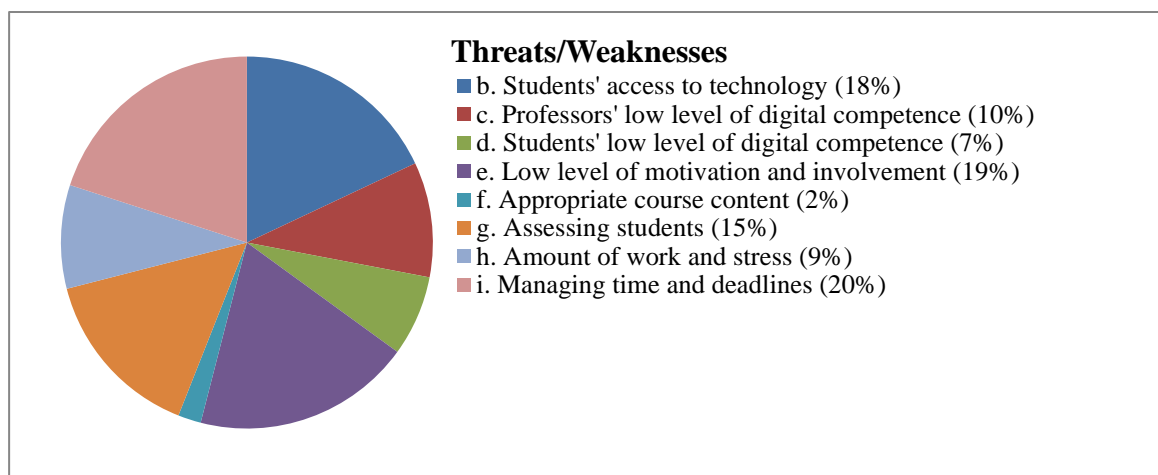


Fig 5. Threats and weaknesses

- The last question (*Figure 6*), however, stressed, once again, the positive opinions students had in relation to the cyber learning process they have been through during the last 2 years.

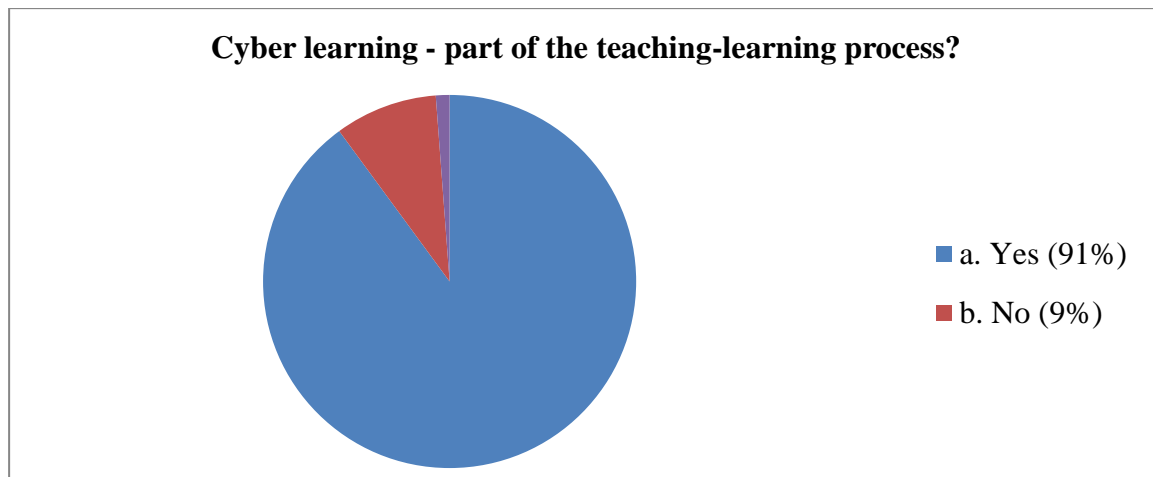


Fig 6. Cyber learning – part of the teaching process

The conclusions of the research show that in spite of the negative reactions and skepticism surrounding the topic of online learning experience, this form of studying still has a large number of advocates, the most important ones being exactly the beneficiaries of it, i.e. the students.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As this paper has tried to prove, there are both advantages and disadvantages of distance education. They are both important and worth considering if we are to assess correctly the situation we are now experiencing, that of being forced to adjust to external constraints that require social and physical distancing. The reality is that online education is suitable and works perfectly in the case of certain categories of people: adults with work and family commitments, shy students who see an opportunity in the online chat-rooms, these providing them with the confidence they lacked in the normal face-to-face environment, or students who can exert control over their own studying experience, mature, self-disciplined individuals for whom an online method of education can be a highly effective alternative. However, cyber learning is not the best option for younger learners (i.e. elementary and secondary school children) who can benefit a lot from their constant interaction with and supervision of their instructors, students who do not have access to the Internet and do not possess the gadgets that might facilitate their total participation in the web-based activities provided by their institution or, other students who are “dependent learners and have difficulty assuming responsibilities required by the online paradigm.”[7]

Nevertheless, the constant technological advances that we have all been experiencing lately and the fact that the Internet has found its way into our daily lives and uses prove that the prospect of the Internet finding its way in the educational sphere is quite plausible. As a consequence, it is quite logical to expect that online studies will grow in popularity and the

“network of virtual faculties will keep spreading in the future.”[17] The internet studies have managed to prove their viability, continuing to develop and benefit students and staff. If the direct change from a traditional face-to-face environment to an online one is too sudden, the hybrid variant could be the best option, this type of blended education system meeting the needs of both, students who are accustomed to a face-to-face format and students who prefer the online option.

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