THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC
ON ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract
This article aims to tackle the significant shifts in academic and administrative communication in higher education in view of the necessity to adapt to changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will, additionally, suggest a list of benefits and drawbacks as seen from the perspective of language trainers caught in the overbearing landslide brought upon by the unprecedented conditions. While being fully aware that this paper will join an already extensive plethora of international academic studies on the subject, we, the authors, consider it is relevant nevertheless, since it is only by sharing common experiences and successful and not so successful stories that we can find solutions, learn from each other and at the same time reconquer the feeling of community that the pandemic has affected to a large extent.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; academic communication; higher education.

1. Introduction

More than just a buzzword or a topic for conversation, COVID-19 has become in the past two years an undeniable force in any aspect of social life, determining people in the entire world to change their perspective on health, social interaction in personal and professional life, work-related patterns, and expectations in terms of things that many took for granted before, such as free movement or the ability to interact face-to-face with close friends, relatives or colleagues.

The academic environment has not been spared from the sudden, profound and longer than expected impact of the pandemic. In many countries, including Romania, the changes that were implemented had a strong emotional and psychological impact on all the stakeholders involved – academic and administrative staff, students, the community, economic and social partners – given that traditional face-to-face interaction was still perceived as the best way to collaborate and carry on with planned activities at the beginning of 2020, when talks about COVID-19 and incidence rates started to take the spotlight. Suddenly, direct communication and physical presence in the same room, with online communication via e-mail or study

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platforms playing a secondary role, had to be replaced for more time than one could have imagined at the beginning with exclusively online contacts. Classes started being conducted exclusively on Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom or institutional study platforms, while communication with students out of online classes was done mainly via e-mail. The same happened in the case of communication with colleagues from the same department and university and with peers from other higher education institutions from Romania and abroad. Regarding administrative procedures, they were quickly modified to allow online responses and even the admission process in many institutions was upgraded from one based on the physical presence of candidates and submission of printed study documents to a mainly online experience.

It has been a tiresome experience for everyone, given the immediate need to adapt or be left behind, and we feel the stress has increased for many people when they realized it is not a short-term effort. Starting from March 2020, when the outbreak was significant enough in Romania for education institutions at all levels to start being closed down, many of them have been mostly closed, depending on a variety of aspects including national and local health and safety rules, national and international rates of incidence or school board decisions. Our university, the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, has not organized face-to-face classes for 3 semesters already. There was a trial to get back to traditional teaching/ learning at the beginning of the academic year 2021-2022, but after only one week we all moved online one more time, thus turning this into the fourth consecutive semester in which the academic activity will not be carried out with trainers and students being in the same room and interacting directly with each other.

Teachers, researchers and administrators from various institutions in many countries have already produced and published studies aimed to present their experience and response to this situation. However, we consider this subject will be worth discussing and analyzing for a long time from various perspectives. This is because every day presents new challenges, from technical glitches to the need to identify quick response patterns to a wide range of problems. In order to solve issues effectively and quickly it is important to keep the conversation open on the matter for sharing experience and examples of good practice, learning from one another, finding solutions through dialogue. Also, disseminating information about shared worries and concerns, expectations and plans for the future, as well as success or failure stories brings mental comfort and help us understand we are all in the same boat, part of a fractured academic community that has to find new ways for keeping in touch and identifying the best strategies to cope with a situation that is new and full of surprises for all of us.

2. Shifts in Academic Communication Patterns as a Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The interest in how the pandemic has affected aspects related to higher education, including communication with students, peers, or stakeholders is both individual and institutional. Numerous collective surveys and studies illustrate some institutions', associations' or communities' effort invested in identifying the main changes and challenges, as well as in making suggestions for better coping with what is going on around us.

In the spring of 2020, in the early stages of everyone struggling to adapt to continuing their activity in unprecedented conditions, the European Association for International Education (EAIE) carried out a survey among higher education employees – both academic and administrative staff – to gauge their reaction to what was going on and to gather data regarding national and international challenges. The resulting report, which was a summary of data collected from 701 respondents from 628 higher education institutions in 37 countries[3], provides interesting insights into key aspects of information dissemination.

Regarding the channels used for sharing information with interested parties, e-mail communication was indicated as a predominant one by 38% of the respondents, followed by communication via institutional websites, mentioned by 25%. Intranet communication (7.4%), press releases or public statements (4.7%), posters placed throughout the university (4.4%), social media (4.3%) were obviously used by a significantly lower amount of institutions. Spoken communication seemed to have played a very small role in this period: workshops, seminars or group meetings were mentioned by 0.2% of the respondents, telephone and SMS communication by 0.18%, while webinars appeared as an example only in 2 of the 701 responses (Rumbley, 2020: 7). It is not surprising if we consider that written communication was seen as more time-effective from the perspective of reaching a very large audience as quickly as possible and it was perceived as the best solution in a period when any form of physical interaction was perceived as unsafe. However, it is somehow shocking to notice there was a sudden shift in so many countries to almost exclusively online written communication in the detriment of verbal dissemination of information and sharing of ideas. At the same time, it is interesting to highlight that, faced with the need to find quick solutions for keeping everyone informed, most institutions resorted to traditional and less dynamic means of online communication,

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[3] The questionnaire was sent to respondents from countries from the European Higher Education Area and, while the number of answers was not equally distributed among the countries, the initiators still felt the data collected from each region provided insightful information. In the survey, references were made to 38 countries, with Belgium being split into the Flemish Community and the French Community.

which allow little room for the recipients of the information to ask questions, provide feed-back or share concerns and make suggestions. Basically, academic dialogue was replaced by a monologue-based discourse. Furthermore, this monologue was in many cases addressed to national students only, forcing international students to find solutions on their own, since only five respondents, less than 1%, mentioned multilingual dissemination of information (Rumbley, 2020: 8).

The main target audiences of COVID-19-related communication indicated in the EAIE survey were the students, mentioned by 38.5% of the respondents, followed by the academic staff (29.2%). Significantly less interest was paid to communicating with partner institutions (4.7%), other departments in the same institutions (4.4%), parents/ families (4 out of 701 responses) or the local community (3 out of 701 responses) (Rumbley, 2020: 8).This is easy to understand given the huge amount of time necessary for communicating with immediate target audiences such as the students and the staff and the tremendous amount of messages that had to be disseminated in a short period of time, sometimes with several messages a day, depending on evolutions in news about the pandemic, national and international regulations, and institutional procedures adapted constantly to fit the situation.

Leaving aside the challenges that it is associated with, the pandemic and the universities' response to it are seen by many as an opportunity to improve and develop new communication and teaching/ learning patterns. Digitalization, online courses open to students from various geographical areas, content and skill development activities made available via online platforms, a higher degree of flexibility and quick adaptability to unexpected situations, immediate alignment to community issues should become part of tertiary education and not be abandoned once the pandemic is left behind (Hazelkorn, 2021: 56-57, Harris and Santilli, 2021: 130). At the same time, international dialogue between higher education institutions and their representatives should be given more attention than ever, since it has become increasingly obvious that global problems require global solutions and coordinated response strategies to the pandemic and to any other problems the world might face (Harkavy et al., 2021: 25-26, Hazelkorn, 2021: 55).

With regard to how Romanian universities have responded to the pandemic, studies published so far highlight the extremely challenging task of dealing with constantly-changing and unpredictable conditions, which has been made even more difficult due to the extensive range of impacted areas, including aspects as diverse as "teaching and learning, assessment, the international flows of students, educational co-operation and joint research endeavours and exchanges" (Matei, 2021: 142). The effectiveness of online delivery of content, the need to provide training and support to teachers for them to be able to teach online, questions regarding how long this situation will last and what role e-learning will play after the pandemic ends, equal access to classes and willingness to travel away from home for students or financial issues connected to government support or tuition fees are all identified as areas of

concern (Matei, 2021: 143). Furthermore, there is significant emphasis on the decision to move from traditional direct communication to online teaching/ learning and exchange of information between teachers and trainers made by most Romanian universities (Deca et al., 2021: 204, Matei, 2021: 142). Since many universities were unprepared for exclusively online delivery, teachers from various institutions and sometimes from the same organization resorted to publicly available platforms for video-conferencing and written exchange of messages and posting of study materials (Deca et al., 2021: 206), having to learn very quickly how to use them. This has definitely been a tiresome learning experience for both trainers and students, with little time for trial and error.

3. Our perspective on the teaching/ learning process

We will refer to our experience with communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic from a twofold perspective: namely, our experience as instructors, as teachers and our communication with our students for classroom-related issues, and secondly, our experience with intra-department and institutional communication with our peers and fellow professors regarding teaching and administrative-related activities. Both aspects reflected minimal and major shifts, as well as facets that we had never envisioned before the current events. For a rounded analysis, we decided to highlight positive and negative features and to draw some 'to be learned' conclusions that would hopefully better our future interactions in out-of-the-ordinary contexts.

We begin with the one major shift and influence in the essential aspect of our activity, that of teaching and interacting with our students. As many other universities all over the world, in March 2020 we switched integrally to online teaching and learning. Since the start of the pandemic, there have been attempts to come back to traditional forms of education (in-campus face-to-face teaching), but these have been brief, as the urgency and dramatic developments of the pandemic in Romania have forced the return to online teaching.

3.1 Benefits

A significant advantage for our university has and continues to be the pre-existence of a Moodle platform (online.ase.ro) already in use and tested for distance teaching and learning, which has been rapidly updated and upgraded to sustain a coherent and complex teaching/ learning and assessment process. There has been a flexible institutional approach, with teachers being allowed to use other platforms as well, as long as all course-related content and information was centralized on the institutional platform. Other platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, which few of us had used before, provided the opportunity to have face-to-face interactions with students and colleagues and to make an efficient switch to alternative forms of communication for the purpose of teaching and collaborating.

Among the benefits, the one that stands out is that foreign language classes and teaching foreign languages for specific purposes actually benefit a lot from this form on teacher-student interaction. Aspects worth mentioning include access to more online resources (e.g. TED Talks, YouTube) without having to rely on room equipment and Internet connection provided in campus, as well as flexibility and more opportunities to adapt teaching activities and materials according to students' mood/ immediate feed-back, especially valid for teaching foreign languages, but also extended to culture and civilization aspects. A lot more internet and app savvy, many students became more engaged in sending back and forth links to various websites that would illustrate their point, with many simultaneous activities going on, for example, on Zoom, when both visually sustained dialogue and communication happened, but also in the Chat section of the platform. For the teacher this was a totally new way of interacting with the group, as it seemed like we had access to the formal conversation, but also to the informal dialogue which is more difficult to achieve in class. We think this amplified the sense of community of learning and of closeness to our students.

Another major advantage that came with online education was the elimination of commute time. In a big, busy city like Bucharest, there are huge chunks of time lost to the traffic and to the hassle of leaving and arriving on time, especially when consecutive classes are held in different parts of the building or even in different buildings of the university. It would be unjust not to notice that it became a lot easier and comfortable to access the classes and be effective time-wise. This time-efficient route translated further into higher attendance and participation rates from students who are employed (especially Master's students, but also Bachelor's), but also attendance from some students that were rarely present in class before the pandemic, without them mentioning the existence of a job or some other serious commitment outside university. Furthermore, online classes and the possibility to hide behind a screen provided introvert or unsure students, who avoided participating in class discussions afraid of their colleagues' or teachers' reactions, the possibility to gain the courage and confidence they needed to express their views.

3.2 Drawbacks

On the other hand, one of the particularly obvious setbacks in the online teaching scenario, especially from the communication perspective, was lack of overall control with regard to class management. This is evident when students choose not to turn on their camera, some of them actually claiming they do not possess or afford to purchase one or update their devices or referring to privacy-protection issues. This disconnection from hands-on access to actually 'seeing' the students went on to create feelings of frustration on the side of the teachers. We are certain that many of us went on to carry some of their courses and even seminars via faceless Zoom sessions, when teachers are staring at their own image on the screen, delivering the content or discussing with unseen respondents, seeing black squares with names

written on them or photographs. In these circumstances, we understand how call-center operators are feeling, trying to establish a connection and have an open dialogue with people they cannot actually see. This is certainly a very important characteristic of the educational process in such conditions and it deserves more coverage in terms of boundaries and privacy issues, protection of intimacy, choice or non-choice when it comes to image disclosure when and for the sole purpose of learning, GDPR-related aspects and so on.

The factuality of not being able to know who is still present and connected to teaching activities makes for an integral part of what we highlighted above in relation to class management difficulties – repeated calls for someone to answer followed by long moments of silence, breakout room calls when some students need repeated reminders to join the rooms, session endings when some students fail to leave the meeting because they are most likely not in front of their computer or engaged in other activities, choosing to pay attention at will. Of course, these difficulties appear sporadically and do not make up for every teaching/ learning iteration; in fact, from some teachers' experience it never happens, while for others it is a constant. But, it is, nevertheless, one of the main frustrating facets of online face-to-face communication.

Another important aspect of interaction in this context is the absence of the phatic function of communication. Teachers talk or explain something and, from time to time, they need confirmation of them being understood. With students' microphones turned off, one cannot hear an occasional 'yes' or 'could you please repeat?'. Furthermore, the absence of the visual image of the student deprives the teacher of the occasional nod of the head, eye-to-eye connection or confused expression that usually helps us verify clear understanding or lack of it. In the end, this lack of real-time visualization of the phatic function of language leads to repeated, seemingly or downright redundant check on the part of the teachers that students understood or even heard them.

A very important point to make here is something that came up and became increasingly evident and strenuous for students, especially, was that time spent online meant a lot of homework and projects to be completed – a lot more than pre-pandemic period. During a series of presentations and discussions taking place during these times, a generally occurring theme emerged: too much to do in terms of individual or group, but independent work, outside the actual online time allocated for the course or the seminar.

In formal and informal conversations, for instance during the bi-annual meetings between student representatives and university management or during dialogue with teachers and faculty representatives, students have indicated they are overwhelmed due to the high level of uncertainty regarding whether teaching and assessment activities will remain online or will be organized face-to-face again, in which case arrangements for accommodation have to be made by students from other cities.

They also mentioned that they are experiencing negative feelings due to lack of interaction with colleagues and teachers (2nd year Bachelor's students and all Master's students have never met their colleagues or teachers face-to-face), difficult communication with some teachers, with references to how face-to-face communication could have helped them solve some issues and find answers to their questions faster.

4. Our perspective on out-of-class student management

The rather interesting element about the online teaching/ learning experience compared to administrative issues is that in terms of communication what was positive about sharing information and ideas in the actual educational process translated into a rather negative experience in terms of discipline, student/ group/ class management, i.e. communication management outside virtual classes, from an administrative stand. As online communication became the main channel for exchange of information, the informality of attitude and language used by the students in their social media became the norm in communication with the academic staff. As instructors, we had to be available 24/7 for our students, we got emails demanding immediate answers, or even some impatient reminders after as short as an hour-long waiting time on the part of our students, with blurred or no boundaries regarding working and non-working hours/ days/ weeks. Also, us having an account on Facebook, or Instagram, or other social media platforms, instantly meant we may be approached on class and course matters, or to settle school-related issues, whenever – online, or offline. This instantaneous and within easy reach of contacting a certain professor also led to less time spent by students in search of information, decreased attention paid to rules of academic etiquette, no need to wait for specific days and hours to schedule a meeting with teaching staff members. Also, facing a white email page, 'hidden' behind a screen, writing or talking to a 'faceless' interface, led in some cases to de-personalized communication, even aggressiveness and more impatience on the part of some students. Moreover, the increase in electronic conversations resulted in more time devoted – on the part of the instructors – to clarify misunderstandings, to answer the same question in several messages, or to make sure every concerned student received the message.

5. Communication with colleagues or peers during the pandemic

5.1 Benefits

On a positive note, what the online experience has brought was flexibility and ease in adapting schedules. It became a lot easier to schedule meetings on Zoom, with an increased likelihood that, unless in a virtual class meeting, colleagues would connect. However big (e.g. University Senate Session) or small (e.g. a discussion between as few as 2 colleagues), meetings happened with more successful rates of participation.

Even Department meetings enjoyed a higher degree of attendance, as it was a lot easier to connect, rather than make time to prepare and navigate through city traffic. We even benefited from the participation of some colleagues who had never attended these meetings before usually due to schedule conflicts. Moreover, all participants have direct access to online information (e.g. email exchanges), which reduces the possibility of misunderstanding occurring due to reliance on hearsay and reported comments after missed face-to-face meetings.

A huge advantage brought on by ease of online communication is that international meetings take place without the commute, resulting in time-saving, financial matters surpassed, efficiency in terms of handling multiple tasks in the same period. Even scientific conferences became more accessible and people were encouraged to participate with papers as, again, time and financial issues eschewed, connecting and presenting online proved really efficient.

5.2 Drawbacks

On the other hand, indeed lack of face-to-face, in person communication, human closeness and traditional socializing in-between courses or seminars and the various administrative tasks had a significant negative impact on team morale and connection with other work or team members. Informal socializing and communication between team members plummeted. Cases of depression, while isolated or confined during lockdown periods, rose and we perceived a heightened degree of sadness among colleagues and a grim perspective upon the future. Unfortunately, there were even cases of actual human life losses due to COVID-19 among family members and colleagues, which only increased the amount of personal and collective stress. Also, team-building activities, gathering colleagues to spend quality time together, became impossible.

Work-wise, from the administrative point of view, it is focus-consuming and time-consuming to navigate through group emails, as infinite 'reply-all' email chains and the use of the CC option became more often used than before.

Many times, the positive aspects of certain activities flipped on to show the negative ones. For example, attending national or international conferences without the socializing and mingling side of such events rendered them more austere and the chance to discuss more in an informal setting, to tighten the bonds between members/ participants, to exchange informal information was lost.

6. Conclusions

Our study has highlighted some troubling and concerning aspects of communication in a never-before encountered situation. Each one of the issues brought to the limelight, with their positive and negative aspects, deserves in-detail attention and data to confirm field observation, or personal experience. Maybe the key lies in the

idea of learning the right lesson and adopting a hybrid approach to communication – now and for the future, as well as of acknowledging the role of resilience and ongoing enhanced cognitive skills that enable the individual to adapt. If we take a look at students' opinions expressed during classes, we might notice how similar these are to our own remarks, as teachers or members of the administrative staff. As such, human experience proves akin and should lead to empathy.

Above all else, these trying times require mental stamina in the field of education and communication, as well as in life, in general. We have to understand there is no shame in admitting that we are struggling and not feeling comfortable with all the changes going on around us if this is the case, but we should also reflect on the situation (and this is actually what we are doing in the paper), practice more and develop new teaching skills or coping mechanisms, share experiences and offer and accept support.

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