A new decade for social changes
Making Sense of the Emergency Remote Education. Faculty and Students’ Takeaway Lessons from the Pandemic Classroom

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Abstract. The purpose of this paper is to analyse faculty and students’ takeaway lessons from the pandemic classroom, comparing the educational partners’ views on the transition from in-campus to online learning. Data collection was conducted through focus groups to understand the key issues at the level of an educational program, the collected responses being used to highlight the overall perception on the online classes during the pandemic, the most frequently uses online tools, the adaptive strategies to maintain engagement and foster learning and the assessment requirements for completing the 2020-2021 academic year. The results show that while most respondents define the experience as tiresome and complicated, faculty and students alike found enough resources to overcome the challenges and that despite the lack of preparedness for education in times of crisis, the educational process can go on when sufficient effort and commitment are put together. The value of the research is that it brings together faculty and student voices, interpreting a shared experience of the emergency remote education, the findings being useful for preparing educational strategies ensuring the resilience of higher education programs in times of unexpected disruptions.

Keywords. COVID-19 pandemic; adaptive educational strategies; emergency remote education; teacher-student communication, crisis, resilience, focus group

1. Introduction
In the interconnected world, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all regions and sectors of social, political, economic, and even private lives, starting with early 2020. While the initial response differed from country to country, ultimately social isolation, lockdown measures and the transfer of all activities that could be supported by remote solutions were adopted worldwide. The education sector did not make an exception. In response to the public health crisis, many educational institutions started offering online courses, adopting what is generally known as “emergency remote” solutions [1, 2, 3]. Romanian higher education institutions did not make an exception, adopting strategies and tools to continue the educational process as close to the pre-crisis model and calendar as possible, replacing face-to-face encounters with e-learning solutions [4, 5]. Crisis management literature recommends preparing...
organisations for crisis, energetically intervening during the actual crisis (identifying the type of crisis, adopting strategies to contain or counteract the crisis, with the right allocation of resources, clearly defined teams, and well-defined responsibilities), and considering post crisis outcomes, among which organisational learning and building resilience are crucial moments [6, 7]. In applying the model to crisis responses in higher education, Julie Mackey et al. identify four phases in dealing with unexpected disruptions: (1) React, Recover, and Redesign; (2) Restart; (3) Reconsolidate; (4) Review and Reflect [8].

The present research focuses on the experiences of one study program from Politehnica University of Timisoara (UPT), Romania, capitalising mainly on the last stage of the response to the health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, namely the reflection stage, needed as a prerequisite to building organisational memory, fostering learning, and enhancing the resilience at the grass-root level. The purpose of the paper is to understand and learn from the COVID-19, seen by the main stakeholders involved in the educational process, faculty, and students, and contribute to the pedagogical literature dealing with overcoming crisis by intertwining technical, emotional, and classical pedagogical solutions. This research is animated by the perceived gap in literature dealing with the takeaways from crisis management and analysing the postcrisis outcomes [6], [9]. The research issues are as follows:

- (RQ1): Faculty and students’ assessment on the sudden online classes
- (RQ2): Most frequently used platforms and online tools
- (RQ3): Pedagogical strategies to ensure learners’ engagement
- (RQ4): Adaptive activities to foster the development of skills and competences targeted by the study program
- (RQ5): Emergency remote assessment activities.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study is based on a qualitative approach, relying on data collected via two focus group discussions, based on a structured questionnaire, conducted via Zoom. Focus group method is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of issues, it being perceived as “cost-effective” and “promising” in participatory research [10]. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals (in this case, the educational partners) rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population, in a strong believe that small data have the merit of maintaining the quality of the voice of participants, that is lost in large samples [10, 11]. Also, the research team shares the views of J.B. Arbaugh, Arthur Bangert and Martha Cleveland-Innes [12] who, following the taxonomy described by Anthony Biglan [13], demonstrate that a given subject matter determines certain effects in online learning and education and that analyses should consider this criterion upon interpreting the data. Hence the choice in this article to focus the research on a specific educational program and the selection of the participants: faculty members and students at the Faculty of Communication Sciences, Politehnica University of Timișoara, Romania.

The responses were collected in March-April 2021, when online education substituted in-campus learning and the duration of the emergency remote education was impossible to estimate. 15 faculty members with ages ranging from 36 to 60 participated in the study, all having more than 5 years of professional experience. Of these, 10 (2/3) are women and 5 (1/3) are men. The student pool is represented by two boys and 11 girls, the average age being 21.4 years. The groups are comparable, the research team considering that the responses are equally precious for the two groups involved in the teaching-learning continuum. Participation was
voluntary and measures were taken to ensure the anonymity of the response presentation and encourage earnestness in the responses. The questions, the same for the two groups, were open-ended, inviting for comments, descriptions, and evaluations, aiming to compare faculty and students’ perspectives on the experience with the pandemic classroom. The discussions were conducted in Romanian. An English translation of the results is provided in the article. The possibility to implement emergency remote educational solutions depends on technical affordances, administrative response, existing skills and support for teachers and learners and the organisational capacity to ensure a favourable learning environment [14]. Politehnica University of Timișoara (UPT) started developing distance learning and e-learning capabilities more than 20 years ago, at the outbreak of the pandemic having a Virtual Campus platform operating for such programs, curated by the E-learning centre [15]. UPT entrusted the E-learning centre with the task to extend the use of the existing Virtual Campus platform for all study programs, offer support and tutorials for faculty, coach professors in using online tools and assist them with technical and pedagogical solutions for continuing the educational process in a technology-dense environment. The Zoom conferencing system was recommended for synchronous online classes. Appropriate adjustments were made to account for the shift to online learning, impacting the educational process, assessment procedures, online events (admissions, graduation, etc.), internal procedures. Periodical consultations were organised, with students and staff, to calibrate the response to the crisis, offer tailored support and ensure that the educational process fosters learning. The research was conducted against this background, to extract information for future educational design starting from the grassroot level, using small data to predict emerging trends [11].

3. Results and discussion

Faculty members’ and students’ voices are presented below grouped along the research questions, to allow for comparisons between the appraisals shared by these major stakeholders in the educational process.

3.1. Faculty and students’ assessment on the sudden online classes. The first issue proposed for discussion asked for a general description of the emergency remote education, with an emphasis on sudden online classes. Faculty and students’ responses display a large diversity in expressing the opinions, but they resonate in content. The research team grouped the responses according to keywords or concepts. Professors’ assessment contained such evaluative statements as “with difficulty”, “using emergency solutions”, “it was good/OK” (five responses). Two of the responses indicated the university normative issues: according to the schedule; in virtual classrooms, in concordance with university recommendations. Four responses referred to online tools (virtual campus, zoom conferencing). Two responses were linked to the teacher-student interaction, stating that while students attended the online classes, the engagement was low, due to the reluctance of many learners to turn on their webcams. One of the respondents nuanced the topic, stating that while the fall semester was one of trial and adjustment, the spring one was qualitatively more successful, due to the intensive teacher-student dialogue and adaptive strategies employed to accommodate students’ needs and expectations. Overall, even acknowledging the challenges of remote emergency teaching, faculty members declared that they felt adapted to the requirements of online education.
Students’ appraisal of the pandemic classroom can be summed up as follows: two of the respondents defined online classes as “tiresome”; “more boring”, and “monotonous” by comparison to the face-to-face classes; lacking in the engagement typical for on-campus learning. Three respondents complained that they felt exhausted and had difficulties in staying focused, this group of responses resonating with findings in similar research [16]. The adaptation process took about 2-3 weeks from the respondents’ perspective, and students voiced opinions that “at first it was excruciating because I did not know how to use zoom/the virtual campus platform/collaborative tools”. Others signalled that the difficulty was of a physical nature: “I had problems with my eyes”, “I missed walking/biking to school”. However, the online activities have brought a novelty with deadlines, homework submission and class participation. Respondents said they felt “empowered” online. Others pointed to the fact that the deadlines for handing over the homework had to be respected, because the online platform no longer allowed them to be negotiated, as in the case of face-to-face educational activities. The rest of the responses indicated an optimistic view: “unexpectedly well”; “like the face-to-face” classes, but with the novelty brought by technological mediation; engaging and offering the possibility to continue the academic year.

An interesting aspect underlined by some of the respondents was the fact that the availability of the study materials on the e-learning platform allowed a better structuring of the subject and added clarity with respect to the educational goals pursued by the courses. Another idea emphasised by the respondents was that the online activities permitted students to continue their studies and simultaneously also carry out lucrative activities. However, such a practice was difficult to verify against the number of students who could find employment during the lockdown period, in the remote office regime.

The dominant attitude expressed during the focus group discussions is optimistic, both faculty and students acknowledging the merits of the adopted solution to continue the educational process, despite the challenge brought by the pandemic and the somewhat abrupt shift from in-campus to online education.

3.2. Most frequently used platforms and online tools. Faculty and students were asked to freely nominate the platforms, digital tools and solutions adopted for the learning process, class management and maintaining teacher-student communication. The result is synthetically presented in the Table below.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool or platform</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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Although students nominated fewer tools than faculty members, they recognized the main elements for the educational process: the virtual campus platform (used for hosting the meetings, submitting class work and assignments) and zoom, incorporated in the platform as a videoconferencing tool for synchronous classes – courses, seminars, and labs. Faculty members, conducting the educational process, acknowledged more elements, used for preparing the classes, producing teaching content or using open-source material, etc.

Students noted that teachers experimented with methods to increase interaction in the online classroom, and this made the educational process more interesting: “Because we were all bored with this zoom and online, teachers tried to get us out of this daily routine”. The methods evaluated as attractive and interesting mentioned by the students were: watching (short) videos and commenting them; invitations for student-teacher interaction through questions, comments in the chatline or directly after each sequence of the lesson; developing teamwork through the tools offered by ZOOM, such as breakout rooms; inviting professionals to course activities; attending online events, other than those managed by the university, as part of educational experiences; organising student events online (Speeches about successful women...). The interviewed students also made suggestions to improve the educational activities such as, for example, the introduction of a Q&A session after each course on the platform used to manage the teaching-learning activities. Some of the students participating in the focus group also pointed to the added value of online courses brought by the online tools they were forced/taught to use, to continue their educational life.

3.3. Pedagogical strategies to ensure learners’ engagement. The faculty respondents mentioned a variety of strategies, adopted to create an attractive and interesting way online. The research team grouped the responses into the following categories:

- alternative choices in the environmental setting: diversified bibliography resources, the possibility to choose projects;
- enhanced classroom dynamics: presentation of video materials; presentation of short films; invitation of professionals to offer comments and examples in the online classroom; alternation of teacher presentations with short debates; participation of students, together with teachers in specialised events/conferences;
- changing roles for learners in the classroom: shortening theoretical (teacher-led) presentations and introducing debates, quizzes, teamwork activities.

Student respondents identified as novel strategies in the online classroom, by comparison to the in-person learning:

- enhanced classroom dynamics: presence of video material (film, multimedia content); experts invited to share hands-on experience; a variety of events;
- changing roles for learners in the classroom: teamwork in the breakout rooms; debates; student presentations in the frame of courses (not only as seminar activities).

Also, students mentioned they liked the quick writes, meaning that during online lessons they could write their questions, thoughts, or points of clarification in the chat and professors responded to the issues either immediately, or by proposing a research and debate...
time among students, so they felt they had some control over the flow and content of the teaching. Both faculty, and students felt that while PCs, laptops, tablets or smartphones are indispensable for creating the online environment, these devices are not responsible themselves for the engagement and may lead to monotony, alienation and loss of contact if not accompanied by engagement strategies. According to the students' statements, “one cannot compare an online event with the physical one”, but felt that “many projects highlighted/stimulated/made appeal to our creative capabilities”. The overall lesson that can be drawn from the responses to this topic is that a strong dynamic classroom depends on the ability of participants to change rhythm, types of activity and relaunch engagement moments, to foster the capacity of maintaining the participants’ interest, focus and capacity of active participation in the learning process.

3.4. Adaptive activities to foster the development of skills and competences targeted by the study program. The curriculum design proposed activities in a fashion described by the National Qualifications Framework to account for the competences developed by each study program [17]. The emergency remote education, with its unpredictable length, did not trigger major changes in the syllabus proposed for the study program. Responses to this issue in the interview indicate that the effort was oriented towards adaptive tasks, rather than towards developing new requirements for the learners. Thus, faculty members mentioned asking for individual and/or group projects; end-term portfolios; computer-aided production of PR artefacts (posters, leaflets, testimonials, Presentations Prezi, blogs, etc.); mini scientific and research projects. Students recalled mainly the events, such as Zooming to alleviate glooming (in Romanian, Zoomzet de veselie pe timp de pandemie); blogging and vlogging projects; online PR campaigns.

Some of the mentioned tasks, as proof of the learning outcomes, were present in the pre-pandemic practice, but the fast online submission via the virtual campus platform and increased personalised feedback from the professors made students aware that the teacher-student communication is vivid and takes place at an increased speed in the pandemic classroom. Professors tried to compensate for the lack of in-person interaction with an increased effort in providing feedback after each home assignment.

3.5. Emergency remote assessment activities. Assessment activities represented a major test for evaluating the success (or failure) of the pandemic classroom. Worldwide, the debate over the timeliness, value, and appropriate use of end-term exams was questioned, up to analysing whether society can and will trust alumni of sudden online programs [18]. Traditional online education abounds in tools and experiences with computer-aided assessment [19, 20]. However, assessment methods and styles are defined at the stage of curriculum design and the emergency remote education left little time for re-calibrating the elements incorporated in syllabuses. The previous study of this research team dedicated to remote assessment during the pandemic [21] showed that in most cases adaptive assessment strategies were put in place, not making full use of the computer-aided assessment capabilities. In response to the question regarding assessment activities, discussed in the present paper, faculty members mentioned as a rule: projects, papers, interactive colloquium, case studies, oral evaluation, essays, but also written tests with time limit, open book exams or take-home exams. The most frequent responses mentioned semester-long projects, allowing for a lengthy time spent by students for completing the task. Broadly speaking, the evaluation of theoretical knowledge in classical fashion was abandoned.
All participants in the focus groups indicated that the assessment activities during the pandemic placed emphasis on the practical aspects developed by the courses. This appraisal can be seen in responses such as the following: “the fact that the emphasis was placed on the practical/applicative aspects in the tasks of the exams seemed to me a super good thing and in our benefit”, “I found it more interesting to have exams from the practical aspects”; “everything we learned had a practical, immediately applicable side and today I remember the content quite easily”; “practice in the evaluation from the exams helps us much more that reproducing theoretical issues”.

Other students mentioned favourably the open book exams: “there was no emphasis on theory, and in some exams you had nothing to copy”; “theory was not neglected, but it is important to know where to look for theoretical issues, rather that learning them as a poem, without knowing how to apply it”. Students also mentioned the evaluation methods they could recollect: projects, grid-type exams, collegiate assessment, oral exams, open book exams. Interesting for the overall impression is that students positively appraised emergency remote assessment activities, by comparison to the pre-crisis, classical ones. The declared motivation behind this evaluation is that teachers (seemed to) assess more hands-on, practical aspects of learning outcomes, over the memory-based, reproductive capacity and that the novel assessment forms allowed for better displaying creativity and the capacity to innovate. On the part of the teachers, such appreciation of the students regarding assessment activities encouraged the courage to contemplate “a leap forward in education in our university”, due to the fact that “the pandemic and technical constraints put us in the position to reinvent ourselves”. Such appreciations add to the good practices accumulated in the pandemic.

4. Conclusions

While acknowledging that the present study has its limitations, since the sample of respondents are from one study program in one university only, and more research methods need to be applied to get a complete picture of the realities of the pandemic classroom, the findings are valuable for developing teaching strategies for online education even beyond the pandemic-related restrictions, contributing to reasoning the experiences accumulated during the crisis and to developing literature on the post-crisis outcomes, especially in the educational sector.

The main takeaway lesson is that, despite obstacles and challenges, despite the uneven level of mastering online tools and platforms, confessed both by faculty and students, higher education institutions find the resources and have the mindset to continue the educational process, demonstrating the ability to innovate and adapt to the most unusual situations. It is important to note that the design of stakeholder consultation is very complex and having the time and resources to plan a thorough student-centred or participatory design process while not forgetting about the voices of the teachers is a task that requires considerable effort and might not be achievable in every context. However, this approach ensures the sustainability of the process. As Ronald Barnett so adequately states, infinite possibilities lie ahead of the University, it’s becoming implying the realisation of its potentialities [22].

The global pandemic triggered by COVID-19 tested the resilience of universities and most of them passed the test, finding responses to the many challenges ahead of them. At the grassroots level, under scrutiny in the present study, real-life responses were recognized and embraced by learners as educational partners. While faculty and students deplore the absence of physical contact and direct interaction in the pandemic-affected times, both groups recognized the strategies to stimulate engagement and infuse a more vivid dynamic in the
classroom as working solutions. Some students found online classes excruciatingly boring, but the majority appreciated the tilting of the balance of online encounters with professors towards practical activities, and unexpected opportunities to demonstrate practical skills and creativity.

This research highlighted that neither faculty, nor students perceived the pandemic period as allowing for business as usual or education as planned. The collected data indicate that adaptive techniques and a goal-oriented attitude helped overcome some of the major challenges brought by the unexpected disruption provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the conclusions of the study are expected to have an impact on the preparation of the post-pandemic academic year at UPT and not only in this institution, with managerial, pedagogical, and infrastructural affordances that increase the use of blended learning and/or e-learning, with an enhanced preparedness to deal with crisis situations and with experiences incorporated in the organisational memory. The capacity for an increased use of blended and e-learning exist, both in terms of technical solutions (an enriched and extended virtual campus, a large majority of students enrolled on the platform and knowledgeable to use it for teacher-student communication, home assignment submission, consultation of educational content, provided by the instructor) and in pedagogical strategies, exercised by the quasi-total faculty body.

The main recommendation emerging from this study is that academic leaders – at UPT, but also larger, in the system of higher education – need to be prepared for unanticipated interruptions such as the health crisis unleashed by COVID-19 and use the experiences accumulated in the pandemic classroom to evaluate and improve the resilience of the academic programs, by involving faculty and students’ voices in shaping sustaining solutions to existing and (un)foreseeable challenges. The authors of the present study intend to continue monitoring the post-crisis educational patterns, to check if and how the mentioned takeaway lessons are incorporated into the institutional memory and educational practice [23]. We emphasise that our insights applied to other contexts might differ substantially in results, due to the differences already mentioned by Arbaugh et al. [12]. Nevertheless, the findings in this paper can inspire researchers to reflect on the responsibility to constantly (re-)consider who is given a voice and who might be overlooked. At the very least, stakeholders in the academic environment should be heard and given a say throughout the experience of the unexpected disruptions [8], this paper focusing on the last stage, of reviewing and reflecting on the education in the pandemic context of 2020-2021.

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