

Let's Give Ear to the University Students Attending and Not Attending Synchronous Online Lessons!

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ABSTRACT

Seeing that an overwhelming number of the students enrolled in the courses she offered did not attend the synchronous online lessons, the researcher felt the need for carrying out this qualitative case study to investigate the reasons behind it from the perspective of not only the non-attending but also attending students. Two qualitative surveys were conducted to collect the data. One was prepared for the students ($n = 20$) regularly attending the online lessons and the other was developed for the students ($n = 20$) who did not attend the lessons. The findings showed that low levels of student motivation, absence of compulsory attendance, and technical problems were reasons for the low level of student attendance to the synchronous online lessons.

KEYWORDS

Attending University Students, Non-Attending University Students, Synchronous Online Lessons, University Students, University Teachers

INTRODUCTION

The delivery mode of teaching has drastically changed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic for it has mandated online teaching at all levels of education including university level education. That has brought along considerable challenges to university teachers as the ones who have not experienced online teaching before have been caught unprepared for it. In the face of the pandemic, university teachers have offered their courses through teaching a/synchronously, giving assignments and/or having students carry out projects. As well as university teachers, university students, used to receiving face-to-face teaching, have experienced difficulties in getting accustomed to online teaching.

The necessity of adapting to online education has come along with attending online lessons on the part of university students. Even if it could be alleged online lessons would lead to more student attendance due to joining them in the comfort of their rooms, it might not be the case in several contexts, one of which is that of the present study. The researcher realized that there was a low level of student attendance to the synchronous online lessons she taught, and therefore, she decided to probe

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the reasons behind it from the standpoint of the students who did not attend them, and that of the students who joined them regularly. The absence of research on what this research aims to investigate indicates the significance of this study and the findings to be presented could be taken into account by university teachers teaching in diverse contexts in the process of designing of their online lessons and encourage them to explore why there is low level of student attendance to synchronous online lessons and how to increase it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Teaching and Student Engagement

Online teaching, having gained unprecedented popularity as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic among students, teachers, parents, administrators and researchers, is the teaching conducted in virtual environments by the use of digital tools. The shift in the mode of teaching and, contingent with that, in the mode of learning has marked the closure of an era and the start of another one notably for the university teachers and students who have had no direct experience of online teaching and learning before. The transition to online environments to teach might prompt disparate emotions in higher education teachers, depending on the toughness or goodness of particular online teaching experiences. For instance, Naylor and Nyanjom (2020) reported that the higher education teachers transitioning to online teaching felt diverse emotions, rooted in the amount of support provided by the institutions they worked for. The level of online teacher motivation is a crucial parameter to enable student engagement in online classes. Drawing the attention to the growing prominence of the term student engagement in higher education, Baron and Corbin (2012) suggested the need for exploring university students' views about their disengagement. The study by Chiu (2021) showed that employing digital support strategies could help increase the level of student engagement in emergency situations.

According to Gourlay (2015), student engagement means “practices which are observable, verbal, communal and indicative of participation...” (p. 410). Student engagement is perceived to be important in attaining knowledge (James, 2017) and improving the quality of learning (Frost, 2008; Papastergiou et al., 2011) and teaching (Leach, 2016). Such an essential construct could be activated by the learning activities promoting it (James, 2018), the use of online flipped classes (Jia et al., 2021), devolving responsibility to students for their own learning (McMullen, 2014) and incorporating creativity into coursework (Miller, 2018). The teaching techniques such as problem-based learning and small class discussions generally applied in small-size classes are found to be effective in large classes and to result in the increase in student engagement (Exeter et al., 2010). Because students engaged with their studies are more prone to attain success in them (Kahu & Nelson, 2018), a wide range of studies examining student engagement in higher education have been undertaken (Kahu, 2013). For example, forum-based online teaching was demonstrated to enhance university student engagement and motivation (Kang & Zhang, 2020). The use of social media positively influences the college student engagement (Dragseth, 2020; Kunka, 2020). Teachers and their online instructional practices are of high significance in enabling active student participation. To exemplify, Almarghani and Mijatovic's study (2017) suggested student engagement could be encouraged by the efforts of teachers employing active learning techniques. It was reported in Boonstra et al.'s (2020) study that teacher behaviors in highly engaging lessons were different from the ones in less engaging ones. In highly engaging lessons, teachers initiated their lessons with enthusiasm and scaffolded their students as they work on the activities, whilst in the poorly engaging lessons, the way teachers started their lessons were demotivating. Online technology and pedagogy offer online teachers the chance to better scaffold students' behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement (Harris et al., 2020). To illustrate, the research conducted by Hernández et al. (2021) revealed that interactive communication tools and the online instructor played important roles in student engagement.

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