Chapter 14
Students' Perceptions About E-Learning Within the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Study in Brazil and Portugal

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ABSTRACT

The current COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a rapid and abrupt transition from presential to online learning in higher education institutions (HEI) around the world. However, the majority of these HEI are not prepared to handle the challenges of this new disruptive digital environment. Students, teachers, and the entire organizational structure of these institutions must learn how to adapt to these new challenges such as teleworking, the use of technology to access and develop virtual classrooms, personal constraints at home, etc. This chapter aims to study this swift transition process and its impact according to the students´ perspective on this matter. Based on an exploratory study and by drawing on the data collected through a questionnaire applied to 1079 Brazilian and Portuguese students, the chapter provides an interesting view on the student's perceptions, their conditions to study at home, the relation with technology, and their expectations regarding the permanent use of online learning (e-learning or b-learning).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6776-0.ch014

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a profound and disruptive social and economic impact worldwide. Every sector and human activity have been somehow affected by this unexpected outbreak. As a result of it, governments, organizations, and other key players are staggering to mitigate its unpredicted consequences during and after the outbreak. The education sector is no exception, as 1.5 billion learners were affected by the school or university closures in 195 countries, according to UNESCO´s mid-April estimates (UNESCO,2020a). The majority of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and their student population face various challenges amid the global crisis inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Undergraduate and graduate university education are being strongly impacted. Given what is known today, these impacts will perhaps be long-lasting and bound to introduce radical changes to the traditional teaching and learning methods in place and the way we perceive curriculum design and development. Within this context, Darwin´s theory has never proven to be so right and wrong simultaneously, as these institutions now realize that the ability to adapt without a collaborative approach is not, per se, enough to thrive in this challenging and complex new environment. Therefore, HEI and faculty are currently swiftly replacing the traditional classroom face-to-face teaching and learning process by virtual classrooms, sharing notes in digital format (i.e., PPT and PDF), videos, and recorded class sessions, amongst others. For many of those who questioned, or who perhaps continue to question, the pedagogical soundness and validity of online learning, it is essential to realize that the transition to this method is the only viable alternative as an anti-risk measure and a means to ensure the continuity of the learning process abruptly interrupted by the COVID-19 outbreak. This new paradigm shift is only possible due to new technologies such as digital and other collaborative and learning management platforms, including, amongst other examples, Zoom, Moodle, BBLearning, Google, Teams, and Youtube. However, despite the technology being a key facilitator of online learning and having enabled the swift transition to this new learning environment, the fact is that due to the speed in which the change took place, and as it becomes a routine, several challenges need assessment.

First of all, one may assume that in many cases, the transition process was abrupt, and perhaps, many faculty and students may not have adapted rapidly to the transition, either for cultural reasons or technological unpreparedness. For example, in the case of faculty who feel that they have mastered teaching by seeing the students' faces in a class (Mohapatra, 2020), this is a cultural and experiential issue that needs a certain maturation period and more experience for the transition to online learning to be fully sunk in. Secondly, some of the measures taken might have been hasty and perhaps only a few in line with an appropriate curriculum design, tailored specifically for an online environment. While some institutions already had a robust online presence that facilitated the transition and their faculty accustomed to integrating technology in the course design, others have been forced into uncharted terrain. For many institutions, the transition was justified as a way to provide academic continuity and a temporary solution to their inability to teach face-to-face as the risk of infection and transmission was high. In these cases, and perhaps in most HEI, what occurred was the transition to a so called "emergency remote teaching" (DeVaney, Shimshon, Rascoff & Maggioncalda, 2020, p.3.) rather than online learning as a method envisioned and sustained by a long-term-strategy and strategic planning. Navigating through the complexities of teaching in a nontraditional format without a clear strategic direction and timely formal preparation is challenging for both faculty and students (Niemotko & Tolan, 2020). Another non less critical aspect, and a challenge, is that the COVID-19 pandemic has showcased profound inequities in higher education, namely the digital divide (Pasquerella, 2020) emphasized in the transition to an