From the Student Perspective:
An Analysis of In-Person, Hybrid, and Online Learning During the Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter describes the online learning experience from the perspective of a sixth-grade student in a private school setting. This collection of thoughts from a student provides a first-person view of the instruction during COVID-19 school disruptions. This qualitative interview will cover topics such as comparisons of online and in-person content and teaching techniques, attention, pacing, specific learning activities in all content areas, and growth as a learner during this time. Themes and discussion from the student responses will be analyzed and related to current literature regarding best practices in online learning.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of an education system has been debated throughout time, going back to ancient Greece when states differed on whether to include all citizens as students or only those destined for leadership roles (Good, 1937). We continue this debate today, with some institutions of higher education dropping liberal arts majors in order to concentrate on job training or science/technology-based fields. The distinction between academic learning and job training has been debated. Students have borne the brunt of the fallout from these arguments, as programs and desired scholarly outcomes shift. There appears, however, a belief that the way to incorporate both views of learning is available. Technology based instruction encompasses both specific skill growth, or training, and intellectual processes throughout the curriculum (Highfield, 2015). In recent years school systems within the United States have devoted an increasing amount of their budgets to technology integration in the hopes of harnessing the power of technology to accelerate learning (Herold, 2016). In some cases, this strategy appeared to work. In others, it did not. The phenomena itself has a name, the Law of Amplification (Toyama, 2015b). The

Law of Amplification refers to the effect of technology, not to solve a problem or present a problem on its own, but to amplify both the good and troublesome aspects of the problem already in place. Understanding this, then, presents the disturbing reality that technology will create conditions for strong instruction to become stronger and for ineffective instruction to become even less effective. Indeed, according to Toyama (2015a), this Law is in effect not only for education, but for any social problem humans would address through technological solutions. Simply put, it means that applying technology to a social problem will accelerate the positive factors already in place, but it will also accelerate the negative factors already in place.

The most recent social problem that humans have attempted to solve with technology has been educational instruction during the pandemic. There have been many challenges for learning during the pandemic. Those have been discussed at length in news articles though the academic research is sparse at this time due to lack of reliable data (Dickler, 2021). Factors that have negatively impacted learning include: disparities in access to technology or internet, frustration with distance instruction, and lack of support. The instance of technology incorporation during the pandemic is, in and of itself, a case study in what not to do. Teachers and schools have been asked to incorporate existing technology first and figure out how to align the devices or programs capabilities with excellent instruction after the fact the exact opposite of what is recommended (Sullivan, Lantz, & Adams, 2018). Online and hybrid teaching challenged educators who, while they may look favorably on technology for instruction, already hold back adoption or use because they do not feel prepared to meet instructional goals with those tools (Hew & Bush, 2008; PBS Learning Media, 2013). Asking educators to successfully migrate their entire instruction approach to online learning modes led to educational difficulties in all areas of the United States. Students struggled in learning and retention in ways that are not yet fully understood.

There have been instances of success even in these challenging situations. Teachers and schools have adapted the curriculum to meet learners needs in ways that will provide examples for strong instruction in subsequent years. A recent survey of higher education faculty found aspects of online instruction worth keeping even after a return to fully in-person instruction is possible. These aspects included: virtual workshops, virtual tutoring, flexible due dates, and using digital tools to make connections with students (McMurtrie, 2021). There have also been direct student benefits, such as the opportunity to become fully digitally literate, a skill sought after by employers (Ja'ashan, 2020). While the temptation may be there to move students back into fully in-person instruction after such a stressful experience, the ever-evolving pandemic may require schools to move forward with more emphasis on technology than would have been conceived of even one year ago. It is important to build on the strengths of technology-based instruction and this includes a thorough understanding of the student perspective.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate, via structured interview questions, how the different modes of instruction during the pandemic facilitated growth toward the goals of education. A student accustomed to in-person education had experience with the different modes of instructional delivery: hybrid, fully online, and in-person with modifications. This student discusses their experience with each of the modes of delivery in the context of a discussion of the overall goals of learning.