

# Social and Emotional Aspects of the Implementation of the Pedagogical Process at a Distance during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Students' Perspective

**Aleksandra Šindić**

*University of Banja Luka*

*aleksandra.sindic-radic@ff.unibl.org*

**Jurka Lepičnik Vodopivec**

*University of Primorska*

*jurka.lepicnik@pef.upr.si*

The purpose of the study was to examine students' views on the experience of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative study was conducted, which included students of undergraduate and postgraduate pedagogical study programs at the Faculty of Arts, University of Banja Luka and the Faculty of Education, University of Primorska. Data on the authentic experiences of students on the socio-emotional specifics of the online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic were collected through a self-assessment questionnaire. Through the thematic analysis of student responses and relevant literature, two interrelated categories were singled out: Student satisfaction with online teaching and perception of one's own emotional experience and Student perception of communication, interaction and cooperation during online teaching.

**Keywords:** students, distance education, emotional experience, communication, interaction and cooperation

## Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other countries, found themselves in a situation where, based on the epidemiological situation and multidisciplinary reports, they declared a pandemic of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The pandemic has had and continues to have a profound impact on all aspects of human lives, from the economy, industry, and business to health and education. The proclamation of the pandemic was followed by the restriction of many aspects of social life, limited movement, the introduction of quarantine and strict respect for physical distance, which often became a social distance. The usual mode of work in the work

environment was changed overnight, forcing people to change their daily routines and adapt to new circumstances. The pandemic has also shaken education systems around the world. Due to the pandemic, kindergartens, schools and universities were closed for some time, and teachers and students were forced to find and adapt to new circumstances. The closure of educational institutions at all levels has challenged the position of both students and teachers in the learning process (Perućica et al. 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic obliged universities and other educational institutions in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to switch to distance learning at short notice, obliging them to transfer the pedagogical process to the online environment. Teachers had to adapt their teaching to the new situation, regardless of whether they were ready for it or had the conditions for it, and this transition was a significant physical, mental and financial challenge for both teachers and students (Kuzmanovic 2021). Often, the challenging process of distance learning was further complicated by inadequate digital competencies of professors and students, insufficient pedagogical knowledge to organize the teaching of certain subjects online and various infrastructural problems. Professors and students in both countries, as was the case in countries around the world, entered the process of distance learning unprepared and had to cope with that on the spot. In the absence of strong instructions or guidance from relevant services, distance learning was left to professors and their resourcefulness, which made the beginning even harder and more stressful for them and the students. Discomfort occurred with both students and teachers, especially due to an unavailable or unaffordable internet connection and purchase of digital aids, difficulty in getting acquainted with online tools, feelings of isolation and lack of personal contact, and unfavourable conditions for socialization (Perućica et al. 2021). At the same time, the authors draw attention to the fact that online learning has contributed to the protection of the health of professors and students from COVID-19 and that it has also raised issues related to other aspects of health, especially mental health.

### **Online Learning**

Distance education, also known as online learning, is, according to Keegan (2003), a form of education characterized by the lack of direct contact between teachers and students, as they are physically separated; distance learning is organized by an educational organization and takes place through different media, and communication between teachers and students usually takes place through different media of audio and video com-

munication. According to Milićević et al. (2021), distance learning is a learning process in which there is a physical distance between the source of knowledge and the recipient. Distance learning has changed radically with the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) and its entry into the pedagogical process. In implementing distance learning, many initially focused on moving content to an online environment, rather than necessarily on online pedagogy (Crawford et al. 2020). Today, we can no longer present the pedagogical process remotely without comprehensive ICT support. Thus, in addition to the concept of pedagogical process at a distance, distance learning, a whole range of concepts is created, including e-education, or e-learning. In order to better understand these concepts, it is necessary to get feedback from the users themselves: students.

Researchers from the USA point out the experiences of students in the application of ICT technology in the process of learning and teaching at the university level. A survey of first-year undergraduate students at a university in the USA found that students' attitudes toward introducing educational technology into teaching were positive, but they still questioned the students' suitability for such learning, which takes time (Buckley et al. 2010). In this study, these researchers examined students' attitudes toward the inclusion of several different electronic media and resources, including webmail, the Internet, Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint, electronic text, video and audio resources, photography, and so on.

In their study with students in Spain, Sánchez and Hueros (2010) noted a similar attitude towards using the online classroom Moodle: students support this way of working, although it depends on the level of technical assistance provided.

Papastergiou (2009), a Greek scientist, studied student learning through educational computer games and found that this way of working gives higher learning outcomes compared to classical learning and that the motivation to learn is higher than in classical learning. Researchers Shaw and Marlow (1999) found a positive interaction with the learning process, comfort and fun compared to traditional learning but also students' concern about the lack of personal context.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning and education gained special importance. It is characteristic of distance learning that the acquisition of knowledge is organized through online teaching, that professors and students are not in the same locations, and that communication and interaction take place with the help of computers and various platforms (Perućica et al. 2021). It is important to pay special attention to the choice of

such teaching strategies, which includes video conferencing, because in this way conditions will be created for better communication and interaction between students and teachers.

### **Specifics of Socio-Emotional Online Teaching during the COVID 19 Pandemic**

The pandemic required emotional and social adjustment of students (Husky et al. 2020; Romero-Blanco et al. 2020), and the unexpected transition to an online learning environment in the form of virtual classrooms and tools required students to adapt to new learning environments where emotions, contacts, cooperation, professors and colleagues were placed in a new and unknown online dimension (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). Due to the unexpected, fast and unprepared transition to online teaching, where physical and social contacts are severely limited, there was a danger that professors would not establish adequate communication structures (Pelikan et al. 2021).

Changes in the organization of university learning during COVID-19 have initiated a number of studies aimed at understanding students' perceptions of the emotional and social aspects of their learning experience.

A quantitative study of the emotional climate of university teaching involving 194 Australian students indicated that students' experiences in isolation during COVID-19 were weaker in the context of all observed socio-emotional indicators than after the pandemic (McLure, Koul, and Fraser 2022).

Recently, researchers around the world have begun to address the factors that influence the motivation of students to learn or work with a computer. In her study on motivational factors influencing e-learning, Selvi (2010) found that in learning through technology the greatest motivating factors are: learning process, teacher competencies, student participation, design of online learning environment and time management.

The results of Pelikan et al.'s (2021) research indicate the importance of intrinsic motivation for adaptive behaviour in a distance learning environment, where there is greater distance and students are more inclined to detach from teaching. Other researches single out low motivation as the main obstacle to online teaching (König, Jäger-Biela, and Glutsch 2020), and in addition to difficulties with motivation, there is a problem of online interaction with professors and other students (Nguyen and Huynh 2020; Shahrokh and Maslov 2021; Bačić and Krstinić 2020), and poorer comprehension of the taught material and reduced concentration during classes (McLure, Koul, and Fraser 2022). Bao (2020), in his case study, notes that due to reduced attention and concentration of students during online classes it is necessary to adjust

the tempo, speed and scope of the content presented to students, further support and engage students through interaction and involvement in on-line activities, and provide good and timely organization of classes to prevent distracting emotions such as anxiety.

On the other hand, some researches have shown the increased popularity of online teaching where students express satisfaction with flexibility and time savings, access to learning content whenever they want, increased individualization in work that allowed progress at their own pace, saving time for travel, etc. (Sathishkumar et al. 2020; Bačić and Krstinić 2020); due to all the above, it is easier to master the material (Bačić and Krstinić 2020).

Research conducted in 20 countries indicated unequal preparation and implementation of the teaching process in the context of regulations and digital pedagogy (Crawford et al. 2020). Starting from this knowledge and the need to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-emotional dimension of online teaching, in our qualitative study we wanted to explore the experiences of students in the Republic of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in some socio-emotional elements of online teaching.

## Methodology

*Qualitative research* was conducted through an online introspective questionnaire in January 2022 in order to better understand the assessment of students in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding their own emotional and social experiences during their studies. We wanted to take a closer look at motivation, focus, interaction and cooperation, understanding the material and work challenges in the context of a changed socio-emotional environment.

*Respondents* were students from the Republic of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely 50 students of the Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, in the study programmes Pedagogy and Inclusive Pedagogy (36 undergraduate and 14 master studies) and 35 students at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Banja Luka, in the study programme Preschool Education (20 undergraduate and 15 master studies). Out of a total of 85 respondents, 83 of them are female, while 2 students are male.

*The research instrument* is an independently created introspective questionnaire, composed of 7 open-ended questions with which we wanted to gain insight into students' emotional experience, their interaction and cooperation, concentration, motivation, work challenges and the comprehensibility of teaching in the online environment in relation to regular classes. We collected data from respondents through an online survey under the same

conditions and we noticed that they represent the authentic experiences of students about the socio-emotional specifics of the online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. We also found that the data contain the potential for inductive construction of local character theory, which is one of the indicators of instrument validity (Merriam and Tisdell 2015).

Through *thematic content analysis* (Kuckartz 2014; Vilig 2016) of student responses and relevant literature, we singled out interrelated categories.

### **Emotional and Social Specifics of Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results and Discussion**

Starting from the fact that the online learning environment is emotionally and socially changed and impoverished (Rupnik Vec et al. 2020) and already available scientific knowledge and research, we tried to better understand their socio-emotional experience of the online teaching process through thematic analysis of student responses. Reading the students' answers, we paid special attention to repetitive elements that shed light on the specifics of the emotional and social online environment for students and their learning and tried to point out the implications of online pedagogy. In accordance with the nature of the research problem and student answers, two categories were singled out: *Student satisfaction with online teaching and perception of one's own emotional experience* and *Student perception of communication, interaction and cooperation during online teaching*.

#### ***Student Satisfaction with Online Teaching and Perception of One's Own Emotional Experience***

Most of the respondents associate online teaching with more uncomfortable feelings compared to live teaching (face to face).

During online learning, I felt less interested in study work, I attended lectures and exercises with less joy [...] (Respondent 13, Slovenia)

The most dominant unpleasant emotions that students cite are confusion and tension, followed by worry, fear, stress, anxiety, discouragement, pessimism, distraction, lack of will to continue studying, and despondency, which could be explained by a sudden (stressful) change and the need for a sudden socio-emotional adjustment to the new situation (Husky et al. 2020).

I felt quite anxious and nervous about the whole situation. (Respondent 25, BiH)

During online learning, I felt a higher level of stress than when studying live, especially during exams. I conclude that this was due to loneliness and the inability to learn in a group. Therefore, I felt a higher level of anxiety and isolation. (Respondent 11, Slovenia)

[...] tension, stress, apathy, lethargy, pessimism, a sense of regression [...] I definitely felt worse than during the usual live classes [...] (Respondent 31, Slovenia)

I was afraid that I would not be able to cope with the new obligations. (Respondent 33, BiH)

A number of students cite as the reasons for more pronounced pessimistic emotions, worries, anxiety and the greater responsibilities that they received from professors, that they had problems with organization (observed in younger students), monotony, reduced motivation and concentration on material (especially during longer lectures and looking at the screen), too rare and short breaks in the lecture schedule, etc. Some of the above could be partly explained by the undeveloped online pedagogical approach (Crawford et al. 2020).

It's harder to get organized and schedule responsibilities, so I get a sense of confusion and worry. (Respondent 7, Slovenia)

I had a hard time keeping my attention on the lectures, concentration and motivation decreased, especially in the harder and longer lectures without a break, and I was pessimistic and discouraged about the success of the study. (Respondent 19, BiH)

Of all these factors, students associate the lack of motivation the most with unpleasant emotions during online classes. Some note that motivation 'had to be acquired differently than in live teaching' (respondent 15, Slovenia).

Decreased motivation is associated with a number of factors such as 'more interesting activities at home that distract from teaching (hanging out with friends, family ...)' (respondent 27, BiH), and 'lectures were not stimulating ... only some of the teaching methods of the professors were interesting, such as problem-based work and discussion, writing and presenting essays, solving quizzes and gaining points' (respondent 8, Slovenia). Some students cite that 'socializing would improve their motivation, and not so much the organization of a certain subject' (respondent 11, Slovenia), while others cite that 'theory without practice was monotonous and demotivating' (respondent

21, BiH). Students also point to the fact that most professors tried to motivate students.

For a small number of students, the motivation during online classes was the same or even better. According to the students, the reasons for increased motivation are 'more challenges during the use of online tools and quick on-line access to information' (respondent 12, BiH)) 'better focus on the material in the home environment and headphones' (respondent 13, BiH), and 'professors encouraged thinking, prepared active lectures, included students, were aware of the importance of rest' (respondent 8, Slovenia). Thus, the research of Buckley et al. (2010) and Sánchez and Hueros (2010) confirms the positive attitude of students toward ICT in the process of distance learning, citing as a problem the time needed to acquire new competencies. It is possible that inadequate digital competencies, insufficient pedagogical knowledge for on-line teaching and various infrastructural problems can also affect the already challenging learning process. Shaw and Marlow (1999) highlight the positive attitude of students towards learning through modern educational technology, which indicates comfort and fun compared to traditional learning, but also concern about the lack of personal contact.

A quarter of respondents said that they were just as satisfied with online teaching as live teaching, of which a smaller number of them were experiencing greater relaxation during such classes because it saves time going to college as an employee and/or living far from the faculty.

Sathishkumar et al. (2020) and Bačić and Krstinić (2020) in their research identify saving time as one of the main reasons for the popularity of online teaching. In our research, it was noticed that the popularity of online teaching is more prevalent among older students, those who work and at the same time attend master's studies and/or who live far from the faculty. Thus, for example, two thirds of master's students in BiH who study and work at the same time state that they are completely satisfied with online teaching and/or it brings them relief and greater relaxation. Also, if we consider the age structure of the respondents, it could be concluded that more mature students showed a more emotionally stable response to stress and socio-emotional adaptation in the changed conditions of online teaching.

It was much easier for me, because I was physically relieved, and also financially. Therefore, I was able to follow the lessons more relaxed and I was not too tired, which would certainly have been the case if I had gone to class after work. I am travelling from another city. (Respondent 1, BiH)

The different spectrum of students' emotional reactions in the context of online teaching during COVID-19 confirms that emotions represent the subjective response of each person to a new situation that a person characterizes as important in order to adapt to it (Milivojević 2008, 12–22) and that this is not the same for every student. Since emotions are individually based and guided by the internal logic of the individual, it is necessary to respect an individualized approach in teaching, respecting the emotions of individuals (Šindić 2021, 45–47) and thus also during online teaching. Starting from the fact that emotional learning processes are very important (Chabot and Chabot 2009, 91–173), and that we have noticed that students often associate reduced motivation with an unpleasant emotional background within teaching, motivation in online teaching should become a central concept of online pedagogy. Also, the findings of the research indicate the importance of developing students' resilience through online activities that would help students better understand themselves and their emotions (Lepičnik Vodopivec and Šindić 2022). There is also a need to reduce the risk of stronger distracting emotions such as discouragement, anxiety and fear concerning a good and timely organization of teaching (Bao 2020) in accordance with the recommendations of online pedagogy.

### ***Student Perception of Communication, Interaction and Cooperation during Online Teaching***

Teaching is a communication process where dry one-way communication is not desirable, i.e. transmitting information as when watching TV. It is important to achieve interaction between the participants, i.e. that there is reciprocity and feedback. Cooperation between teaching participants is achieved through their mutual supportive communication and interaction (Radovanović and Kovačević 2020). More than two-thirds of the respondents experienced online communication, interaction and cooperation worse in terms of their quality and intensity compared to live teaching. This was also expected because the social and emotional aspect of online teaching is of lower quality, since there is less interaction and trust between students and teachers (Anderson 2021) and too little contact among participants in the educational process (Taber 2021).

Professors received much less feedback. However, it was difficult for us students as well, because no one wanted to be exposed in this way [...] Usually, you would rather wait for someone else to answer. (Respondent 22, Slovenia)

Analysing student responses, we noticed that the online environment further discourages shy and withdrawn students. Worse effects were also observed in the less motivated, and in groups where students did not know each other before switching to online classes. In other situations, the limitations of online teaching have been overcome more easily. Students cite the following as difficulties for online interaction and collaboration: 'it is harder to answer, turn on the microphone and say something and answer than live' (respondent 26, Slovenia), 'debate or discussion is harder to lead' (respondent 36, Slovenia), 'we do not see each other, facial expressions, gestures' (respondent 26, BiH), 'sometimes the connection is bad' (respondent 14, BiH), 'they cannot spontaneously exchange opinions' (respondent 3, Slovenia), 'it is harder to ask questions and express dilemmas' (respondent 18, BiH), 'cooperation was more business and more limited, less support because we do not know each other well' (respondent 3, BiH). While some felt 'as if no one was listening to you' (respondent 9, Slovenia), others avoided communication due to discomfort 'when everyone was watching and listening only to you on camera' (respondent 22, Slovenia). First-year students characterized their cooperation the worst because they had not known each other personally before.

For communication, interaction and cooperation to be satisfactory in the new online environment 'more incentives were needed for cooperation between professors and students' (respondent 16, Slovenia), and students used special online rooms, Zoom, and Viber groups. 'Since the communication does not take place on a face-to-face basis, when asking questions there is an option to raise your hand' (respondent 7, BiH). 'Professors were more approachable and tried to respond quickly to students in the online classroom, by email or phone' (respondent 4, BiH) and 'sent all necessary literature' (respondent 5, BiH). These and similar student responses can be used as guidelines for enhancing interaction and cooperation in a different environment than usual. We noticed that the obstacles were successfully overcome, based on student responses such as these:

The relationship, the interaction between us students has not changed. We stand by each other, support each other, encourage each other and come to help – if not personally, then at a distance. Perhaps this experience of working remotely as a class connected us even more. (Respondent 12, Slovenia)

There was no big difference. We were able to clearly talk to the professor during the online classes. (Respondent 15, BiH)

For me, online is a better way because the questions and answers are direct and specific without unnecessary dilution. (Respondent 10, BiH)

It is easier for me to communicate remotely (over the phone) than live. (Respondent 33, Slovenia)

Communication, interaction and cooperation in the online environment had both an objective and a subjective dimension. The objective is reflected in the specifics of online communication where it is necessary to further encourage students to activity (Bao 2020), to model teaching so that students can express themselves using various online means and by finding new ways of virtual communication. Also, it was noticed that the combination of online and live teaching reduces the negative tendencies of online teaching in the direction of cooperation and interaction of all participants in the educational process. Namely, students who already know each other in a real environment found it easier to establish contact in the online environment. The subjective dimension is reflected in the differences in the functioning of individuals in the virtual social environment. Students coped differently during online communication due to differently developed social competencies, preferences and other personal characteristics. Therefore, it would be desirable to consider the individualized approach in order to facilitate the integration of all individuals into the social environment (Šindić 2021, 58–60) relocated to the online space.

## **Conclusion**

Our qualitative study confirms the results of numerous studies of the socio-emotional learning environment at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic which indicates its impoverishment and shortcomings in relation to live teaching. Separate interdependent categories indicate that students perceive 'a more unpleasant emotional experience, lower satisfaction with online teaching and weaker communication, interaction and cooperation during online teaching.' It is noticed that the category related to 'emotional experience and satisfaction with online teaching' is more inadequate than the category related to 'communication, interaction and cooperation during online teaching.' While students express more dissatisfaction and unpleasant emotions that accompany an online class, the situation is somewhat better on the social level. Paying attention to the repetitive statements in the students' answers, the drop in motivation stands out as the biggest problem of such organized teaching, and students most often associate it with their emotions.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The thematic analysis of student responses and contemporary research on this topic, in order to improve the socio-emotional online learning environment, identified the need for:

- enriching online teaching with contents that support students' resilience in stressful situations,
- good organization of teaching and timely informing of students, which increases safety and reduces stress,
- additional and more emphasized encouragement of students to activity,
- adjusting the volume, pace, speed and presentation of content while taking more frequent breaks than in live classes,
- preventing monotony (which is more common during online classes) with various contents, activities and methods,
- modelling teaching so that students can express themselves by using various online means and finding new ways of virtual communication,
- individualizing the teaching process in the direction of improving the socio-emotional climate of online teaching,
- initiating and/or supporting student cooperation through peer co-education where students with positive emotional and social experiences of online teaching will advise and encourage other students,
- combining online and live teaching, which reduces the negative tendencies of online teaching in the direction of cooperation, interaction and motivation.

All this points to the need for a broad expert discussion to find a solution to remove the drawbacks, which should include not only educators but also education policymakers in each country by examining whether distance learning is functional in similar emergencies in the future. Educators need to be empowered to act in times of crisis, as this is the only way to fulfil their mission in a society of the future where technology and society are in a new era of developing their relationship, which seems crucial in the times of crisis that we are experiencing (Williamson, Eynon, and Potter 2020).

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### **Socialni in čustveni vidiki izvedbe pedagoškega procesa na daljavo v času pandemije covid-19: perspektiva študentov**

Namen prispevka je obravnavati socialne in čustvene vidike izvedbe pedagoškega procesa na daljavo v času pandemije covid-19 s perspektive študentov. Izvedena je bila kvalitativna študija, v katero so bili vključeni študenti diplomskih in podiplomskih pedagoških študijskih programov Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Banja Luki in Pedagoške fakultete Univerze na Primorskem. Podatke o avtentičnih izkušnjah študentov smo zbrali s pomočjo vprašalnika, ki smo ga sestavili za namene raziskave. S tematsko analizo odgovorov in upoštevajoč relevantno literature smo izpostavili dve medsebojno povezani kategoriji: zadovoljstvo študentov s poučevanjem in z učenjem na daljavo ter njihovo čustveno doživljanje in dožemanje komunikacije, interakcije in sodelovanja med poučevanjem na daljavo v času covid-19.

*Ključne besede:* študenti, izobraževanje na daljavo, čustva, komunikacija, interakcija in sodelovanje