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LESSONS LEARNT FROM COVID-19 INDUCED STUDIES FROM HOME

The world has undergone considerable changes on account of Covid-19, which is “a disease caused by a coronavirus that was first reported in 2019 and became a pandemic” [1]. Precautions to prevent the spread of the disease include the wearing of masks, the need to wash hands after visiting public places, and social distancing. The disease paralyzed all spheres of society, made adjustments to their functioning, and education was not an exception. The lockdown led to closures of schools and universities in most countries of the world.

The Covid-19 outbreak created a serious disruption of educational systems around the globe. The necessity to prevent the pandemic and to maintain social distancing upended the traditional pattern of classroom education, and digital remote learning was quickly launched. Universities had a limited period of time to decide how they would embrace the new reality and integrate digital learning into the education process.

Digital remote learning has become a solution to delivering quality education using various online platforms. Educators were compelled to adopt the “Education in Emergency” approach, for which they were not fully prepared. The virtual classroom platforms like videoconferencing (Google Hangouts Meet, Zoom, Slack, Cisco, WebEx) and customizable cloud-based learning management platforms such as Elias, Moodle, BigBlueButton and Skype are increasingly being used [2].

Weaknesses in the development of digital remote learning led to difficulties in adapting for teachers and students. Among the most common challenges were the following: access to the platforms, flexibility and affordability; issues with an Internet connection; shortage of digital devices. Teachers found it difficult to adapt to the changes without proper support, technical or psychological, to understand the features of online learning, to create a favorable, stress-free, and productive environment for students.

Based on the phenomena mentioned above, the overall aim of the study is to analyze how the transition to digital remote learning has affected students’ perception of the process of education. In the course of research, literature on the topic of digital remote learning was analyzed, as well as the education conditions for Belarusian University students receiving their first University degree – those who underwent distance learning

of foreign languages during the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to obtain accurate results, a questionnaire was created with a view to receiving students' feedback on the way the remote studies were arranged, the way they felt about the new mode of studying and whether this way had an impact on their vision of their future studies and work.

The survey was conducted among 100 students from Belarusian universities. The respondents answered a number of questions in terms of evaluating the organization and patterns of digital learning in foreign languages; describing their feelings regarding the new approach to studying at different periods of digital learning; enumerating the causes of the desire or unwillingness to return to the offline in-classroom education; revealing problems that they faced during remote digital learning; reflecting on advice that could be given to teachers to help them organize the learning process effectively; and trying to shed light on what kind of work schedule they prefer in the future: in the office, online or the blended mode.

The survey revealed that in spite of the difficult and unknown situation caused by Covid-19, 52 % of the respondents were interested in remote digital learning and 56 % noted that they were excited to try the new way of studying. At the same time 54.1 % of the students remained calm. However, only 5.1 % chose the word "fear" to describe the onset of remote digital learning.

It is interesting to notice that returning to the classroom learning conditions caused anxiety in 44.3 % of the students and fear in 20.6%.

The students of Belarusian Universities gave a high rating to learning foreign languages in Zoom and Google Class, but mentioned that Moodle is less suitable for studying languages.

On the one hand, the respondents complained about an increased number of tasks given by teachers; on the other hand, absence of teacher-led control and practice was noticed. Among other problems, the students mentioned poor quality of the Internet, organizational problems, and lack of contact with teachers and group mates.

As far as the advantages are concerned, the Belarusian students mentioned time saved due to avoiding the commute, the possibility to record lessons in order to work on more difficult tasks later, breakout rooms created by Zoom, and the ability to use various interactive tools for learning (videos, interactive boards, graphic applications).

The students' advice for teachers included a deeper knowledge of digital systems, students' cameras switched on as an obligatory requirement, dynamism of classes, more communication-oriented tasks and creative projects to make the learning process more student-focused.

Finally the students were asked to choose the most convenient work schedule for their future. As a result 70% of respondents chose the mixed working mode (offline and online), 10% would prefer to work in the office, and 20%, remotely.

The study findings indicate that Covid-19 changed the structure and techniques of the learning process. On resuming classroom lessons, students and teachers cannot but continue exploring digital tools to improve learning and teaching. Remote digital learning needs to be explored further so that online education can be integrated in degree programmes offered by the Belarusian universities. The Covid-19 pandemic came as a shock, yet it facilitated the re-assessment of the traditional education process.

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