

ФОРМЫ ОБУЧЕНИЯ ВО ВРЕМЕНА СОЦИАЛЬНОГО ДИСТАНЦИОНИРОВАНИЯ

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Исследованы новые формы дистанционного обучения, которые используются в европейских учреждениях высшего образования в течение последних двух десятилетий. Период пандемии COVID-19 рассматривается как особенно турбулентный для педагогической практики. За это время ученым пришлось усовершенствовать и модифицировать существующие модели обучения (классно-урочную, чисто дистанционную, смешанную, гибридную и *HyFlex* (гибкая гибридная)), а также адаптировать их к новой образовательной среде. Затронуты проблемы доставки образовательного контента и вовлеченности студентов в учебный процесс как фундаментальные вопросы для времен социального дистанцирования. Синхронное гибридное обучение проявляется как наиболее адекватная виртуальная форма образования в рамках модели *HyFlex*. В качестве примера приведена пилотная версия применения этой модели в системе отечественного последиplomного образования.

Ключевые слова: пандемийная педагогика; формы обучения; синхронное гибридное обучение; социальное дистанцирование; вовлеченность студентов; способы доставки образовательного контента.

TEACHING AND LEARNING FORMATS IN TIMES OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

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The article facilitates a discussion on some new online learning formats that have been utilised in European higher educational institutions for over a last couple of decades. The times of COVID-19 pandemic are distinguished as particularly turbulent for pedagogical practices. In this process educators have to refine and modify existing modes of teaching (in-person, purely online, blended, hybrid, *HyFlex*) and adapt them to new learning environments. Throughout the paper the author refers to the problems of course delivery and students involvement as fundamental ones for the times of social distancing. *Synchronous hybrid learning* is proclaimed as the most prudent virtual learning tool within *HyFlex* delivery format. As an example a pilot version of its utilisation in the system of post-graduate studies is provided.

Keywords: pandemic pedagogy; teaching and learning formats; synchronous hybrid learning; social distancing; students involvement; means of course delivery.

Introduction

Pedagogical innovations have always accompanied world education. Actually, all of them were connected with change as an inevitable driving force of evolution. Political, social and economic developments as well

as information technologies brought about self-paced modifications in higher education traditions. Sometimes they created crises that have been settled more or less successfully as time went by. But in 2019 global pan-

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demic, caused by an infectious disease, created the world crisis, which threatened health and safety, disrupted the stable equilibrium of life. According to K. S. Weick, it presented a cosmology episode in people's sense of the universe and turned life into momentary chaos. The global crises entailed multitude of secondary crises, one of them totally affected the system of higher education. In opposition to former voluntary changes higher institutions had to meet this challenge involuntarily. Almost 70 % of the world's student population were impacted by the affects it caused¹. The case created the feeling of «...I have never been here before, I have no idea where I am. And I have no idea who can help me» [1, p. 652]. Due to the ongoing health risk European postsecondary institutions were forced to find a quick response to restore order.

As soon as the crisis disrupted traditional teaching and learning the solution was to deliver instruction remotely which was an alternative to conventional in-class or blended learning modalities. Within some days a great number of universities shifted to online learning formats, some of them opted to cancel all face-to-face classes at all. Educators expected to return to the usual format of teaching in a number of weeks or one semester, but as the time has shown, the pandemic expanded and everybody started to prepare for a new normal during and after the COVID-19. The second and the third waves blocked the path back towards their usual learning sessions. Under such stressful circumstances higher education began to transform dramatically, including its technology and pedagogical practices.

In the process scholars had to refine and extend existing theories and develop new ones. They conducted comparative studies to find similarities and differences among former and later instructional developments, selected the appropriate empirical practices to be used in new less-than-ideal environments. The matter of topical interest was course delivery, students engagement, use of educational technologies ensuring social interac-

tion and feedback, appropriate teaching and learning formats, authentic assessment, etc. Ultimately, the results from these experimental empirical studies provided a foundation for a set of best practices for instructional communication in a variety of online delivery modes. Pandemic pedagogy began to be developed as a new trend of contemporary research [2].

The current study aims at making contribution to pedagogical literature by analysing qualitative research data that highlight the organisational forms of education used amidst and after COVID-19. The primary task is to rethink online educational pedagogy and technologies, to adapt them to new forms of education. The research also examines the questions of evolutionary changes taking place in the course of the last decades due to the digital transformations and some pedagogical innovations. We set a task to explore the perspectives of various blended formats of teaching and learning, especially regarding *HyFlex* and its latest synchronous modifications. Recent developments in the field of pedagogy heightened the need for further studying these problems. To the author's knowledge they have been scarcely investigated from the point of view of ongoing remote teaching and learning organisation.

The research is conducted within the theoretical framework of Moore's theory of transactional distance and student-centred approach in pedagogy. According to the above-mentioned theory, distance is considered as a pedagogical phenomenon which offers a way to better understand the meaning of this notion in online courses as well as some questions connected with social interaction [3].

The research methods are as follows: the study of literature which provides insight into the uniqueness of the terms being used; the case study dealing with a particular case of utilising; the method of observation connected with studying, collecting and recording new information. The research data is drawn from a number of latest English-language sources.

Findings and their discussion

Our discussion sector we start with the assumption that all previous learning experiences are meaningfully different from courses offered in response to a crisis or disaster. So, working to maintain instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers should understand these differences and take them into account when evaluating this or that emergency case. Historically the most common format of teaching was face-to-face (in-class, in-person) which has actually been in use from time immemorial. In recent decades it has been practiced with the inclusion of computer nets instruction used first exclusively then primarily in classrooms.

Rapidly developing mass-media technology (radio, TV, the Internet, mobile services) facilitated distance education which in its modern sense can be considered as a concept of the Fourth Industrial Revolution [4, p. 79]. The movement towards online learning initiated new educational institutions (the British Open University and the like) and new modes of teaching which asymptotically strive for integration in one single distant form. By the turn of the centuries distant learning had firmly established its position as a core component of education technologies and became a new mode of its functioning. It provided learners with better

¹COVID-19 and higher education: today and tomorrow. Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations // Right to education [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNESCO_IESALC_Covid-19%20and%20higher%20education_2020_en.pdf (date of access: 03.08.2022).

access to education and contributed to the development of instructional pedagogical technology. But it should be noted that early pure distant forms suffered certain inadequacies such as local access to digital resources, some attainment gaps, financial pressures, etc. They created the problems with interpersonal interaction and feedback. Watching passively how professors teach the class face-to-face or on the screen wasn't the best way of getting education. Its pedagogical potential was also wide open to criticism. So, online learning carried a stigma of being lower quality than face-to-face learning, despite research showing otherwise.

As early as 1970s, researchers began talking about mixed formats of learning which later developed beyond their authors' original conception. All teaching scenarios that were not exclusively face-to-face or online were called «blended learning» or «hybrid learning» [6]. First the terms were used interchangeably, then acquired their own specific features. Their synonymous use implied the common meaning of «being a mixture», i. e. a combination of the best elements of conventional and online learning settings. Structural transformations were necessary due to the development of instructional technologies able to solve important pedagogical problems and improve the quality of education. Possible emergency shifts were not yet on the agenda and the very idea of designing hybrid forms came as a result of their consistency and pedagogical expediency.

There is a great collection of names that stand behind blended teaching formats (Ch. R. Graham, Ch. Bonk, J. Curtis, D. Clark, S. Dziuban, S. Patrick, D. Garrison, M. Horn, B. Abrect, etc.). Equally great is the number of definitions. Defining the terms has always been difficult and controversial because the distinction between them is not clearly articulated even in the best practices. Most definitions are narrow with the focus shifted solely on the context and the environment rather than their role, pedagogy and functions. Actually both blended and hybrid forms prove to be effective because they combine the effectiveness and socialisation opportunities of the traditional classroom with the technologically enhanced active learning possibilities of the online environment [6]. These learning formats enrich the methodology of teaching increasing sensitivity to learners' needs and verifying forms of instruction with course participants. Taxonomic differences between the terms began to be shaped as well. Blended learning has become the standard form for the use of a wide range of learning technologies such as traditional classroom, web-based tutorials, web-based simulations, online collaboration, online coaching, with later more complicated e-learning forms.

Though most institutions lack formal mechanisms for labeling blended and hybrid learning contemporary research tends to differentiate them at least in connec-

tion to the philosophy of uncertain times. Which of the term described above is more applicable in the conditions of ordinary and emergency remote teaching? To answer this question one should also consider how much online teaching the blend contains and what percentage of in-class content makes up its pedagogical design. An effective remote learning experience depends largely on the circumstances of its utilising. According to the *Online Learning Consortium (Sloan)* report the figures of early blended voluntary use flustrated within the bounds of 30–79 % which will not save the pandemic situation with its fully unplanned operating schedule². Apart from that its early quantifying adoption rates produce certain difficulties mainly connected with the equipment provision, the proper choice of organisation mode, instructors attitudes, their technical literacy which lacked behind the level required [7].

For a certain period the situation has been gradually changing. By 2010 further reduction of in-class instruction took place which led to the widespread blended enrollment. A follow up surveys indicated preference of more complicated modes of instruction, correlating with aims and pedagogical effects, being able to meet the requirements of ever growing educational aspirations. They tended more to hybrid forms characterised by greater combinability of elements, fusion of interconnected technologies, hardware and software, which correlates with multivector pedagogical policy in general.

One can say that in its adolescent years blended learning became better structured and more flexible. A number of flexible «blends» were adopted as transitional forms (*BlendFlex, HyFlex, FlipGrid*), demonstrating evolutionary process of their development. All cases can be considered as modifying current practices based on traditional modes of teaching, developing existing pedagogies and modifying them for the future [4, p. 80]. They became more preferable in recent environmental conditions due to their greater educational abilities. While blended forms primarily present a linear, rotation on-line and in-class instruction utilised in different proportions, hybrid forms suggest multiple systems that work independently, reveal greater diversity of choices including combinability of different modalities and technical equipment³. This finding is consistent with studies done by professors Ch. Miller and R. Shank at the University of Minnesota.

In addition to the specific features already identified scholars point out the fact that blended forms focus on surface-level physical dimension of the learning environments, with a few very general high-level pedagogical approaches [8]. The focus in hybrid learning is switched to the design of a coherent theory instead of its separate parts. Like other related domains dealing with distance education, hybrid learning concentrates more on solidly grounded theories and models including institutional

²Online learning consortium [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/> (date of access: 03.08.2022).

³Ibid.

change and adaption, learning access, and cost effectiveness. One should admit that both, blended and hybrid forms were helpful in different learning environments. They contributed to optimising the delivery of education content, developing existing pedagogies and modifying them for certain pedagogical frameworks. There is no perceivable notification when one delivery method shifts into another as in some cases the transition between them is seamless and minimal.

Further digital transformation which was taking place at unprecedented speed alongside with the fast changing environment contributed to adoption of some new formats of education. The times of uncertainty required ever growing level of flexibility and rapid adaptability, much higher than the previous learning formats could provide. That's why change in the forms of teaching was inevitable, doing more of the same will not be enough [9]. One of the inventions in this sphere is a comparatively novel form of hybrid learning called Hybrid Flexible (*HyFlex*). It is a video and audio-based learning tool pioneered by professor B. J. Beatty at the beginning of the century and completed by 2019 as a full-fledge concept [10]. Structurally it was proclaimed as a combination of the unique possibilities of «blend» (mixture of in-class and distant forms) with supercomplexity of «hybrid» (high level of inclusion, diversity of participation modes, etc.). The specific feature of this format is its multimodality, synchronous blending of both regimes in a single course and providing students with free choice on how they can participate in educational activities. The San Francisco State University Academic policy defines *HyFlex* as sessions that allow students to choose whether to attend classes face-to-face or online, synchronously or asynchronously, using computers or using your mobile learning tools⁴. Pedagogical approach to this model is presented in the free online publications by B. J. Beatty and brought together by K. Kelly [11]. It was proclaimed as a course design based on four fundamental values (pillars):

- learner choice (students can choose between participation modes in space and time);
- equivalency (activities in any participation mode must lead to equivalent learning outcomes and diverse assessment);
- reusability (the same learning artifact can be utilised by students in each participation mode);
- accessibility (students are equipped with technology skills and have equitable access to all participation modes with no discrimination, social or economic).

In line with the view of other investigators (B. Whalley, D. Fanse, A. Brown, J. Park, etc.) we consider that *HyFlex* is not so much about machines but about humans – the way they live, learn, play, think in the age of ever accelerating change. It has a strong pedagogy

which is learner-centered, personalised, democratic. It provides more freedom, evaluates the possibility of choice better than anything else in educational enterprise. Methodologists perceive *HyFlex* as a good way to accommodate students' needs and their life circumstances, increase their access to the course content and instruction, preserve different learning styles and strategies, give students a sense of control over their learning. The philosophy behind it is not only computing and technological transformation but interconnection of all possible technical and pedagogical means, apt to the conditions and context of teaching and learning. This is the ethics of technology use which is of prime importance for social and educational interaction, especially in times of shutdowns and involuntary distancing.

Now we are going to see what potential properties new technologies should possess to promote the above mentioned values as well as what the ultimate goals should be achieved by employing them. The goals are as follows:

- to give access to global educational resources;
- to ensure distance learning and proper course delivery modes (synchronous, asynchronous or their combination in a single course);
- to maximise students engagement and to ensure high levels of student inclusion;
- to maintain social contacts and personal interaction;
- to get independence from big computer suites, etc.

Sure enough, these goals can be implemented by means of advanced technical equipment including both, big computer-labs, the whole capacity of the *Zoom* web-conferencing applications with inherited audio-video and other e-learning tools, and autonomous mobile learning applications such as smart phones, notebooks, that have stable Internet access and functional connectivity. Most universities have much of these at their disposal to say nothing about individuals. According to the 2017 survey more than 95% of undergraduates owned smart phones and the concept of «bring your own device» is familiar to them as a personalising educational system of today and tomorrow. Modern research shows the infancy of this modality and lack of universal higher education best practices.

Some of the *HyFlex* ideas and pedagogy find application in its numerous modified versions such as *remote life participation*, *synchronous hybrid learning* (SHL), *synchronous online learning*, *synchronous remote*, *liquid learning*, *FlipGrid*, etc. (A. Raes, L. Detienne, I. Windey, J. Priess-Buchheit, N. Naffi, F. Martin, M. Parker, etc.). Most of them are designed as short commercial courses and differ in the spheres of application, instructional directives, composition of structural elements, length of the course, etc. There is little evidence of their learning

⁴Online education policy // San Francisco State Univ. Acad. Senate [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://senate.sfsu.edu/policy/online-education-policy-1> (date of access: 03.08.2022).

opportunities being expanding for bachelor or master studies on a systemic state level [12]. They all can be regarded as commercial strategies.

In this research we would like to share the Belarusian State University experience in organising educational process on the bases of *HyFlex* during the 2021/22 academic year, the third year of pandemic. Due the ongoing health risks and negative practices with the postgraduate students involvement it was decided to take up SHL as the most appropriate for the situation. Each word in its title is self-explanatory and speaks in favour of our choice. As the label is not well established in home educational practice, we accepted its conceptual pedagogical policy and most essential technical characteristics to make an experiment on how it may work together with the university technical provision. One of the particular goals of SHL was to break the barriers between in-class students and those being neglected and bring them together in one synchronous learning journey regardless of students physical location. Another not less important goal was to facilitate students engagement in the educational process without making a long pandemic pause.

The main point of this format as a new learning space is its synchronous hybrid and blended environment in which both on-site and remote students can simultaneously attend learning activities. They are engaged in fully synchronous hybrid instruction being joined through cameras in active mode. The physical classroom was equipped with a *Polycon* video-conferencing system which made it possible to connect two groups of students through audio-visual communication of two-way media, facilitating dialogue and interaction of all participants.

In European experience the classroom is usually equipped with some ultramodern tools such as 360° conferencing camera, omnidirectional microphone, speakerphones, interactive projectors, two large flatscreens, etc. Due to the university circumstances we made some minor adjustments. First of all, we abandoned all expensive access, leaving only the technologically significant tools, such as video conferencing cameras, a flatscreen and private devices. The survey conducted by N. Naffi showed that in the condition of the inevitably long pandemic term more adaptive, personalised, cheaper and more humane learning is expected [13, p. 141]. That was our case. Our innovation appeared to be less exacting

with regards to the quality of perception but didn't influence much the proclaimed goals achievement.

We don't set a task to describe all details of the experimental work considering it part of a separate study, but in the context of our discussion we can't but confirm how potential and challenging the format of SHL is. The totality of its pedagogical and organisational effects enables to think about it as of a preferred solution of higher education institutions for the times of uncertainty. Students perception of the effectiveness of SHL is almost the same. According to the questionnaire 85 % of learners found SHL beneficial in the pandemic learning environment. It was unanimously recognised as the best way to restore continuity of instruction without losing much of its quality. In the general sense it meets the interests of all individuals who want to accommodate their needs to life circumstances. Thanks to its technical abilities SHL can imitate a little incomplete but sufficient real life situation irrespective of learners physical presence at the session. It automatically increases involvement rates reducing health risks, strengthens social relations and communication.

Students formative feedback could give a greater insight on the work being done. Some learners identified the gaps, really existing or reflecting their individual perception. The most serious problem is appropriate technological provision. Necessary e-learning tools may not always be at hand. As soon as SHL format is based on individual use of hard and software the problems may concern the need of technical support to bridge the gap between two groups, in-class and remote. The lack of technical training is a problem that can be easily overcome either by a technical assistant or by students themselves as most of them are self-trained well enough to run smoothly and without serious technical challenges. Concerning some specific problems of foreign language teaching some participants expressed the opinion that e-learning is a potentially less effective method and can be utilised with «cautious optimism».

Of course, SHL as a *HyFlex* modification is not a magic pill and by no means perfect, but the advantages by far surplus the restrictions which may be the best answer to the university's question how to provide students with a high-quality, equitable education regardless of social, ecological and even personal circumstances. The answer to this question forms part of a new pandemic pedagogy and modern methodology.

Conclusion

On the basis of this overview we can make judgments on the problems of pedagogical innovations in general and on times of social distancing in particular. The most general observations concern the increasing role of technology in modern education. It shifted into the first position in organising new teaching and learning formats leaving behind traditionally prioritised problems of didactics and methods of teaching.

Pandemic pedagogy provides a specific technical-based response to learning sessions under extreme circumstances.

As the world moves on amidst and after the global pandemic of COVID-19, the universities will need to make prudent choices about student engagement and content delivery methods. From a scientific pedagogy and our personal standpoint, consideration should be

given to different types of hybrid and flexible forms. Highly appreciated by students, *HyFlex* offers more flexibility in time and space and pretends to become the mode of the future. These issues form the core of theoretical and practical grounding of the problem under consideration.

Of all existing formats SHL presents the most flexible response to COVID-19. It helps to adapt teaching to new reality, supports student-directed approach and search for individual learning paths. It maintains some sort

of normality which is crucial in the context of a pandemic where nobody knows when we can return to the physical classroom and in what capacity. SHL provides students with the opportunity to develop technological, communicative and social skills, to collaborate and exchange ideas both, synchronically and asynchronously. Its implementation is a matter of management, not the traditional top-down but «middle-up-down». It's an initiative of practitioners and researchers whose direct concern is students and their needs.

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