

Students' Attitude towards online Learning (Georgian Case)

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Abstract: The purpose of the article is to study Georgian student's attitude towards online learning during the COVID-19 period. It aims at finding out the main challenges students face during online learning as well as getting feedback for further improvement in online teaching. The paper is based on the survey results conducted by the author in February – March 2021.

Keywords: Attitude, COVID-19, educators, face to face learning, online learning, students

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Introduction

The term online learning or online education, which started to flourish in the 1990s as a result of creating and developing internet, World Wide Web and technology (BACH, HAYNES, & SMITH, 2007), refers to distance education used in higher education (Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2009). And distance education, in its turn, is defined as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (Schlosser, 2009). As for the telecommunications systems, it implies electronic media, such as television, telephone, and the Internet (Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2009). In this article, I refer to online learning as the type of learning where instructors and learners are connected via internet, using different platforms.

Although in the developed world the demand for online learning has increased over the last decades (BACH, HAYNES, & SMITH, 2007), it has never been popular in Georgia. According to the survey conducted by Youth Express Georgia in 2013, out of 12 students of Georgian Technical University interviewed, only 2 students knew what distance/online learning was (YouthExpressGeorgia, 2013). As Tamar Lominadze, head of the e-learning center at Georgian Technical University in 2013, mentioned in the interview, the law about distance education was created only in 2011 in Georgia and as a new product the support from the government was not as it should have been. (YouthExpressGeorgia, 2013). Situation did not change a lot during the last decade. Majority of my students could not answer the question regarding what online learning was and how it was managed when asked a year ago.

Despite the lack of popularity and awareness of online learning, Due to COVID-19 Pandemic all universities and schools (both state and public) in Georgia have moved to online learning since March 2020. COVID-19, which was declared as pandemic by World Health Organization in March 2020, (Ghebreyesus, 2020) turning the education system not only in Georgia, but all over the world upside down. Most universities and schools worldwide moved from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning. Teachers and students worldwide had to face the reality and adjust to a new environment in a relatively short period of time. Fortunately, Georgian educators and learners adapted quickly and easily to a new and challenging teaching/learning environment thus saved Georgian education system from collapsing apart.

Methodology and Data Collection

The goal of the survey is to obtain information about respondent's viewpoint regarding online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period. Looking at online learning from students' perspective will allow educators to see the bigger picture, take into account students' recommendations and as a result make online teaching more effective and attractive to students.

The research was conducted using online questionnaire comprising of multiple choice as well as close and open-ended questions via software package Google Drive and all respondents were provided with electronic links to the questionnaire. Responses were obtained from target respondents within the time period of February-March 2021.

The sample for the study comprised of 53 BA students, representing the age group of 18-25, from three Georgian universities – Agricultural University of Georgia, Caucasus University and Open University.

Survey Results and Analysis

The standpoint that online learning did not enjoy much popularity in Georgia was once again reinforced by the results of the questionnaire. 100% of the respondents joined online learning due to COVID-19 pandemic and not because of flexibility or some other positive features of online learning. As for the online platforms, two platforms - Microsoft Teams (58.5%) and Zoom (41.5%) - are used by the respondents while learning online.

Beside challenges and benefits of online learning, it was interesting to find out how effective and enjoyable online lessons were for students. About 60 percent of respondents announced that they somewhat enjoyed online learning. Only about 15 percent found it actually enjoyable while about 24 percent announced they did not enjoy studying online at all. More negative results were revealed about the effectiveness of online learning. Only about 3 percent of the students considered online learning effective while approximately 65 found it moderately effective and 35 percent absolutely ineffective. Taking into account the results, one may come to the conclusion that online learning in Georgia did not experience fiasco but still needs some improvements to satisfy the needs to those one third of students who found online learning absolutely unenjoyable and inefficient and to change the answer "moderately and somewhat enjoyable and effective" to more positive one. And in order to make effective

and efficient changes to meet the needs of more students, it is important to find out what challenges did students meet while studying online. Knowing what students found challenging, as well as advantages and disadvantages of online learning from students' perspective, will help educators to strengthen the strong sides of online learning and to change those aspects that were found as disadvantage and challenging for students and to adjust them to students' needs.

In order not to limit students in option, instead of multiple-choice questions - naming some pros and cons of online learning, students were asked to name themselves positive and negative sides of online learning from their own experience and viewpoint. According to the survey results, only 5 students out of 53 could not name any negative sides of online learning and mentioned that online learning was not challenging for them at all and they could easily adjust to new learning style. Others mentioned problems like bad internet connection, technical problems, lack of face to face relationship and adjusting to absolutely new way of teaching as well as to a new online platform and lack of motivation and concentration. Students also point out on negative impact of online learning on their health such as eye problems, headaches and sedentary lifestyle. (See the chart 1) Some students also mentioned that it was easier to cheat and get points while online learning, that made them lazier. Based on the results one may say that instructors should be more careful while evaluating students to avoid writing undeserved points. At the same time, instructors must try to plan lessons in a way that will rise the motivation, concentration and active participation of students in the lessons. It is not an easily achievable goal, however, it is doable and manageable. In order to achieve above mentioned objectives, it would be interesting and beneficial to see how students themselves see the solutions to those problems and what recommendations do they give to educators.

As for the advantages of online learning, almost all respondents said that the best thing about online learning was that they could attend lessons from any place, even from work, and they did not have to commute to university, thus saving time and money. Online learning turned out to be especially convenient from students living in different parts of Georgia. As some of the respondents' mentioned, they did not have to rent apartments in Tbilisi (all three universities are located in Tbilisi) and could attend lessons from villages and other parts of Georgia that saved their finances. Some students admitted that they found online learning comfortable as they did not have to wake up early in the morning in order to get ready, put some make up and commute to university. They could wake up just 10 minutes before the lessons started and attend lessons even still lying in bed comfortably, which was especially convenient in bad weather. Only about 15 percent of students highlighted the fact that online lessons could keep them and their relatives safe from COVID-19.

I was curious to know how would students choose to study in the next semester, online or face to face if they were given an opportunity to pick themselves. Despite the announcement of the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic, only 15 percent of students declared that if given a choice, they would take online learning. 85 announced they would choose to have face to face lessons for the spring semester 2021. These results may make us think, that changes in online learning system, training of educators and rising awareness regarding the positive sides of online learning, both in students and instructors, are needed.

It was also interesting to find out what subject did students find easy and which difficult while learning online. Vast majority of students admitted that studying so called "humanitarian subjects", like languages, literature, history, anthropology, etc. was much easier to understand and study online than so called "technical subjects" like math, calculus, finances, physics, IT, etc.

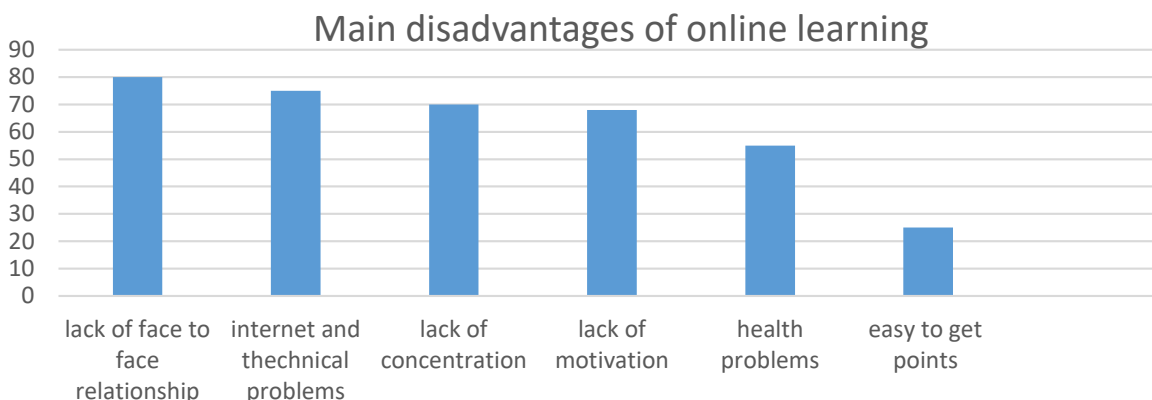


Chart 1. Main disadvantages of online learning

The most attention-grabbing part of the questionnaire from me, as an educator, was the last part of the survey, where students were asked to openly give some advice and recommendations to educators teaching online. This part of the survey was not compulsory to fill, however about 90 percent of the respondents' filled it thus, from my point of view, showed their willingness to help instructors to solve those problems that they mentioned as disadvantages and found challenging. Vast majority of the respondents mentioned that more activities, discussions and debates during lectures, as well as using more slides, would make lessons more interesting and fun. Surprisingly enough, requesting for switching on the camera for all students was also recommended by about half of the respondents. From this recommendation one may assume that in many cases cameras were turned off that presumably hindered students' active participation and motivation to be engaged in discussions. From my personal experience I may say that talking to students without being able to see them, just seeing blank and black small boxes with names and nicknames, was like talking to wall, discouraging, boring. I intentionally held one lesson with all cameras turned off (including my camera) and for the next lesson 100 percent of the students had their cameras on. They all mentioned that it was very uncomfortable, boring and even a bit scary, to see the black screen all the time. They said that while they were talking, they had the feeling that nobody was listening to them and they said just half of what they wanted. "Now we understand how uncomfortable you feel and I will always have my camera on" said one of my students and others also agreed.

What students also recommended was that lecturers should be more understanding and friendly, trying to create friendly environment, should give students a chance to ask as many questions as they have and interestingly enough, 3 students mentioned that instead of debates, it would be better to give them more homework.

In conclusion, I will finish the article by directly quoting some of the students' recommendations to instructors. As they recommend educators should "create more auditorium environment so students don't forget they are still students"; "control exams" and do not express negative attitude towards online learning. As one of the students mentioned "to be real the one thing that i hate is that the professors are complaining that online learning is problematic but the truth is it's not and they should stop that because this kind of attitude is killing the mood of students because they are starting to believe what they hear all the time none stop". And finally, what is most important and what most students recommend is "BE KIND".

Conclusion

Online learning has never been popular in Georgia, however due to COVID-19 pandemic all schools and Universities moved to online learning last year. Only few weeks ago were universities and schools able to go back to face to face learning however, some universities still keep on online learning. Although moving online was full of obstacles, educators and students quickly adjusted to a new teaching/learning environment thus saving Georgian education system from collapsing.

Despite the fact that online learning did not fail in Georgia, according to the survey results, some changes are needed in order to fully meet the needs of students. And to make the right changes, it would be really beneficial to take into consideration what students like and dislike about online learning. What and how would they change the learning process to be more interesting, appealing and effective.

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