

Distance Learning from The Students' Point of View: Connected but Socially Disconnected

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Abstract

Increased adoption of distance learning (DL) during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was introduced into school contexts across the world without prior planning, induced a sudden and far reaching change in teaching methods. DL has simultaneously made it possible to highlight problems present in the school's system and opened a space for deep reflection on the effectiveness of teaching strategies. Interaction in online learning environments is considered a central factor to ensure the participation and inclusion of all students, even those most fragile. However, this goal has not always been achieved through DL during the pandemic. Indeed, the literature highlights critical concerns in relation to online learning around the low quality of participation; this, in addition to technical problems such as availability of suitable devices and good internet connection, as well as a lack in digital competences. Beginning from these premises, this inquiry aims to explore students' point of view with respect to their learning experience during DL, in order to understand – from their perspective – the obstacles and opportunities they encounter, their needs and the possible factors that could improve their learning experience. 172 students attending the second level of secondary school in a north-eastern region in Italy, took part in an online survey. The students completed the survey following a period of lockdown, during which their school adopted distance learning. The following factors involved in the learning process during DL were investigated: the kind of support students think they need during DL; usefulness of DL as a daily learning tool; the positive and negative aspects identified in relation to DL. The study findings reveal students' held an ambivalent perception towards distance learning: half recognized the potential for DL to be integrated within the school curriculum, while the remaining half would rather avoid using it, except in cases of emergency. Students were aware of the difficulties involved in managing home learning; however, they were less aware of the factors that could help them to overcome such obstacles. Finally, they highlighted both positive elements of DL (such as aiding the organization of learning materials), as well as negative aspects related to the lack of relational involvement. These findings reveal the importance of ensuring that the instructional design of an online environment considers not only the didactic aspects, but also the social and relational ones.

Keywords: distance learning, interaction, self-regulation, students' perspective

1. Introduction

Distance learning (DL)¹ has been part of mainstream student life and their school routines for over two years now. The first lockdown in Italy in March 2020, mandated the closure of schools and the rapid transformation from in presence teaching to an online mode of learning. Students all over the world experienced this sudden change that has upset their daily life, introducing new habits and learning contexts. Schools responded quickly to the emergency through adopting extraordinary measures and new tools to ensure learning continuity. This shift to DL, however has not been without obstacles and difficulties: teachers have faced technical difficulties (such as the lack of suitable IT tools or a suitable internet connection); coupled with the challenge of serving novel educational design needs; dealing with problems of drop out from the most fragile students; and with issues of social inequality compounded during the pandemic. These aspects have presented significant challenges for teachers and students, but at the same time, the crisis has made it possible to highlight problems present in schools. In doing so, it has opened a window for reflection on teaching strategies that might more effectively and appropriately address the educational needs of pupils.

Many researches that deal with the subject of learning, have emphasized the importance of adopting a learning approach that stimulates student participation and active involvement. The constructivist approach considers learning as a process that is actively constructed through participation, exchange and interaction between students and teachers, as well as with their peers (Taylor, Fraser & Fisher, 1997; Taylor, Fraser & White, 1994; Lin & Tallman, 2006).

Therefore, learning is considered a complex process in which the relational and interactional aspects are fundamental. According to Bruner (1996), learning is not the result of a simple acquisition of concepts or procedures, but instead occurs through a process of building knowledge, where the learner plays an active and creative role. These objectives should not only be pursued during in presence learning, but should also become central aspects to DL. However, international research identifies, among the most critical aspects of online learning (in addition to technical problems and lack of digital competences), factors related to students' emotional skills and affective involvement, as well as the quality of their participation (Calvani & Vivanet, 2014; Rivoltella & Ardizzone, 2003; Brown, Dehoney & Millichap, 2015). Many students developed a sense of isolation during the pandemic, feeling disconnected from the world of school, and experienced an increase in psychological disorders (Commodari, 2021). Thus, faced with a radical change in their daily lives and habits, many have felt bewildered and distressed.

¹ In the paper the abbreviation DL is used to refer to distance learning

1.1 Interaction in online learning

Interaction in online learning is a process which proceeds through an exchange of ideas, opinions or information between several people; and through this process shared meaning is built. However, interaction and participation are not always equally distributed in learning environments and especially in online ones. In fact, if instructional design is not well structured, it is likely that some students will abstain from engaging and, even if online, remain silent (Shukor *et al.*, 2015). Interaction in online learning environments is therefore considered a central factor to ensure the participation and inclusion for all students, even those most fragile. Thus, building online learning environments where space is given for interaction and exchange, could on the one hand, decrease students' sense of isolation and psychological discomfort, and on the other, enable them to develop a greater sense of responsibility and self-efficacy (Holland, 2019).

According to the literature, the quality of interaction in online learning environments influences learning outcomes: students who experience good interaction with their peers and teachers and feel positive about their involvement, achieve better results (Mehall, 2020).

The physical distancing that was advised during the Covid-19 pandemic, has in fact increased the perception of social distancing – a psychological gap that has weighed heavily on the public, especially pupils. For this reason, it is even more critical to think about providing social and emotional support as an intrinsic aspect of online learning (Hodges, 2020).

However, it is not enough to provide opportunities for interaction to ensure learning activities are engaging. Therefore, we must think beyond just increasing the quantity of interaction, towards improving the quality of exchanges. Indeed, to ensure a meaningful learning experience, we must promote learning experience and exchange that is intentional and systematic, structured and guided. If we fail to do so, teachers run the risk of running an empty, confused discussion, devoid of objectives, that fails to deliver quality learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

Starting from these premises, this article surveys students' perspectives regarding their learning experience in DL. Our aim is thus to understand, from students' perspectives, the obstacles and opportunities they encounter during DL, their needs and the aspects that could improve their learning experiences. More specifically, the following factors were investigated through an exploratory questionnaire:

1. The kind of support students think they need during DL
2. How much students consider the DL useful as a daily learning tool, not only linked to the pandemic
3. Positive aspects identified in the DL
4. Negative aspects identified in the DL

2. Method

2.1 Sample

This survey sampled 172 students attending the second level of secondary school in a north east region in Italy. These participants responded to an online survey developed within the FAMI IMPACT FVG project (Qualification of the school system in multicultural contexts, also through actions to contrast early school leaving). The survey targeted students under the age of 18 (average age = 16, 27; SD = 0.74; female students = 72,7%; male students = 22,7%; undeclared sex =4,7%).

2.2 Measure

The survey was divided into different sections and made up of closed items (on a Likert scale from 0 to 4) and open questions. The sampled students completed the survey following a period of lockdown, during which their school adopted distance learning.

In this section we focus on answers to the following questions, which investigate different aspects of the learning process during DL:

1. Which kind of help do you think you need to follow distance learning?
2. When you return to school, would you like to continue to use online teaching?
3. What do you consider positive aspects of online teaching?
4. What do you consider negative aspects of online teaching?

3. Results

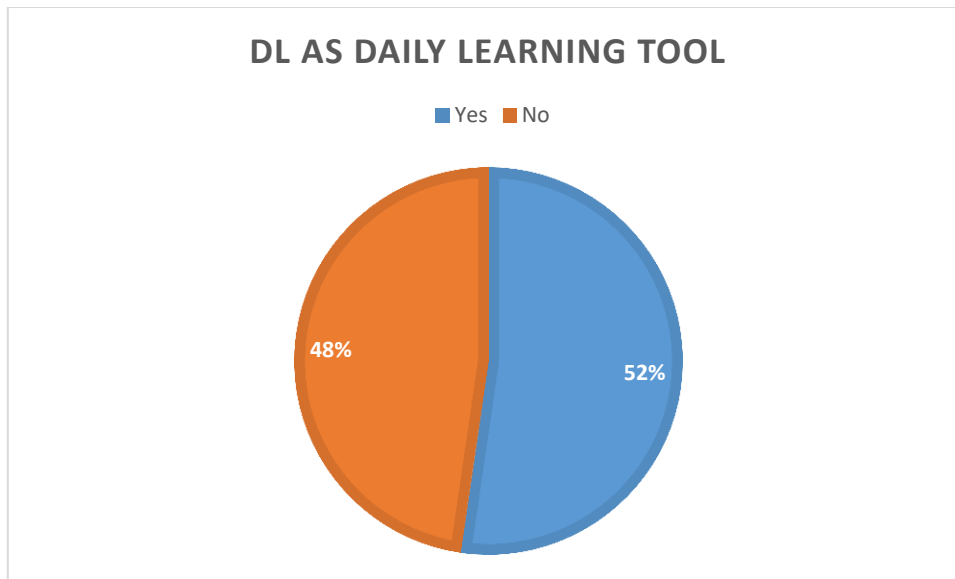
3.1 Which kind of help do you think you need to follow distance learning?

Students identified the following factors that could support their learning during DL:

- Concentration support
“Concentration aids.”
“Being in a completely empty room with nothing so that I don't lose concentration”.
“To do full but few hours, otherwise I lose concentration due to the tiredness of being in front of the computer.”
- Device
“Using a computer instead of telephone and staying in a room where there will be no distractions”.
- Interaction and involvement
“More interaction with professors.”
“Make the lessons more engaging.”
- Language
“Support for understanding the language”.
- No identification
“I don't know what to answer.”

3.2 When you return to school, would you like to continue to use online teaching?

Students were divided in answering this question. About half of them would like to continue using digital leaning during their school year, while the remaining half would rather avoid using it except in cases of emergency (Graph1).



Graph 1: Would you like to continue to use online teaching after emergency?

Students who did not wish to continue to use digital learning, identified the following categories of responses as their main reasons:

- Lack of learning
"No, because in my opinion going to school is better and better for following the lessons"
"At school I can actually understand and learn better."
- More distractions
"During DL it is difficult to attend the lessons due to the constant distractions."
- Technical problems
"Because when present you can attend to the lessons better; instead during DL the microphone and the camera or the connection that drops off may not work."
- Lack of relationship
"We are not with the other guys."
- Lack of routine:
"There would no longer be a daily habit, the body and mind can not keep up with it".

Students who would like to continue using digital learning, identified the following categories of responses as their main reasons:

- Materials available
"Maybe if a person is sick he isn't able to attend the lessons, the DL would be a great thing. Or having the homework on the platform is a good thing."

- Emotional aspects

“Because it is very useful, you have less anxiety and then you can optimize the times during the day.”

“Because after all the months we spent in DL going to school regularly every day became too stressful.”

“In these days that we are practically always at school they give us a thousand of exams in presence...I always get into crisis because I want to do well in school, but if they do not leave us enough time and if I become confused, I don't understand anything and I take it badly ...”

- Time management

“At home I have more time to translate into my language”.

3.3 What do you consider positive aspects of online teaching?

Students identified the following categories of responses as the main positive aspects of DL:

- Organization

“The fact that we have everything on the phone.”

“Asynchronous hours to study.”

- Less stress factors

“There are longer breaks during lessons and you can live more relaxed.”

“Less anxiety for oral and written exams.”

- Digital competences

“It made us grow digitally.”

- Comfort

“Being able to wake up 10 minutes before class starts – longer breaks.”

3.4. What do you consider negative aspects of online teaching?

Students identified the following categories of responses as the main negative aspects of DL:

- Interaction with other students

“That you cannot meet friends and you are much less active.”

“The way we discuss is different from in the classroom.”

“There is no communication like in school.”

- Distraction

“Easily distracted, understand the teacher's explanations less, the fact that there is no contact with other classmates and teachers”.

- Hours in front of the computer

“You are too much in front of the computer.”

- Passivity

“Less things are learned, students are not encouraged to learn.”

3.5 Discussion

The students' expressed ambivalent attitudes towards distance learning. Not everyone felt they had their needs adequately met during DL and, as consequence, identify the specific help

that could support their learning. On the one hand, they were aware of experiencing difficulty in managing home learning, the sources of distraction they face, and understanding the content of the lessons well; however, they seemed to possess a low awareness of the factors that could help them overcome such obstacles. It also seemed evident that some emotional and relational aspects can become more pronounced during distance learning. Many students declared that they suffered from isolation and have not been able to develop meaningful relations with their peers and teachers. Thus, physical distancing has in fact increased the perception of social distancing (Hodges, 2020). This aspect is certainly interesting when compared with the methods of interactions that young people adopt in their daily lives, which predominantly occur through social and digital channels. Therefore, even if students habitually use digital tools to interact and communicate with each other, this same channel in the school context seems to have a distancing rather than a strengthening effect. The pupils have always experienced the school, before the pandemic as a social place, where in addition to learning they form relationships and learn and live with others. This transition between school as a physical place to school as a digital place, has in actuality created a gap in the relational fabric, making it more difficult for students to feel part of a learning community, built from relationships and moments of interaction. Surely this perception is also the result of a lack of instructional design capable of effectively grasping these aspects, leaving in place a logic of pure information transmission.

The amount of hours students have spent in front of their computers, has allowed for didactic continuity and maintained a critical bridge between school and students; otherwise it has changed their routines, required a greater degree of self-regulation, organization and the acquisition of additional digital skills (Alirezabeigi *et al.*, 2020). The management of emotional factors, often identified as anxiety and stress, was also highlighted by students as a critical concern. DL has reduced stress for many students: staying at home and following the lessons from their PC allowed them to manage their time more flexibly (precisely because time became more dilated), and concurrently enabled them to avoid direct exposure to a social environment that many found difficult to manage (Calvani & Vivanet, 2014; Rivoltella & Ardizzone, 2003; Brown, Dehoney & Millichap, 2015).

This, however, has also created a problem for many students who have experienced difficulties in returning to school, precisely due to their inability to manage social and performance-related pressure. For the most fragile students, DL did not represent a moment of growth, nor an opportunity to face their difficulties and develop new social and emotional skills; rather it strengthened their tendency to withdraw and move away from situations of criticism (Commodari, 2021).

Finally, DL has certainly had some positive impacts, which students recognized as supporting their study path: the platforms allow institutions to efficiently organize their learning materials; it helps to ensure continuity when students cannot follow their lessons for a certain period of time; and enables students to take advantage of a variety of materials.

4. Conclusion

Distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has expanded studies on online learning and opened important spaces of reflection, for providing improvements to the quality of student experience and their learning outcomes. The use of DL was not planned but rather represented a sudden change in schooling, put in place without previous scheduling. This change has highlighted critical aspects in student's learning experiences, but at the same time has also drawn attention to previously unrealized potential. The importance of good instructional design in online learning environments has certainly become more evident, and if appropriately planned and implemented, can act as a positive resource and stimulus for student learning. Suitable design does not only mean thinking about the didactic aspects of learning, but also the social and relational ones. It therefore means offering learning opportunities to young people that are authentic, and in which it is also possible to experience key social dimensions. Otherwise, the online learning experience runs the risk of simply functioning as a container of information, and thus becomes a sterile and unimpactful experience for students. In an online environment, it is possible to create conditions for exchange and sharing, group activities, and moments of meaningful interaction with others, experienced in an authentic and socially-supportive context. Consequentially, physical distance must not translate into social distance: the possibilities offered by technology need to be appropriately deployed to increase learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

Online learning can also help students develop important skills in self-regulation and self-efficacy with respect to learning (Munro, 2005). For many, it is difficult to manage online learning due to the numerous distractions and the lack of a fixed time structure, as is present in the in-person school routine. The greater flexibility that online learning offers, can represent an opportunity if well managed; or a major obstacle, if students have not acquired an adequate level of self-regulatory skills. It is therefore critical that one of the objectives of online teaching is to help students improve their abilities to self-regulate, and that they are supported in their continuous development through the coaching and support of their teachers.

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