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DISTANCE LEARNING: ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

***Annotation.** The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic marked the start of very serious innovations in many areas, including education. Digital learning platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Google Classroom and others have emerged as a way out from the blockade forced by pandemic. New learning opportunities has completely changed the nature of learning in all educational levels all over the world with its advantages and disadvantages.*

***Keywords:** distance learning, online education, digital learning platforms*

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic marked the start of very serious innovations in many areas, including education. Digital learning platforms such as Zoom, Teams, Google Classroom and others have emerged as a way out from the blockade forced by pandemic. New learning opportunities has completely changed the nature of learning in all educational levels by providing necessary resources for students and educators all over the world with its advantages and disadvantages.

Though many leading traditional universities of the world started to provide some of their courses online even before the Covid-19 Pandemic for the majority it was a new challenge to tackle. Nowadays, **online learning** turns out to be extendedly practiced and is becoming an alternative to traditional universities. But what are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning?

Online learning is a good alternative to continue learning in times when universities cannot open its doors for full capacity because of pandemic. Apart from that, online learning is a great opportunity for those who can't afford to get traditional education because of time and material resources. Some free online learning courses by leading universities provide opportunities for learners to achieve knowledge in many fields worldwide. However, for them switching fully to online form of education is also new with its advantages and disadvantages.

What are the advantages of online distance learning? Some of them are listed below with a brief explanation:

Involving students with physical limitations to full range education with all. There are students who cannot participate in classes with everyone and they are taught in isolation by teachers who visit their homes. With online learning students with limited opportunities gain chance to attend the class with their group mates and it is very helpful in terms of their socialization.

Inviting professors from foreign universities to deliver certain courses is another advantage of online education. It has the same limitations in terms of the lack of face-to-face communication; however, it is affordable for universities in terms of availability of professors and cost effectiveness.

As for the disadvantages of distance learning, currently it overwhelmingly exceeds the advantages. Challenges we faced during more than one year can be grouped as following:

Attendance. Many sources informs about improved student attendance as classes can be attended from any location if equipped with required technology. Accordingly, there are slight chances for students to miss lessons. However, internet connectivity remains one of the key challenges of online teaching and remote areas are difficult to fully reach due to breaks in internet connection and attendance is not regular in those areas.

Though it may seem surprising one more reason for poor attendance is video record and archiving of classes. The opportunity for recording and archiving kills another very important opportunity during education process – the opportunity of asking questions and requesting further clarification from the teacher. Knowing that records are archived and available any time students become reluctant and skip attending live classes. Of course, recorded videos provides great

opportunity to listen the lecture many times when you have time. However, it nulls face-to-face communication between student and teacher, as well as among students. There is no class discussion and no further explanation when necessary; no new ideas coming from students which encourages teachers to enrich the content, etc. We should keep in mind that online lecture is not a Ted Talk, it is a serious learning process.

Staying focused on the lesson through the screen is another factor affecting online learning. There are many opportunities for students to be distracted by social media and criticizing teachers for not teaching interesting and attracting enough would be unfair and ineffective.

Another problem with staying connected and focusing on the screen is potential health problems both for students and teachers, particularly for schoolchildren.

Ethics and code of conduct during online classes has not yet well established and needs systematization. Students refuse to participate in class discussions, feel comfortable not to get ready for the class as they can disconnect by one click and later accuse bad internet connection and drop out by the system. Majority of students in the virtual classroom refuse to open their cameras and they have various reasons for this:

- a) they are psychologically not ready or are lazy to open their cameras;
- b) majority of students don't have a suitable place to attend the class online with their cameras and microphones open;
- c) they find it unnecessary to be in front of the computer during the whole class;
- d) various other reasons.

However not opening and not getting ready for the class makes students less disciplined and less responsible.

Technically we are not fully equipped: most of the professors are forced to deliver their classes from their homes and the only equipment we have is a computer which forces us to sit/stay in front of it. Accordingly, we are not dynamic; for teaching some courses it is fine but for others more flexibility and more tools are needed to be effective in the teaching process. Another problem is the video recording of the classes. In online learning programs from leading universities we see model lectures which are professionally designed, acoustic and other technical requirements are met as it is a professional teamwork. But in the case of routine online classes it a theatre of one actor – teacher who should play all parties. As a result we have a recording with poor effect and distributing them is not effective.

Another big disadvantage felt by all of us is **methodology** – traditional learning methods happened to be less effective during online learning. New methodological instructions and guidebooks need to be developed to help educators be effective in the virtual classroom. Having basic skills of using technology teachers, at least most of them, feel difficulties in teaching without necessary methodological tools and resources. For these reasons, effective trainings both from methodological and technological perspectives are necessary to conduct for teachers for they can encourage their students to use various opportunities of online learning.

Examination – we had to switch from written exams to test system as organizing it was difficult because of limited proctoring sources and expertise. Currently many universities work on developing online examination system providing flexibility for teachers to conduct examination in the form that are suitable for the delivered course.

As for the social consequences of the long-term online learning the following problems can be expected:

Absence of active physical human interaction during distance learning doesn't create favorable conditions to develop social values such as communication, disagreement and agreement, empathy, patience to listen to others, to argue and discuss, find ways out from a situation, etc. There is no competition, no obvious mistakes and recommendations from the educator to help learners to distinguish between right and wrong and to improve. Tolerance to others, adjusting to characters, developing team skills and other necessary social values can be developed during real human interaction.

Education process is also a good platform **to develop ethical values**. It is quite questionable whether we can inoculate ethical values through fulltime online education. The students we have

been teaching since April 2020 are still either traditionally educated students for a few years or traditional high school students. Let's imagine the generation who were taught only online. From this perspective, even very high technical equipment will not allow achieve desired results.

I would also like to mention one more important issue here. In many cases, the benefits of online education are exaggerated and some people is in favor of online form of education even in post-pandemic period. However, in making such assumptions, we must keep in mind that in our modern world many families grew up with only one child and in many cases with one parent and one child. In this case, almost no ground will be prepared for the integration of these children into society, and the problems will become apparent in the very near future. In fact, the problem can have many consequences, from depression to suicide.

Summarizing all the challenges we can say it will no longer be possible to escape online education. **Majority of us accept that distance learning is a good supplement to traditional face-to-face education, however when** applied alone it may develop serious negative consequences that we discussed above and accordingly **cannot be accepted as a full alternative**. The best option will be to combine both forms of education with the predominance of the traditional form of education.

To help educators methodological and pedagogical aspects of the question are necessary to be considered by experts to support educators with necessary guidelines and know-how.