

Online Distance Learning Education from the Social Work Perspectives during the COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the benefits of online distance learning for higher education while under COVID-19 pandemic. Open and Distance Learning offers affordable and flexible social work training for disadvantaged communities, allowing learners to work and study simultaneously. We contrast the social work departments at the universities – one is the *off campus* and second is the *online/distance* in terms of experiences. The results of meeting sessions describe the abilities, talents, and behaviors shared by instructors and students to improve the sharing of information in this situation. The main takeaways from this collaboration between institutions are the advantages of using new technology, ethical exam questions, social work practices, and the confirmation that the digital gap is a factor in social exclusion.

Keywords: *Off Campus, Online, ODL, COVID- 19, Social Work, Digitalization, Higher Studies.*

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has forced countries to restrict citizens to reduce infections and protect lives. Teachers have faced a new configuration of tasks, requiring teleworking or online work. Remote work is a flexible, adaptable way of fulfilling tasks, gaining prominence in modern and contemporary societies. It is especially useful in education, as face-to-face communication has disappeared for a few months (Nariman, 2020). The pandemic has forced the adoption of new technologies, transforming our communication methods and behaviors. The shift from face-to-face interactions to screen, internet connections, and computer science applications has disrupted traditional learning methods, necessitating a new methodology for universities.

Universities are increasingly utilizing various communication methods, including telephone, videoconferencing, WhatsApp, email, and YouTube channels, to facilitate online work. While this has provided flexibility, time optimization, and increased productivity, it also has drawbacks such as dependence on the internet, loss of social skills, and increased loneliness. Teachers and students must now design additional academic tasks beyond class attendance and exam evaluation, while maintaining academic quality standards. This requires changes in university behavior, collaboration with other universities, pragmatic procedures, redefining pedagogical keys, adapting subject formats, exam preparation, scheduling, calendar reformulation, and the use of new computer applications.

Universities are utilizing various communication methods for online work, offering flexibility and productivity but also causing internet dependence, social skills loss, and loneliness. To maintain quality, teachers and students must design additional tasks, collaborate, and adapt to new technology. To facilitate distance work in university education, rigorous task design, collaboration among the university community, and agreed guidelines are necessary for smooth student and teacher study. This article provides reflections on the challenges faced by teachers in the new online modality, including pedagogical issues, technological use, and ethical concerns related to information confidentiality and use, highlighting the need for change.

Virtual universities have developed online procedures to monitor students and support their studies, using tools like forums, groups, and communication channels. Routines, help protocols, solidarity, and collaboration are essential to prevent isolation among university members. Social Work teachers face challenges in transmitting empathy and cordiality in distance interviews, while maintaining the profession's values. Technology offers flexibility, student autonomy, and innovative practices. However, ensuring close teacher-student training and consolidated professional learning experiences from home remains a challenge.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education is a crucial resource for serving a large number of students efficiently and effectively, enabling self-learning through didactic resources. It requires teachers to develop new strategies to satisfy all learning needs, despite not implying self-management by students

(Nunes 1994). Encouraging student participation, solidarity, and collaboration is crucial for motivation and knowledge building. Monitoring each student ensures they adhere to online classroom schedules, deadlines, and teaching team-designed tasks.

Distance learning has been characterized according to the contributions of García Aretio (2001, pp. 144-148) for: 1. Planning and organizing carefully the information and contacts with the students, 2. The use of the motivation to initiate and maintain interest in learning, 3. Explicit the objectives to be achieved, 4. Present content meaningful and functional, 5. Request the participation of students, 6. Activate responses and encourage interactive learning, 7. Encourage self-training without forgetting learning support, 8. Strengthen work collaborative, 9. Facilitate feedback (feedback), 10. Reinforce the self-concept and respect the diversity of the group, 11. Promote the transferability of learning through a correct gradation, 12. Formatively assess progress. Table 1 adds the comparative between face-to-face and virtual university teaching carried out by García Aretius (2001, pp. 163-165).

The pandemic has unified two teaching systems, allowing teachers to serve as guides and mediators to ensure information and knowledge reach all students. Teachers transmit course agendas and knowledge through digital platforms, videoconferences, and interactive online chats. These virtual tools and the pandemic have contributed to a different conception of learning and new attitudes among teachers, ensuring the same service to students and avoiding academic loss.

The teacher used digital platforms and videoconferences for course agendas and virtual reflection. The pandemic prompted a shift in learning conception, openness to technological means, and pedagogical innovation. This required adaptability and creativity, as teaching online required more time, support, and continuous monitoring.

Education through distance aims to provide open, permanent education by overcoming distances between teachers and students through unconventional situations using new technologies. Dialogue and reflection are crucial for effective distance education (Costa 2016, p. 23).

Table 1. Comparison between face-to-face and distance learning systems

In Person	Distance
Students	
Homogeneous in age.	Heterogeneous in age.
Homogeneous in qualification.	Heterogeneous in qualification.
Homogeneous in level.	Heterogeneous in level.
Unique meeting place.	Study at home, workplace, etc.
Local residence.	Dispersed population.
Controlled situation. Dependent learning.	Free situation. Independent learning.
Mostly not working. Usually it is child/adolescent/youth	Most of them are adults and work.
There is more social interaction.	There is less social interaction.

Education is primary activity. Time complete.	Education is secondary activity. Time partial.
They generally follow a mandatory curriculum.	The curriculum followed is determined by the student.
Teachers	
One type of teacher.	Various types of teachers.
Source of knowledge for the group.	Support, facilitator and learning guide.
Irreplaceable resource.	Partially replaceable resource.
Supreme judge of the student's performance.	Student performance guide.
Basically educator / teacher.	Basically producer of material or tutor.
Your skills and competencies are highly disseminated.	Their skills and competencies are less known.
Normal problems in design, development and curriculum evaluation.	Serious problems for the design, development and curriculum evaluation.
The above problems are up to the teacher.	The above problems are system dependent.
Communication/Resources	
The classroom is the main source for exchange of knowledge.	Knowledge is usually acquired individually, but also collaborative.
Face-to-face teaching.	Mediated teaching.
Direct communication.	Deferred communication in space and time or synchronization through the network.
Own workshops and laboratories.	Workshops and laboratories of other institutions.
Limited use of media.	Massive use of media.
Structure/Management	
Little diversification of units and functions.	Multiple units and functions.
The courses are conceived, produced and disseminated with simplicity and good definition.	Complex processes of conception, production and dissemination of the courses.
Administrative schedule problems.	The problems arise in the coordination of the conception, production and dissemination.
Many teachers and few administrative and technicians.	Less teachers and more administrative and technicians.
Little relationship between teachers, administrators and technicians.	Intense relationship between teachers, administrators and technicians.
Administrative and technical can be partially replaceable.	Administrative and technical staff are basically irreplaceable.
At the university level, he turns away students. Further elitist and selective	It tends to be more democratic in the access of the students.
Many courses with few students in each one.	Many students per course.
Low initial costs, but high in function of the student variable.	High initial costs, but less high in function of the student variable.

(Source: Garcia Aretio 2001, pp. 163-165)

Online teaching plays an active role in students' learning, consolidating knowledge through autonomous, responsible, creative, and disciplinary learning. This process includes knowledge acquisition, skills, participation, and motivation (Silva 2004).

The UNESCO Report on Education for the 21st Century (1996) highlights four pillars for global education: 'learning to know', 'learning to do', 'learning to live together', and 'learning to be'. These pillars promote self-discipline, motivation, reflection, and communication. Communication competence is crucial in distance learning, particularly during virtual sessions and teaching. Elements like exhibitions, structuring, synthesis, dialogue, and interaction are essential for constructive, critical, and coherent learning.

Communication in the distance education process should allow achieve some of the following objectives (Corral cited in Diniz 1992; Baker et al., 1996):

Inform students about scientific and technical content, the techniques of intellectual work, and the comprehension of the topics requested.

- Motivate the student to continue learning, surpassing the difficulties that might arise.
- Help solve isolation problems and encourage exchange of ideas and experiences in the course of learning.
- Offer technological support and professional support in the use of the new technologies.

Distance learning fosters knowledge exchange and social interaction between teachers and students, reducing feelings of loneliness and impotence among students (Costa, 2016, p. 39). There are several platforms available at universities to hold virtual meetings, such as Zoom, Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Whatsapp, Business Skipe, Cisco Weber meeting, social networks, browsers, You tube etc. All these tools should not make us forget the consistency and availability of people in its use. That is, the use of new technologies should not take over all the times of student learning, but should be a support in their learning particular and exclusive. For this reason it is good that both teachers and students, respect a reasonable and responsible availability.

Distance education teaching should focus on encouraging student participation, ensuring bidirectional information exchange, promoting cooperation, and providing resources. Teachers should guide students, encourage proactive learning, and provide feedback. They should also ensure timely feedback, encourage critical thinking, and provide support for students with difficulties. The teaching should also encourage self-esteem and confidence, use technology effectively, and provide necessary technical advice for virtual study completion (Kleij, 2015; Costa 2016, p. 59). The teachers have met great difficulties during online learning: attracting the attention of the student, maintain order in sessions, organize shifts speak, offer feedback, and coordinate discussions (Chang and Fang, 2020).

A recent study has shown that learning self-directed and willingness to learn online are good predictors of academic performance in virtual teaching, while technological prowess and

Internet self-efficacy were not (Torun, 2020). Teachers should emphasize the importance of students' autonomy, organization, dedication, persistence, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and initiative during distance learning. This includes developing discipline, responsibility, and the ability to search and select relevant bibliography. The teacher-student relationship should be inclusive, pedagogical, interactive, competent, and quality, fostering a successful learning process. COVID-19 has accelerated the transition from face-to-face to virtual learning, prompting university plans to adapt to this reality in the short term (Al-Okaily, Alqudah, Matar, Lutfi, and Taamneh, 2020).

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND IMPLICATIONS

The profession of Social Work has as its main competence to facilitate the social well-being of individuals, groups, communities and society in general, using the professional support relationship as the main tool (Bracons, 2017^a, p. 140). In 2014, the International Federation of Social Workers and the International Association of Schools of Social Work approved a global definition of social work, defining it as a profession promoting social change, development, and empowerment. It is based on principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity. (Fernández and Ponce de Leon, 2019, p. 20). During the pandemic, Social Work teachers faced challenges in teaching content due to the need to link students with practice professionals. Two universities with extensive experience in academics and social intervention prioritized social innovation in their Social Work Degrees. Training in Social Work equips professionals to design and implement social policies to counter socioeconomic effects.

Social Work Degrees in the European Higher Education Area (EEES) are structured gradually, combining theoretical contributions with practical experience and individualized supervision. The aim is to develop skills in ethical principles, critical thinking, and professional decision-making. The Practicum subject is a learning space for knowledge exchange, analysis, and critical reflection, allowing students to apply profession methodologies with independence, autonomy, responsibility, and maturity (Bracons, 2017^b).

The practicum is a training program that focuses on direct, close, proactive, participatory, committed, determined, reflective, and critical learning. It aims to develop students' personal, academic, and professional skills while promoting social participation and critical thinking. The practicum also emphasizes the importance of trust and closeness in communication, enabling true meeting, dialogue, knowledge, and understanding. The essence of the profession lies in social change, problem-solving, and promoting well-being (FITS, 2020).

The pandemic has limited students' ability to continue their practices due to confinement or contagion risks. Practices are crucial for personal and professional identity formation, and universities have had to design alternatives without losing quality teachers to ensure students can continue their practices without losing the academic year.

Universities have proposed virtual meetings to address confinement in Social Work practices. These activities include solving practical cases, describing the organization, designing a

social project, and writing a research paper. Students practice methodologies and research capacity in Work Social, with weekly meetings with teachers to discuss case resolution, institutions, and social resources. Collaborative work and online platforms help compensate for the hours assigned to subject credits. Two universities faced challenges in subject evaluation, particularly in developing face-to-face tests. Virtual platforms like Moodle allowed continuous evaluation, but UNED faced logistical issues with higher students. To address this, they designed a computer application called AvEX for online exams.

Online exams replaced face-to-face exams, requiring students to record answers using electronic devices. The system required a web camera and random photos, registered in the application. Teachers verified the photos matched the student's license and verified they did not have external help (UNED, 2020). The camera's inability to detect all room planes and control mobile phone and social network use for multiple choice exams hindered fraudulent conduct. To counter this, teaching teams shortened exam times, assigned random questions, and used open questions for practical application. These measures ensured test development without external aid and student knowledge evaluation.

The application for exam development is innovative but requires further refinement to address ethical issues. It integrates an anti-plagiarism system, but needs to address multiple choice exams, mobile phone usage, and fraudulent student practices for future use. The UNED application has enabled thousands of students to be examined remotely, preserving their academic year. Future uses include standardized exams for all universities, offering virtual options for face-to-face universities, and determining the future of online and face-to-face universities in the face of competition. Technological advancements and methodologies will determine these questions.

DIGITALIZATION IN THE UNIVERSITY STUDIES

The pandemic has highlighted the ease of internet access, including university exams, but also highlighted the digital divide and inequalities between countries, particularly affecting vulnerable individuals. The telematic learning model has exacerbated educational inequalities and highlighted material deficiencies in disadvantaged homes (Cabrera, 2020). Social Work values equal opportunities, justice, equity, and solidarity. Universities and states should address technological inequalities affecting millions of people and their social inclusion through education. The pandemic has highlighted the polarity between rich and poor societies, leading to a digital divide and new forms of marginalization. This includes economic income, work dropouts, insalubrity, overcrowding, and diminished family finances (Alqahtani and Rajkhan, 2020).

Latin America faces challenges in accessing digital platforms and completing academic years due to lack of electronic devices and internet. Universities are forced to close due to technological resources. Acquiring technological devices and necessary skills for online learning is crucial. Despite extraordinary technology in educational institutions, preparing for learning electronics plays an important role in promoting the educational process during the pandemic (Alqahtani and Rajkhan, 2020).

COVID-19 has accelerated the transformation of traditional universities into more digital, blended, and open ones. With the advent of ICT and internet, students can receive training from anywhere, requiring only an electronic device and internet connection. However, the challenge lies in ensuring the digital divide is not socially excluded. States must work towards sustainable, inclusive, and equitable economic growth, where education becomes a powerful tool for advancing democratic societies and preparing new generations for globalization challenges. Virtual teaching should ensure equal rights and opportunities for everyone, ensuring that education is a powerful tool for a more democratic future. Governments and public institutions investing in education aim to combat poverty, exclusion, and high inequality levels, contributing to fairer, more inclusive, cohesive, and better educated societies, thus reducing the support for important aspects of society.

CONCLUSION

Online teaching in Social Work offers flexibility and overcomes time and space barriers, but also presents communication gaps, potentially hindering professional skills learning and increasing educational inequalities. This study aims to understand distance learning and pedagogical strategies during the pandemic, ensuring teachers are aware of new skills in an increasingly interactive and technological society. Distance learning offers enhanced accessibility, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness compared to traditional on-campus education, saving on transportation and accommodation costs.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE AUTHOR

The Author had full access to all of the information in this research study, which has been studied and approved the final manuscript. The author is sole responsible for the conceptualization, design of the study, review of related literature and discussion.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declared that they have no competing interests.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Applicable and Received

CONSENT TO PARTICIPANTS

Applicable and Approved

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