



A Shift from Classroom to Distance Learning : Students' Perceptions

OULD SI BOUZIANE Sabria*

University of Mostaganem (Algeria).

e-mail : Sabria.oulsibouziane@univ-mosta.dz

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Abstract

The implication of distance learning versus face to face classes has become a new form of education in Algeria since Covid 19 outbreak. Therefore, ordinary classes are replaced by virtual/online ones where video conferences, online texts and assignments are reinforced remotely on digital platforms and learners are abide by this new form of learning. This study examines this issue in the context of Algerian universities, namely, Mostaganem. Its purpose is to depict students' perceptions after shifting from classroom to distance learning. To conduct this study, a questionnaire is administered to 49 third year LMD students (30 females; 19 males) enrolled in the academic year 2019/2020. The results showed that students, at the University of Mostaganem, are willing to accept innovations in learning; besides, they react positively to e-learning which is but an evidence of the hard work and perseverance of the teachers and instructors. Importantly, combining online and face to face learning has been an alternative to both kinds of learning what is named blended learning.

Keywords: *classroom learning, e-learning, blended learning, perceptions*

I. Introduction

Corona virus outbreak has triggered depression, fear, unbalanced educational future among teachers, students and parents as well. The abrupt closure of schools, institutions and universities has affected them in many ways, chiefly among them, the learning process. Teachers shifted from face-to-face learning to distance/digital learning; besides, learners found themselves sinking and swimming in this virtual world of blended learning. Therefore, ordinary

* Corresponding author



classes are replaced by virtual/online ones where video conferences, online texts and assignments are reinforced remotely on digital platforms and learners are abide by this new form of learning.

Integrating e-learning system as an alternative or extension to traditional learning classrooms has become a new trend of reality since the pandemic outbreak in Algeria. Nowadays, distance education is widely used by teachers and instructors of all levels; as a result, learners, for couple of months, did not attend physically classes. However, thanks to Internet and electronic means, students were able to communicate with their teachers and classmates and avoid a blank year. In the Algerian universities, distance learning has been successful thanks to the use of social media, platforms, video conferences and emails which bring students as well as teachers closer, facilitate learning and make it easier and more efficient. This abnormal, down to earth fact raised the question of whether students are satisfied with such hybrid educational programmes.

Thus, the study seeks to find answers to the following research questions.

1. How do students perceive distance learning during Covid 19 pandemic?
 - 1.1. Do they see it as positive to their learning process?
 - 1.2. Is it really significant in their learning process?
2. Can e-learning be an alternative to educational learning classrooms?
 - 2.1. Is face-to-face learning irreplaceable?
 - 2.2. Is e-learning an effective method?

The following hypotheses are tested:

1. Students positively react to e-learning and see it as significant in their learning process in order not to pass a blank year.
2. E-learning can never replace face-to-face learning; however, blended learning can be recommended.

This study examines the issue of e-learning in the context of Algerian universities, namely, Mostaganem. Its purpose is to depict students' perceptions after shifting from classroom to distance learning during Covid 19 Pandemic. It is, therefore, crucial to know students' point of view in order to ameliorate the learning process and find solutions that suit teachers, students and instructors.

1.1. E-learning/Distance Learning background

Thanks to new technologies, distance learning education is proliferating though its origin can be mapped out to over 100 years ago. Early distance education used First and Second Generation Communication Technologies. First Generation (1850s to 1960s) employed merely one technology that include prints, radio and TV. Second Generation (1960s to 1985) distance learning used multiple tech without computers through audiocassettes, TV, videocassettes, fax and print

notably (Sadeghi, p.81, 2019). Furthermore, Ozkekin and Akkuryt (2015) distinguish between old and distance learning under three Generations: Correspondence, Telecommunications and Computers in which interaction and participations are primordially important. (Cited in Sadeghi (2019), p.82)

E-learning is often interrelated to distance learning because its core element is learning at a distance through using Internet devices at their own pace via emails, video conferences, chat rooms, social media and platforms. In this vein, it is defined as “learning that takes place partially or entirely over the Internet” (U.S Department of Education, 2010 cited in Brittany Gilbert, P.3). Thus, it can be defined as any task/activities, materials done via Internet to assist teaching and learning.

Distance/online learning refers to “distributed learning” or blended learning in which there is a mix of interests among learners led by instructors over a period of time. (Dede, 2005 cited in Gillington and Molinari, 2012). Online learning or hybrid learning hinges on student’s engagement and interaction in order to be fruitful and effective. In this regard, Chaney (2010) defines online courses as a demand “to provide quality education to all students, regardless of location and time” (cited in Gilbert, p.5).

According to Mehrotra et.al, (2001), “distance learning or distance education is not a future possibility for which higher education most prepare, it is a current reality creating opportunities and challenges for educational institutions: a reality offering students expanded choices in where, when, how and from whom they learn; a reality making education accessible to ever larger numbers of persons” (cited in Sadeghi, p.81, 2019). Distance learning helps students to be self-regulated, self-reliant, independent and autonomous. Admittedly, for Traxler (2018), online learning caters for chances to learn anywhere, anytime and from anyone.

1.2. Distance Learning during Corona virus

In the last decades of the 20th century, the new form of learning labelled “online learning” has been tremendously proliferating (Abe, 2020). Technology has been creeping into our lives for decades and nowadays it has become of great significance leading universities and instructors to cope with the current situation of the pandemic. Corona virus has made life hard to live; besides, people felt anxious, frustrated and shocked in all fields especially education. The sudden interruption of studying in schools, colleges and universities in Algeria has caused educators to digitise learning and create different online platforms in order not to stop learning/teaching.

Collie and Martia (2020) saw this educational change as “uncharted territory” and stressed “teacher adaptability” to cope with this lockdown situation. Liberman (2020) proposed that online learning may stand for a “new form” which will continue as long as the pandemic still exists.

II. Methodology

Participants

To conduct this study, the sample consisted of 49 third year LMD students (30 females; 19 males) enrolled in the academic year 2019/2020. They have all witnessed and for the first time that drastic change in education where learning is basically done online. They answered the questionnaire after coming back to studies i.e., after the seven months of the lockdown.

Instrument

This study opts for a mixed method approach; thus, results are analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire which is divided into two parts. The first part deals with students’ general information and the second part revolves around the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning and students’ attitudes towards such new mode of learning particularly. The purpose is to depict students’ perceptions after shifting from classroom to distance learning.

III. Results

To assess students’ responses about their general information, most of them admitted that they usually spent much time per week using their computers or smartphones for leisure purposes like using social media and playing games, rather than using them for educational goals. The online courses were provided to students via the University Moodle platform and social media, chiefly among them, facebook and messenger. Students were more active in social media rather than Moodle. Moreover, 46.93% of students have access to their computers most of the time; 44.889% sometimes; and 8,16% have no access.

As far as asking them whether they are confident when using the computer, 71.42% of the respondents felt so; while, 4.08% were not and 22.44% felt sometimes at ease when browsing the net; 2.04% provided no answer. Studying at distance is another point to ask to see students’ reaction and easiness with such new form of learning. 42.85% said that they needed technical help; 40.81% sometimes did; and 16.32% needed not. The following table illustrates the aforementioned results.

Table 1: Students' Perceptions on the Use of the Computer during Distance Learning

Statements	Yes	No	sometimes
I have access to my computer most of the time	46,93%	8,16%	44,89%
I am confident using the Internet.	71,42%	4,08%	22,44%
I need some technical help to study at distance	42,85%	16,32%	40,81%

Perceptions towards online learning

The first questionnaire revolved around students' interest in e-learning. 55.10% reported a yes answer; 20.40% claimed that they were not into such learning and 24.48% stated that they sometimes felt interested in e-learning.

Table 2. Interests in E-learning

	Yes	No	Sometimes
Are you interested in e-learning?	55,10%	20,40%	24,48%

On the kind of e-learning that they prefer, 44.89% preferred e-learning in addition to traditional courses; 22.444% are with e-learning as an alternative to traditional courses and 32.65% did not prefer the two previously mentioned suggestions which means they were biased towards traditional classes. Students were also asked to identify the presentation of e-learning materials. 55.10% preferred the material as PowerPoint and reading texts; 26.53% as PPT only; 12.24% as bullet point contents; and 4.08% provided no answer as the following two table shows.

Table 3. Kinds of E-learning Students Prefer

	Yes	No	Sometimes
What kind of e-learning do you prefer?	22,44%	44,89%	32,65%

Table 4. The Presentation of E-learning Materials

	A	B	C	No answer
I prefer e-learning materials to be presented as:	26,53	55,10	12,24	4,08

Moving to the advantages of e-learning, students were supposed to tick more than one answer from the suggested lists of positive aspects of e-learning. 61.22% admitted that e-learning was suitable for students who live far from the university; 57.14% agreed with the advantage of learning at ease from home; 38.77% were with the fact that e-learning helped them to choose the teaching materials that suited them; 36.73% said that information was easily accessed and

18.36% agreed that e-learning demanded lower fees as the following tables demonstrates.

Table 5. The Advantages of E-learning

	A 09	B19	C 18	D 30	E 28
E-learning is beneficial for many reasons.	18,36%	38,77%	36,73%	61,22%	57,14%

As far as the drawbacks of e-learning, the results showed that 73.46% of respondents considered that e-learning prevented them from communicating with teachers; 48.97% saw it as a hindrance of interaction with classmates; 42.85% viewed e-learning as expensive i.e., not for free; 26.53% regarded e-learning as having negative effects on their physical abilities; and 14.28% provoked loneliness.

Other questions were also asked to students about e-learning in relation to some important element about learning in general, such as working independently, interaction, collaboration, benefits, shortcomings, online vs. classroom learning. Starting with working independently, 71.42% enjoyed working independently via the Internet; while, 28.57% disagreed. Moreover, 53.66% could understand online courses without the teacher's assistance; whereas, 46.65% could not. As far as collaboration is concerned, considered as the most significant skill of the 21st century, 53.06% responded that they agreed on working collegially with their classmates and 46.93% disagreed. 59.16% enjoyed working in groups; while, 40.81% did not.

Concerning students' perceptions on online vs. classroom learning, 71.42% said that they learned better in online courses that face to face courses. Besides, 67.34% preferred online courses; while, 32.65% did not. Interestingly enough, other benefits drawn from online courses are stated below. 70.42% respondents perceived using online courses as a helpful means to revise regularly at anytime and remember them easily; in contrast, 28.75% did not agree on that. Furthermore, 57.14% saw learning online as motivating; while 42.85% deems it as tedious. They also considered a detailed online course as effective in gaining knowledge (61.22%); on the other hand, 38.77% were not with that point.

With regard other features to consider about e-learning shortcomings, 67.34% respondents felt distracted when learning online and easily shifted to using social media instead; whereas, 32.65% did not. 57.14% felt that complicated tech do not make them stressed and lost; while 42.85% felt so. The table below summarise all the results mentioned before.

Table 6. Students' Other Perceptions on E-learning

Statements	Agree	Disagree
I enjoy working independently via the Internet.	71,42%	28,57%
I could understand online courses without the teacher's assistance.	46,65%	53,66%
I can work collegially with my classmates online.	46,93%	53,06%
I learn better in online courses than in face to face courses.	28,57%	71,42%
I prefer online courses to face to face.	32,65%	67,34%
Using online courses help me revise them each time and remember them better	79,59%	20,40%
Learning online is motivating	42,85%	57,14%
.A detailed online course is effective in gaining knowledge.	61,22%	38,77%
I feel distracted when learning online and I easily shift to using social media instead.	67,34%	32,65%
Complicated technology makes me feel stressed and lost.	42,85%	57,14%

IV. Discussion

The implication of distance learning versus face to face has become a new form of education in Algeria since Covid 19 outbreak. Mostaganem University, as among other Algerian and worldwide universities, has shifted to transferring the learning process remotely through digital platforms "Moodle". Thus, this study aimed at revealing students' perceptions towards this new system of learning.

The results showed that most students used their computers and smartphones for leisure purposes such as connecting in social media and playing games. This indicates that they all possess tools to get access to the Internet. Therefore, shifting to distance learning was not that complicated for them as long as they felt confident and interested in using them.

It is worth stressing, at this juncture, that distance learning might not be the best solution for all students, but many students reported the benefits they gained from distance learning. At the utmost, they viewed e-learning as suitable for those students living far from the university as it helped them get updated and active anywhere and anytime, from home, bedroom, buses, taxis, workplaces and so forth. Besides, students felt flexible to choose the course of learning that they wanted to start with and reinforce without being abide by any schedule. This is not congruent with a study conducted in 2017 where it was claimed that online courses can have a negative effect on students' progression and academic success (Bettinger et.al., 2017).

More importantly, students considered e-learning as affordable for anyone without wasting too much time and money in going to and from university. Thus, it saved them money and time as all that they needed was a computer or a

smartphone. In addition, distance learning favoured working independently as well as cooperatively. Students coped with the two methods of learning as they might have different learning styles, strategies and preferences. They also preferred e-materials to be presented as PowerPoint and reading texts to facilitate memorising and understanding them.

However, respondents also admitted some of e-learning shortcomings. Some students claimed that e-learning prevented them from interaction with teachers and classmates. They all missed that social physical interaction between them. Moreover, it also made them feel distracted, lonely and stressed. This is consistent with Sadeghi (2019) claims about the disadvantages of distance learning. Thus, positivity, self-motivation, self-regulation and self-reliance are needed in order to learn successfully in distance learning. Others also saw that without paying Internet fees, they would not get connected and download the courses. Hence, this is one of the frustrated limitations of distance learning.

All in all, the results showed students' positive attitudes towards e-learning; therefore, they are willing to accept innovations in learning. For some, this type of learning is still a nightmare because of a lack in training and resourcing (Kim et.al., 2021). More interestingly, combining online and face to face learning has been an alternative to both kinds of learning what is named blended learning which "is considered the most effective and most popular mode of instruction adopted by educational institutions due to its perceived effectiveness in providing flexible, timely and continuous learning" Rasheed et.al., 2020, P.1).

The online-only learning situation may not continue for a life-time; thus, recommendations are provided to improve the quality of e-learning and e-teaching. First, teachers should opt for a blended learning approach in case more interactive platforms are used clearly and appropriately by both teachers and learners. Second, allowing creativity, productivity and flexibility to deliver lessons to students are of paramount importance in order not to oblige teachers and learners to rely on only one platform. Finally, other suggestions are also needed by developing further surveys to teachers and instructors to enhance e-learning in general during and after the pandemic through using other strategies like video conferencing, Zoom, Meet and spreading a variety of online resources and learning materials.

V. Conclusion

It is worth mentioning that the new generation is acquainted with technology, they are tech savvy; however, distance learning in our universities will never replace traditional classes but can be an additional means that meets students' needs and goals. This study reveals students' perceptions on the benefits

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of distance learning that outweigh its drawbacks. However, other results could be found if we conducted a survey on other levels and different universities. Moreover, students' learning styles may also play a definite role in determining the appropriateness of online courses. In short, students at the University of Mostaganem reacted positively to e-learning which is but an evidence of the hard work and perseverance of the teachers and instructors.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Aim : The present survey investigates students' perceptions towards distance learning during Covid 19 pandemic. Your opinion is important in this study. Put a tick or a cross next to each statement that is convenient to you. Thank you!

I. General Information

1. Gender : Male Female
2. Number of hours I spend per week using a computer/Smartphone for educational purposes.
3. Number of hours I spend per week using a computer/smartphones for leisure purposes like using social media, playing games, etc.
4. I have access to my computer most of the time. Yes No sometimes
5. I am confident using the Internet. Yes No Sometimes
6. I need some technical help to study at distance. Yes No Sometimes

II. General Information about e-learning:

1. Are you interested in e-learning? Yes No Sometimes
2. What kind of e-learning do you prefer?
Instead of a traditional course
An addition to a traditional course
None of the above suggestions
3. I prefer e-learning materials to be presented as:
 - PowerPoint
 - PowerPoint and reading materials
 - Only bullet point contents
4. E-learning is beneficial for many reasons. More than one answer is possible to tick.
 - Lower fees of studying

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- Choosing teaching materials that suit me
- Easily accessed information
 - Suitable for students who live far from the university
 - Repeating the lessons every time
 - Learning at ease from home

5. E-learning is not beneficial for many reasons.

- Absence of communication with teachers
- Absence of communication among classmates
- Internet costs
- Affects our physical abilities
- Provokes loneliness, depression

Agree disagree

6. Using online courses help me revise them each time and remember them better.
7. I enjoy working independently via the Internet.
8. I could understand online courses without the teacher's assistance.
9. Learning online is motivating.
10. I can work collegially with my classmates online.
11. I enjoy working in groups online.
12. A detailed online course is effective in gaining knowledge.
13. I feel distracted when learning online and I easily shift to using social media instead.
14. Complicated technology makes me feel stressed and lost.
15. I learn better in online courses than in face to face courses.
16. I prefer online courses to face to face.