

Online Learning During COVID-19

Lidija ELLIOTT

Abstract

This paper will focus on what some of the largest advantages and disadvantages of online education have been for students and educators, while dealing with COVID. This will be split into four distinct sections: Advantages for Students, Advantages for Educators, Disadvantages for Students, Disadvantages for Educators. Despite being in similar situations, there is a prominent divide between the circumstances faced by each. Knowing as an educator what challenges students face, or knowing as a student what challenges educators face, can bridge the divide, and hopefully create a mutual understanding between each group.

Keywords: online, education, advantage, disadvantage, students, educators.

Introduction

The year 2020 will go down in the history books as one of the most peculiar years in modern history. What has driven most of the frustration in 2020 is the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). According to Zhu & Niu (2020, p. 1), “Since December 2019, a new type of coronavirus called novel coronavirus

(2019-nCoV, or COVID-19) was identified in Wuhan, China” which persists at this time (early 2021 — though several vaccines are currently being deployed). Along with health concerns, a slew of other societal issues have been propelled to the forefront of public consciousness. Income inequality, social justice, and climate change are a few of the topics that have been perceived to be worsening side effects of COVID-19. However, the reality is that, due to stay-at-home orders and less recreational activity, more people are beginning to pay attention to circumstances already causing concern. This information may all seem tangential to the true focus of this paper, but it leads to yet another major problem that has been the cause of great difficulties during the coronavirus pandemic: online education or online learning. Tsai and Machado (2002, p. 2) define online learning as being “associated with content readily accessible on a computer.”

The fact that online learning and online programs are available in this day and age is impressive. It provides accessibility to a relatively stable online environment and allows students nearly unlimited access to their instructors. The instructors’ response rate/time/willingness is a whole other subject entirely, but the fact remains that online courses are a blessing during the tough times of COVID. According to Mishra, Gupta & Shree (2020, p. 2), “...online education became a pedagogical shift from traditional method to the modern approach of teaching-learning from classroom to Zoom, from personal to virtual and from seminars to webinars.” As great as the transition has been, it has been anything but seamless. To say that there is a significant difference between online classes and in-person learning would be an understatement — both in quality and reliability. For every student that notes they are thriving with online learning, there are probably just as many (if not more) that would say they miss the traditional environment. They miss the social aspects of in-person learning. They miss the divide between school and home life. According to Burke (2020), “students talked a lot about really missing being in person with their classmates, with their colleagues, with their faculty members, and having those spontaneous, organic

conversations and relationships.” There are not any concrete divides — most students have probably felt a little of both now and then.

Advantages for Students

There are numerous ways that students have actually benefitted during the COVID crisis. It may not be immediately apparent since the idea of having to sit in near isolation for class seems like a drawback in itself (which will be discussed more later). Regardless, every tricky or bad situation has some silver lining — being a student during the COVID pandemic is no exception. Most of these advantages did not become immediately apparent, especially since coronavirus worries and lockdowns began right in the middle of the semester for schools around the globe. As educators hurried to make their classes just as valuable/viable online as they were in the classroom, students, especially newer university attendees, had to entirely remodel their work ethic. They would no longer have access to the amenities at a large university, nor the in-class time to focus on their work and ask professors, and fellow classmates, for help when they needed it. Though this made it a difficult task to rise up to, there were a few aspects of the COVID lockdowns that actually ended up benefitting students rather than harming them.

Course Access

This advantage is sort of a two-way street, but that will be drawn out later. For now, the ability of students to access their courses from anywhere, at any time, is an astounding nod to the impressiveness of technology. Even by historical standards, being able to take a class in any subject an individual desires at any time without restriction is remarkable. During this pandemic, it has become vital that educational be accessible online to ensure that people can practice proper social distancing requirements. COVID also put the development of complex online courses, like teaching English, into overdrive. Though this also has

its drawbacks, the creativity of universities and course instructors in creating comprehensive course experiences has never been higher. Various simulations, interactive examples for lessons, and unique approaches to assignments have all seen huge steps forward, thanks to the innovations of educators and students alike.

“Lecturers researching different technology options and regularly meeting to exchange findings allowed for informed decisions to be made within such a short time frame. The success of this pooling of time, research and knowledge, and the productive discussion that followed demonstrated that effectively achieving the task was best done as a collective effort” (Bradley, 2021, p. 80).

It may take some time to become fully integrated and useful, but the coronavirus has reinforced the way the online learning process is approached.

Instructor Access

Being able to contact an instructor through the use of technology is nothing new. University email has existed for over two decades now and is a great way to get in touch with professors. However, instructor access during office hours and via personal meetings is now simpler and easier. This is not to say that students could never have online meetings before 2020, but the pandemic has essentially forced professors to become well acquainted with these forms of technology and make themselves available more often. According to Older (2020), “On top of helping anxious students, professors faced an additional challenge: quickly figuring out how to become adept at teaching online.” Realistically, this is an important change that benefits all students. Increased flexibility from professors for students who may also work a part-time or even a full-time job is usually less harsh. This is not a blanket statement for all instructors. Many have been kind and accommodating well before this event, but COVID has helped push the last bunch into a realm of greater lenience.

Cost

The cost of higher education for many students has never been an easy burden to bear. In fact, this “advantage” [of not physically attending college], depending on what school a student attends, may not even enter the realm of being called an advantage because their institution has not lowered the costs of attendance for 2020–21. Still, there are plenty of schools that have kept their students in mind above their bottom lines and have accordingly made education financially accessible.

Comfort

Perhaps the least important feature of this section, yet still relevant, is that students are now able to learn from the comfort of their own homes. According to a survey that was done by Fatoni et al. (202, p. 572), “A comfortable educational environment was the most common advantage identified for online learning.” There are several reasons that this is beneficial to students, but the primary reason is that they are able to learn in a healthy and safe environment. The home learning environment, specifically regarding quizzes, tests, and the like, has already been theorized to result in better performances by students. This is even applicable to students in programs that require that face cameras be active and that the exam window cannot be left, to ensure the academic integrity and honesty of students. Lastly, concerning comfort, students are able to work on their classes and take their course wherever they go. Laptops already provided a great deal of range with homework/writing, but the expansion of online course videos/syllabi/assignments has further enhanced the capabilities of students so they can reach their full potential online.

Advantages for Educators

When the COVID-19 lockdowns first began, it was very difficult for educators to get all of their course materials set up for their students. Much like the rest of 2020, it was a time of great uncertainty as one of the largest social-educational

experiments was about to get underway. No one knew how it would go, and the impacts of what is going on are still unknown even today. However, once everyone began to settle into their new daily routines, teachers and professors began to realize that there were actually some benefits to working at home while their students did the same. Ever since then, it has been a challenge each day to optimize course loads, help as many students as possible, and essentially try to be everywhere at once to an even greater extent than educators had already been attempting. Luckily, the work-from-home response to dealing with the coronavirus epidemic did not undermine every task of being an educator.

Ease of Posting of Assignments

Perhaps to the dismay of students, all coursework would now be submitted through online means. Not only has this drastically cut down on the physical clutter that has plagued the office of professors at the beginning of each term, but there are now several systems in place that ensure students know when an assignment is due. This also means that there will likely never be any discrepancy between an educator and their student about whether an assignment was supposed to be submitted in person or virtually. Being able to post all assignments online also means that the instructions for said assignments can be revised at a moment's notice. Should some discussion in class lead to an interesting, relevant discussion question, then it can easily be applied to online postings. Again, this may somewhat disappoint students that are in their first or last year of university, but this versatility in assignment management proves how valuable online course portals are for educators.

Resource Availability

It is certain that there were a great number of courses being run by less-experienced educators when COVID restrictions began to take hold. Accordingly, as they began to modify their course schedules to accommodate online functionality, many of them were probably lost when it came to doing so. Even seasoned professors were likely at a loss for what to do if their class normally depended

on in-person activities. This is where the true potential of the Internet begins to shine. Should one educator have a great idea for how to cope with these difficult circumstances, they can instantly share it with their department and with the Internet at large. Educators that were proficient online teachers before COVID began have shared their knowledge on how to control online classrooms, since this all began in March 2020. Despite the rocky start, having knowledge this readily available to educators everywhere has been a great asset that most did not even think to seek out before teaching online.

Commute Time

Some universities in Japan, but especially in America, have professors and educators that travel from all parts of the country to teach each day at their institution. COVID lockdowns are hard, but they have saved hours upon hours of travel times for students and professors alike. “One of the benefits of Work from Home is that you don’t have to spend money to pay for transportation or gas costs, and teachers can also save time on travel” (Purwanto et al., 2020). While discussing commute times, the entire lockdown scenario has also made it far easier to get guest speakers to attend various lectures as well. Many university lecturers or renowned professors from other institutions can be reached more easily to share their thoughts in the classroom. Skype/Zoom meetings for educational purposes have been growing in popularity — even long before COVID — but this entire situation has propelled them to even further popularity. Without having to go through the troubles of traveling overseas or throughout the country, popular and much-sought-after speakers are more accessible than ever.

Experimental Teaching Methods

The teachers/professors who were in control of a natural lab course that utilized a lab section are likely to resonate with this the most. When COVID restrictions first started to go into effect, the outlook for lab-based courses was bleak. Professors would be unable to provide adequate instruction for complex lab routines that essentially required in-person guidance. However, there have

been significant steps forward in online experimental technology that allows students to run simulations of various lab experiments. In turn, professors can rest assured that their students will be gaining experience online that is just as valuable as if they were in the lab.

Disadvantages for Students

The benefits of going to school while at home during COVID are seen as a silver lining for a reason: almost every other aspect of learning from home is harder on students than it is easier. A majority of students will likely adapt just fine or perfectly to at-home and online learning. The rest of the students will have trouble getting used to this form of learning for a number of reasons, even those entirely unrelated to their work ethic or attention span. In spite of all the great improvements that have been made to online courses since the end of March 2020, there have been equally great challenges that students have been tasked to meet as well. Here are a few of the negative examples of online learning that students have continually experienced with an impressive level of tenacity, consistency, and perseverance.

Distractions at Home

This is a big one that generally applies to classrooms that have younger students but is applicable at any age — the older the class, the more complex the distraction can be. No matter the age, however, having students suddenly being thrust into an unmoderated environment that they are 100% comfortable with (their room) has just as many drawbacks as benefits. Their rooms are likely full of distractions, from TVs to gaming consoles, and of course pets and family members too. Being confined to their rooms all day will not help these notions either. They might be able to roam the house during their downtime, or take a walk outside, but students are bound to be drawn to their phones or other stimulating things when they are parked in front of Zoom lectures all day.

Lack of Social Opportunities

Again, this is more applicable to younger college students who are in their first year of university because they cannot form new relationships. According to Posey et al. (2020, p. 5), “Students can get to know each other over the net. However, it does not replace the bond that is formed from face-to-face meetings.” Through their whole life, they have been in a classroom environment in a school full of students or possibly mingling with coworkers at a part-time job. Now that has suddenly been ripped away from them after years of exposure. The longer the lockdowns and online learning lasts, this is certain to have negative effects on their mental health. Despite the fact that it is for the benefit of their physical health, it doesn’t make it any easier.

Access to Internet Connection

Figuring out how to ensure all students had access to a stable Internet connection was, and still is, a difficult task to tackle. Takenaka (2020) wrote that “Today, the Internet is accessible for nearly 100% of the people living in Japan, However, the Internet still covers only 60% of the nation.” In an ideal world, there would be no issues with having students shift over to totally online instruction. Unfortunately, there are students that live alone, or even with family, that simply do not have the funds to pay or do not want to incur extra costs for reliable or any Internet access. Luckily, this is one of the few disadvantages that have been dealt with swiftly, as a majority of institutions have provided assistance to students that may need it in the form of working from university buildings with Wi-Fi access. A select few places have also financially supported students in acquiring a means to Internet access, for example, “Japan’s top three mobile phone companies announced they will eliminate some additional charges for data plans for users aged 25 and under” (Fraser, 2020). Despite these efforts, a clear class divide has been exposed because of this issue, and progress is slow to rectify it completely.

Engagement

Staying engaged and working independently as a student involves a bit of all these aspects but comprises what is likely the hardest part of online learning. When a student is in school or walking across campus to their classes, their mind is always focused partly on education, whether they recognize it or not. They might leave one class thinking about homework for that day, but once they arrive at their next course, their thought process will unconsciously shift to second class. Online students usually participate from their bedrooms — full of the distractions discussed earlier — and they are relaxed. Because they are not in a classroom, they are more susceptible to these distractions, and even the best students have reported having trouble with engagement. As Zounek and Sudicky (2013, p. 60) state:

Some students may require strict and detailed management from their teachers; however, when implementing e-learning solutions, teachers usually expect a higher degree of activity, self-organization and independence on the part of learners. For unmotivated students with poor learning habits, therefore, technologies may become the reason for decreased productivity and worse study results.”

Unlike some of the other issues mentioned, it is a persistent problem that does not and will not have a complete fix until in-person learning resumes.

Disadvantages for Educators

Great effort has gone into making the transition to online learning for students as smooth as possible. Obviously, it has not been free of bumps and detours, but the work of educators has led to significant steps forward in online learning techniques and technology. However, several difficulties still lie ahead for educators themselves as new and old teachers/professors try to constantly adapt to shifting situations. So far, the shift to online learning has been successful. This was especially noticeable during the initial transition that occurred in March and

April 2020 when universities were able to begin e-learning practices effectively in less than a month. Regardless, the issues listed below are likely chronic issues that will never fully be resolved, much like the engagement of students, as noted previously. It is a constantly, endlessly changing circumstance that will require equally perpetual amounts of work until COVID has been resolved.

Distraction of Students

Dealing with distractions is already difficult enough for students themselves to handle. Unfortunately, the problem is almost harder for educators to deal with than ever before. Previously, in a classroom setting, a professor/teacher was able to take full command of the room, nearly all the elements or sources of distraction, and could act as an authority figure that would keep students in line. Without a physical presence, or any of the causes of engagement issues (no controlled environment, moving classes, etc.), keeping the attention of students is an unsurmountable challenge at times. At higher levels of education, this might not be as large an issue, but it can still drastically lower the participation of the student body as a whole. This becomes problematic for introverted students — it is difficult to properly gauge their progress without face-to-face interaction. As Guijosa (2020) states:

“Rather than discrediting online education, to improve its effectiveness, it is necessary to address these challenges. It is critical to developing more immersive educational content and experiences that adapt to each student with the support of technology and, above all, more appropriate instructional methods.”

Extended Responsibilities

Of course, educators far and wide have had to put in countless hours of extra work simply to accommodate the needs of their students. The hard work of educators could not be overstated because of the effort seen so far. However, though this is a blessing that cannot be praised enough, all the additional work done is taking its toll on professors and teachers. According to Jiji (2020), “Teachers

at universities and colleges are being exhausted by the sudden switch to online classes caused by the Coronavirus pandemic.” Making sure they are available at virtually all hours, redesigning course syllabi, and setting up additional office hours/study hours are all contributing factors to these circumstances. This is even without mentioning the extensive time commitment from them when migrating courses online during the Spring 2020 semester. Course migrations of that scale (and of that complexity when considering collegiate studies) were not a task that had much precedent. Nearly every step taken during that period of time was being made up as they went along. Needless to say, not every story regarding this was a success, but the coronavirus has led to innumerable hours of extended work for educators.

Building Rapport with Students

As an educator, building rapport with students is an integral part of creating a successful class. Having a positive relationship builds respect between student and educator. Without that respect it becomes incredibly difficult to accomplish even the simplest of classroom tasks. It is difficult to build that relationship while teaching online. It can be done, but it will never be as genuine as it would have been had it been built in person. In order to tackle this obstacle, most educators will try their best to relate to every student. It is still a slow and arduous process that is still being improved, but it provides nowhere near the same level of respect.

Conclusion

As outlined in this paper, the issue of advantages and disadvantages of online technologies in education is very complex and not in any way black and white. The Internet is a unique and powerful tool that has a huge effect on all the teaching and learning activities that are done in the classroom. As Posey states (2020, p. 12), “Not only does the Internet enable international teaching and learning, it gives the teaching and learning a new dimension by adding the opportunities to

the various types of communication with partners to the teaching and the learning from far away on the Globe.”

In spite of negative aspects, it is clear that they do not greatly outweigh the capability of students and educators alike. It will take confidence and perseverance, but once the vaccine has been rolled out on a wider scale, hopefully these issues will become a thing of the past. Only time will tell, but compared to 2020, the outlook for 2021 (as of February) looks just a hint brighter than before. To summarize it, it would seem best to embrace a broad, open-minded view of education technology implementation, observing the overall social practices of using online tools in real-life situations and reflecting the best practices in the learning environment.

References

- Bradley, N. (2021). A Process of Development and Lessons Learned: Transferring Core English from the Classroom to Online. *BULLETIN OF NAGOYA UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES*, 2021, No. 8, pp. 77–103.
- Burke, L. (n.d.). Inside Higher Ed. Retrieved from: <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/10/27/long-term-online-learning-pandemic-may-impact-students-well>
- Fatoni, A., Arifiatih, N., Nurkhatyatic, E., Nurdiawati, E., Fidziah, E., Pamungkas, G., ... Azizik, E. (2020). University Students Online Learning System During Covid-19 Pandemic: Advantages, Constraints and Solutions. *A multifaceted review journal in the field of pharmacy*. 11(7), pp. 570–576. Retrieved from: <https://www.sysrevpharm.org/fulltext/196-1602175161.pdf>.
- Fraser, J. (2020, October 28). The Impact of Covid-19 on Education Inequality in Japan), Center for Strategic & International Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/impact-covid-19-education-inequality-japan>.
- Guijosa, C. (2020, February 26). Distractions: An Obstacle to an Online Education. *Observatory of Education Innovation*. Retrieved from: <https://observatory.tec.mx/edu-news/distraction-an-obstacle-to-online-education>.
- Jiji. (2020, May 24). Shift to Online classes leaves Japan`s University Teachers exhausted. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/24/national/university-teachers-japan-exhausted-online-classes/>.
- Mishra, L., Gupta, T. & Shree, A. (2020). Online teaching-learning in higher education during lockdown period of COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*. Vol 1, pp. 1–8. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100012>.
- Older, W. (2020). When Covid-19 forced him to Teach Online, This New York Tech got Creative.

- New York Institute of Technology. Retrieved from: <https://narratives.insidehighered.com/covid-19-forced-him-to-teach-online/index.html>.
- Posey, G., Burgess, T., Eason, M. & Jones, Y. (2010). The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Virtual Classroom and the Role of the Teacher. Southwest Decision Sciences Institute Conference, March 2–6. Retrieved from; http://www.swdsi.org/swdsi2010/SW2010_Precedings/papers/PA126.pdf.
- Purwanto, A., Asbari, M., Fahlevi, M., Mufil, A., Agistiawati, E., Cahyono, Y., Suryani, P. (2020). Impact of Work From Home (WFH) on Indonesian Teachers Performance During the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Exploratory Study. *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology*. 29.(5), pp. 6235–6244. Retrieved from: <http://sersec.org/journals/index.php/IJAST/article/view/15627>.
- Takenaka, H. (2020, July 31) Japan`s post-pandemic information technology challenges. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/07/31/commentary/japan-commentary/japans-post-pandemic-information-technology-challenges/>
- Tsai, S. & Machado, P., (2002), “E-learning, online learning, web-based learning, or distance learning: Unveiling the ambiguity in current terminology”, *Association for Computer Machinery eLearn Magazine*, (7), 3–5. New York: ACM Press, DOI: 10.1145/566778.568598.
- Zhu, H. & Niu, P. (2020) The novel coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, China. *Zhu et al. Global Health Research and Policy* 5:6, pp. 1–3. Retrieved from: <https://ghrp.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s41256-020-00135-6>.
- Zounek, J. & Sudicky, P. (2013). Heads in the Cloud: Pros and Cons of Online Learning. Conference: DisCo 2013 At: Prague. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311807667_Heads_in_the_Cloud_Pros_and_Cons_of_Online_Learning.