

How do students regard online learning?

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Does the question in the title draw you in immediately? I wouldn't be surprised if it does, considering that our classes are mostly online these days, during the pandemic! It is very unlikely that as teachers, you would not have asked yourself this question at least once in the past few months.

Ironically, even to read this column you must now be poring over digital screens, even if you are not talking into microphones with earpieces tucked into your ears! I deliberately chose this research paper (it is only three pages long, so you would not need much time to read it) this month.

Considering that the authors of this paper are from Greece and Turkey, I was curious to glean their research findings. In this study, the authors have asked as their *research questions*, how online students:

- ✦ perceive the online learning experience
- ✦ compare online and classroom learning experiences
- ✦ perceive the impact of culture on their online learning experience
- ✦ are challenged by their cultural, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, during online learning.

They carried out qualitative research by interviewing 12 students, who were volunteers from different cultures like Somalia, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Turkey and Cyprus. While most of them defined online learning as being different from classroom learning, one of them declared it complemented classroom learning. I found this interesting in itself: this student obviously did not feel that it could substitute classroom learning. In answer to the second question, the time-saving element of online learning was picked up by one student, who sounded relieved that (s)he

Students' Perceptions of Online Learning

Aytekin Isman, Zehra Altmay Gazi and Fahriye Altmay Aksal

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did not have to wake up early in order to go to class! The obvious advantage of being able to directly ask the teacher a question inside a classroom (versus having to email it at the end of the online class) was pointed out by another student. Yet another student concurred with this, adding, "In distance education, it can be difficult, as one has to study alone, research alone." Stated differently, the interactive nature of a classroom experience (which permits engagement with peers) was felt to be missed during the online experience by several students.

Almost all of them agreed that culture, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds strongly affect the impact of online classes. They were of the view that the usage of the English language during online classes created challenges and severely limited many of them.

The authors conclude that online classes place a demand on students: that they be self-motivated, responsible and able to communicate using the Internet. The ability to meet all these requirements is affected both by the student's personal qualities as well as his/her cultural background. In an online

learning community, the authors emphasize that establishing a common understanding warrants an integration of personal qualities (like motivation, learning style, gender and previous online learning experience) with cultural differences. It is only through such integration that differences between online learners can be minimized and online programmes can become successful, assert the authors.

As I said, this is a short paper. It ends there. But it set me thinking.

I began to ask the following questions:

- Aren't there almost as many differences (cultural, personal, etc.) amongst learners *in a classroom*? If yes, how do we as teachers set about *minimizing* them? *Do we*?
- What if – instead of trying to minimize differences amongst learners – we examined these differences and tried to *understand* them?
- And then, having understood them – even if only partially – what if we integrated that *understanding* into our online classes?

Let me use a hypothetical example to explain what I mean.

Let's say, in your online class of 35 students, you have 7 who are very weak in English but Internet savvy, 10 who are good in English as well as Internet savvy, and the remaining 18 who are mediocre in both English as well as usage of the Internet.

Ideally, in a classroom scenario, what would you do with students of differing abilities?

Group them, so that peer learning can happen? Well, in an online class, would it be possible to do the cyber-equivalent? By sending them (during a class) into three or four different break out rooms for short discussions, *during the class*? The groups can be configured around (just as an example) their English and Internet skills: depending on whether we wish to have them learn from each other (in which case we will constitute groups with a mix of one Internet-savvy-comfortable-in-English student along with a few who are on a spectrum, as regards both these skills) or we want them to feel comfortable with others of matching skill (in which case we will group them as per the described distribution). Our lesson would also then have to be designed accordingly. No doubt, this requires a lot of planning and preparation: but once this work is done, it will come in handy for the future, won't it?

Now bring it into the classroom!

1. Spend one class getting your students to answer a simple questionnaire.
2. Design the questionnaire such that it draws out their perceptions of online classes: the challenges, the positives, the negatives.
3. Ask a question or two that requires them to use the Internet to answer. This will help you gauge their surfing skills.
4. Deliberately couch a question or two in English that is pitched slightly above their level. From those who comprehend/don't comprehend these questions, you will know their language level.
5. Ask them questions like what they miss about classroom experiences.
6. Allow them to suggest cyber-equivalents for the things they miss. Your students may surprise you with innovative ideas!
7. See how they respond to the idea of small-group discussions in break out rooms. Or even in WhatsApp groups.
8. Now collate your findings and see if you can factor the conclusions into your online classes thereafter.

Send in your findings to
thinkingteacher22@gmail.com.

But even before getting here, I wonder: in our rush to 'cover the syllabus' online, have we taken the time to even study the different online skills of our students? Or have we simply assumed that they are all equally capable of navigating the online space? With its technological challenges, demand for fluency in English, and much else?

Yes, understanding such diversity will definitely demand some time to be set aside: but don't you think that is a small investment which will render many repeated instructions needless in the future? If you have found yourself getting increasingly frustrated because of having to repeat instructions to your online students, try the suggestions in our box, and tell us if they helped!

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher (www.thinkingteacher.in), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at <neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>.