



International Student Experiences in Online Learning Post Covid-19

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During the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, faculty and students alike had to make quick and drastic changes to their teaching and learning practices. Adjusting to a new learning context with different academic expectations can be challenging. This is especially true if this new context is in a new language, culture, and across varying time-zones, which was the case for many international students during Spring semester 2020.

A survey study was designed to better understand the international student experiences when classes abruptly went online in response to the Covid-19 pandemic mid spring semester 2020. This report gives voice to these student experiences and provides recommendations for ways to better support international students in future online courses.

The survey was administered online through Qualtrics and sent to all international undergraduate and intensive English students at the University of Minnesota in July 2020. We had 385 out of 2149 international undergraduate students respond, which was an 18% response rate. Findings suggest that while taking online classes was a relatively new experience for most students--85% of students indicated having taken two or fewer online courses of which 50% had never take any prior to transition online during spring semester 2020. Despite this being a new experience, 24% of students strongly agreed and 55% somewhat agreed with the statement "I was satisfied with my overall online online experience" suggesting a generally positive experience. Below are summaries of the findings and recommendations.

Successes

While students tended to focus their comments on the challenges and struggles they experienced in the transition to being an online student, they also shared some unexpected silver linings or benefits. Most notable were the comments about ways being online benefited English language learners. The most common comment was about access to video recorded lectures, which allowed students the opportunity to review and ensure comprehension and allow access to class content from across time zones. While there was an even 50/50 split in agreement to the likert scale statement "the online format made me more

confident in my English language skills," many comments in open-ended question highlighted various ways the online format helped build English language skills and confidence.

What follows are some student voices:

"It's easier for me to study English because I can repeat the video if there is something I didn't understand."

"Online instruction made me more comfortable and active to engage in class discussions, especially for the lectures."

"Because we had many breakout rooms and group assignments which prospered our communication skills."

What helped students

Students were asked to share what faculty and instructional staff did that helped them learn and be engaged during online learning. What follows were the most recurring and salient comments:

- Having access to recorded lectures and closed captions or transcripts of those lectures
- Having guided opportunities to interact with peers
- Having a variety of participation modes (e.g., Zoom breakout rooms, chat, polls, collaborative documents, discussion boards, Kahoot!)
- Having faculty or instructors who cared and made an effort to communicate regularly and in a timely fashion
- Having faculty or instructors who were flexible and understanding

Challenges

Theme 1: Lack of Connection to Classmates

65% of students strongly or somewhat disagreed with the statement, "I felt connected to my classmates." Even though students indicated most class had synchronous components, they mentioned lack of opportunities to interact or that online interactions didn't provide a sense of connection. Here is what some students said:

"I did not feel connected with classmates. While it did not take away from me learning the material properly, it somewhat diminished the educational experience."

"I felt a big disconnect between me and the class. With me mostly taking technical classes it doesn't help with the fact that moving online. There is a disconnect between me, my classmates, and the instructor and that disconnect grew further as the semester went online."

"...But we have less connections between classmates. Online lessons make us feel more distant and harder to be friends."

"No chance to connect to classmates. And would be awkward if have team projects or discussions since we don't know each other and they are not active in discussion."

Theme 2: Time

Students commented on hardships they faced related to time. Those who traveled back to home countries or outside of the central standard time zone commented on the struggle of working across time zones. For some, this was more logistical in nature, and made it hard to keep track of due dates and deadlines, for others it was an issue of lifestyle and wellbeing as a result of studying at all hours of the day and night. Students expressed the following:

"Sometimes I was not able to take synchronous meetings. For many of us who came back to home countries, taking synchronous classes means we will need to take classes from 12-5 AM."

"Different in time between US and Oman. Taking classes till 1:30 am after midnight and sometimes taking exams too late after midnight. Not having enough hours to sleep and insomnia. Sometimes sleeping during the day."

"Keeping up with class schedules. Time difference made me extra hard to keep up with due dates."

"I sometimes don't remember the deadlines and class schedule, since I can watch the videos or records later."

Theme 3: Lack of Motivation/Focus

Many students also commented on the challenges they faced related to staying focused and motivated once classes went online. Student reported that it was hard to

study from home or isolated in a dorm room and found it hard to be motivated to learn outside of the classroom.

"Not being physically on campus is a little challenging that I don't feel as motivated to study, and not seeing my classmates and instructor face to face is also another aspect that make learning harder for me."

"I did not feel motivated to pay attention throughout all of my classes as I had too many distractions going on. Apart from that, I wasn't seeing my friends taking one of the best parts of college away."

Recommendations

- Consider creating cohort experiences or course scheduling, support services, and community building activities that are more accessible for students across time zones.
- Consider creating student groups based on time zones.
- Create shared and community-focused experiences outside of Zoom or synchronous meeting spaces.
- Reach out to students individually, perhaps at the college, department, or programmatic level.
- Learn as much as possible about your students' context, internet connections, and access to materials and be open to making reasonable accommodations accordingly.
- Keep clear and open lines of communication.
- Design online classes with a flipped classroom approach and balance student/student, instructor/student, and student/content interactions.
- Scaffold student interactions.
- Create "in-between spaces" for students that serve to provide students with those informal interactions that tend to occur while walking to class, while waiting in line for coffee, or while packing up belongings after class.