

10 Across Borders and Barriers – Students International Online Conference

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10.1 Abstract

Teaching at universities or in adult education requires not only profound knowledge of the subject to be taught but also some pedagogical and didactic tools. Educators across the globe have been looking for tools that would inspire and motivate students, would enable them to work independently by doing their own research and in this way - learn how to learn. Tools that enable to develop a passion for certain subjects and topics, to learn to work in teams & contribute to a common goal, to have a strategic vision for their own achievements and to be patient at the same time. This Corona year required a new didactic approach and sometimes projecting the old formats onto new online circumstances. An online conference, among other creative tools, was an event that received a huge positive response from students, locked in their home countries without direct contact to other fellow students. This was expressed in the quality and creativity of students' work and engagement. But also, the geography of our participants was amazing – providing equal opportunities to students from all corners of the world – the perfect tool to stay connected and to be heard & seen in times of lockdown!

10.2 Challenges of teaching and requirements of the future employment

The last summer semester 2020 was a very special one. The challenge was not just to offer an "interim" solution, but to make the best out of the situation and to create new formats or adapt old ones required due to the Corona pandemic. The topics of flexibility in thinking, agility in action, "embracing" the change and innovation that we tried to teach our students in all the semesters before, had suddenly the opportunity to be actively addressed and implemented. A number of challenges and requirements had to be taken into account while creating new lectures, seminars or teaching formats. Here are some of those challenges and requirements.

10.2.1 The lack of contact

The first online semester was a challenge not only for teachers but also for students. Being almost isolated from the world, spending most of the time in front of computers, it was often impossible to establish personal contact with other fellow students.

For lecturers, too, it was unusual to sit in front of a "black wall" and give lectures without seeing the students' faces most of the time, without being able to "read" from them whether the material presented seemed to be exciting or at least interesting, or whether students were distracted or bored and unable to pay the necessary attention to the subject.

Many seminar participants did not know each other, especially international students who participated for the first time in lectures and seminars at that particular university. Of course, in some situations, it was possible to learn a lot about their personalities from the chat messages, but there was still a huge lack of visual connection, which led to some kind of restraint.

10.2.2 Research-based teaching

Although the traditional lectures are very well suited for such digital teaching, we know that this passive learning is exhausting and less effective. It is important to create spaces and opportunities for students to acquire knowledge and to search for content on their own, to systematise it and to present it to others in an appropriate form. After all, one learns best when one actively and independently generates the knowledge or better - teaches the topic to others!

10.2.3 Communication

In addition to technical knowledge (in my case in Supply Chain Management and Sales), the ability to communicate, to present one's own ideas to others, to inspire others with one's own content is of enormous importance for the leaders and managers of tomorrow. "Communication is only learned through communication", Cicero once said, and in every subject, no matter how technical it may be, opportunities for ideas exchange, conversations, discussions, question rounds and presentations should be created to experience "the power of Communication".

It is of a huge importance not just to be a good "story teller", but also to be able to listen to others. This is a skill and ability that is often neglected. Already in schools we learn how to write, how to read, how to speak, but not how to listen - and by this we should understand the ability not to understand the spoken words, but the ideas behind them, or even the feelings and the motives of the partner. This requires and promotes a certain empathy and emotional intelligence that are crucial for an effective human relationship.

10.2.4 Digitisation

The working world of tomorrow will look different. Many meetings will no longer be held live and in presence, but will actually use the advantages that digital collaboration tools offer. This not only saves time, but also contributes enormously to environmental sustainability by refraining from numerous unnecessary business trips. In doing so, it is important to know and master these tools, to reduce the fear of using them, to be flexible and open towards such opportunities and feel comfortable in such new circumstances.

In addition to digital tools for presentations, there are a number of programmes that make it possible to work together on certain documents and develop creative ideas (e.g. Google Jamboard), organise work together (e.g. etherpad-tools), conduct live surveys (e.g. Mentimeter) or even create quizzes and play them live digitally together (e.g. Kahoot). These are just a few possibilities that can be used for teaching as well as for corporate communication in the future and that help to create a certain closeness despite the distances. This is also a certain prerequisite for the increasingly important IT competence of modern and future employees and managers.

10.2.5 Presentation

It is well known that most people are afraid of public speaking. The reasons for this are complex: one fears not being good enough, not being able to convince, being laughed at, forgetting something or simply not being understood. This manifests in trembling legs, sweaty hands, a stare or gaze that wanders to the ceiling, rapid speech tempo, etc. To overcome these fears and uncomfortable feelings, a proper preparation will help, and, of course, practice.

It is also of importance for the future leaders to be able to present one's own thoughts to the audience and to exemplify one's own interests and passions in a way that would create your "followers". While speaking in front of others you learn to express yourself clearly and purposefully and to respond to possible questions with confidence. The right mindset is very important here - having the courage to try new things, to react flexibly to possible problems or disruptions – these are the soft skills that are expected from the employees in the 21st century.

10.2.6 Body language

"You can't not communicate", a famous quote by Paul Watzlawick. We reveal much more about ourselves and our attitudes and feelings through body language than we do with words. And if we want to be listened to and to reach people with our ideas, we have to make sure that non-verbal communication is in harmony with verbal communication. Non-verbal communication, which includes not only gestures, eye contact, body and head movements, but also para-verbal communication, i.e. how fast, high or low we speak, how clearly we articulate, what rhythm and melody our speech has, as well as extra linguistic aspects, is an instrument that can also be used consciously to achieve certain persuasive goals or to be able to convey one's own ideas in a targeted and efficient way.

10.2.7 Diversity

Diversity manifests itself in many different forms in university life. On the one hand, of course, there are the subjects themselves and different approaches to dealing with them. On the other hand, there are the students who come from different cultural environments, bring different experiences, have different interests and preferences and speak different languages. This is always an enrichment for the group, because you learn an incredible amount not only from teachers or from books, but also from each other. Both parties should recognise this first. The heterogeneity that prevails at universities today is an incredible advantage and instrument at the same time for more tolerance, openness and more understanding that we are different, think differently and have to accept these differences or remain open to them.

10.2.8 Visualisation

Packaging one's own ideas in a visual form that enables understanding, ensures better retention of information and demands special attention from the audience is a principle of modern management in every company and a skill not yet perceived by many and yet to be learned. Visualisation can be in the form of spoken figurative language, but can also be created through images, schemes, colours, structures or a linguistic consolidation of ideas or important points that together have a common thread and contribute to a better understanding of the ideas to be conveyed. This is something that comes into play when designing the presentation slides or posters. In doing so, one learns to focus on the essentials, to tailor information to the audience and to draw the audience's attention to oneself and one's own topics.

10.3 Implementation - turning challenges into advantages – Best Practice Case

All these aspects mentioned above - on one side - lack of contact with fellow students due to complete online teaching and on the other side - a set of skills and abilities that the working world of tomorrow expects from us and our students, should be actively addressed, taught and practiced regardless of the fact whether our lectures and seminars are held live or online. This was the impulse for the idea to organise an International Student Online Conference. This format offered the opportunity to pursue all these aspects and ideas mentioned before and to create the environment that would lead to better learning processes as well as better communication with and among students. Topics within International Supply Chain Management with all its facets and International Sales with many exciting topics on digitalisation, compliance, sustainability and communication were identified and offered to students. Moreover, it was also possible for students to create their own topics based on the main theme, which could either be of a general nature or relate to specific industries and sectors, such as the automotive industry, mechanical and plant engineering, the chemical industry, the financial sector, the food or textile industry or even luxury goods or the aviation industry. The topics ranged from psychological-communicative, such as body language, story

telling, personality development, emotions and negotiations in purchasing or sales, social - such as relationship management, event management and gender aspects, to agility and innovations, sustainability and compliance and various types of digitalisation, such as augmented reality, social media, big data, digital twins, blockchain technology, which are already shaping our business and industrial world today and will change it tomorrow.

However, it was also important to emphasise the interdisciplinary nature of the topics by linking certain business management findings with engineering or psychological and communication aspects.



Figure 1: Participants' presentations

Some of the work was done in small groups – by 2-4 people. It was another challenge – developing teamwork skills, the ability to exchange ideas with others, to distribute tasks, to agree on procedures and contents, to achieve a goal together. This also required better planning, thoughtful time management to take into account the needs of the team members and achieve the desired outcome.

After the literature research and/or own observations and interviews with business professionals, the results from this own research were summarised either as a presentation or in form of a poster.



Figure 2: Students' posters

It should also be emphasised that this format or assignment was of a voluntary nature, but the participation was terrific - over 90% of all students participated in the formats in at least one form (preparing either a presentation or a poster). This is also an interesting issue about the power of voluntariness. Under pressure or necessity to “do” something, very often the interest disappears. But the creativity and success need that particular “freedom” to unfold.

The focus of this task was not on assessing students’ abilities, but on experimenting, trying out, practising, testing and 'acting out' a conference and the way of presenting.

The geography of the participants was fascinating - from Mexico, to Brazil, Europe with Germany, France, Italy, Ukraine and Russia, to Asia - India, China, Indonesia, Vietnam and Africa- Egypt, Ghana and Nigeria. It was exciting for all the involved to experience so many people from so many regions together in one digital place and to experience and share their passion.



Figure 3: Geography of the participants

Most of the participants were young people, but we had also some “surprise-guests” who already had 20 years of professional experience behind them. This is another form of diversity - across generations, which is occurring repeatedly at universities nowadays and enriches everyday learning incredibly. This is the trend, which is sure to continue, towards intergenerational teaching as a result of the life-long learning process and the realisation and openness of many people to start a second career or simply to continue and learn new subjects.

The conference was a success - due to the number of participants, the quality of the contributions and the enormous commitment that many students had shown in creating the works and in presenting them. But there was also some other discovery: being closed and reserved at the beginning students realised and made an experience that if one “opens up” and shows oneself (the requirements for the participation at the conference was the turning on of camera during presentation and discussions), so much more can be conveyed and so much joy is offered by this active way of communication, thus creating a great teaching and learning atmosphere and an environment for one's own growth!

10.4 Conclusion - Sustainability in teaching

When lecturers are engaged in their work, students become motivated too. This leads to a wonderful commitment, joy and great results at the end. To make those results “visible” and keep them “alive” longer, it is important to capture them, not to let them be forgotten, but to pass them on in the sense of the above-mentioned visualisation, sustainability and knowledge transfer. That is why a video was created after the conference that recorded those impressions and experiences and ensures the sustainability of the results.

At the same time, this “video of the results” is a great tool to maintain the relationship with students - something we always address in relation to customers in companies. It is important that at the end of a learning module, a seminar, a course, an event or the whole study students get something back that can be considered as a “souvenir”, emphasizing the importance and the interest in their work, something to take away as a reminder of successful teaching and great results of their own research. This can certainly be shown to others in one's network - family, friends, colleagues, and thereby inspire the others for similar or other creative formats. This is also a form of collaboration - the 17th sustainability goal, which ensures sustainable implementation of one's own ideas and thoughts. This also can be considered as an example of the possible long-term attachment of students to other fellow human beings and institutions that were companions of their own development.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BgVOhBrINws&feature=emb_logo

