

TEACHING AND LEARNING SOCIAL WORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

C. BACTER¹ C. MARC² S. SĂVEANU³ R. BUHAŞ⁴

Abstract: *The online educational process has effects on all actors involved. The paper investigates the changes that emerged during COVID-19 pandemic in terms of teaching activities in the case of Social Work study program at the University of Oradea. We present students' opinion regarding the way courses, seminars and laboratories were conducted in general, educational materials used in class and, problems that occurred during online meetings. Another component of this study refers to the way the practical activities were carried out. The research results show that students have adapted to the online context and, to a larger extent, the teaching-learning activity could be carried out in order to achieve the educational objectives of Social Work study program.*

Key words: *online educational process, Social Work, digital technologies, students, disciplines.*

1. Introduction

Similar to the vast majority of other fields of activity, in education, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated major changes with implications for academic activities at all levels of training. The strategies imposed by this situation involved the use of new online teaching methods through digital technology. Although in previous years there were concerns about digitalization in education and training, with emphasis on the importance of using technology in education and developing specific programs to improve teaching, especially in terms of distance-learning, now the situation has new implications because technology is largely used. In fact, online teaching has become the only way the educational activity could be continued in this period with restrictions.

The draft for the Strategy on the digitization of education in Romania (2021-2027) aims, as an objective of the Operational Plan of measures, to strengthen the acquisition of digital skills by students, including practical training in which the advanced digital skills needed in the labour market are developed and applied (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020).

These changes have been a challenge for universities, teachers and students alike. The

¹ *University of Oradea, Romania, claudianbacter@gmail.com, corresponding author*

² *University of Oradea, Romania, marc.cristiana@gmail.com*

³ *University of Oradea, Romania, soranasav@gmail.com*

⁴ *University of Oradea, Romania, ralubuhass@gmail.com*

good development of academic activities depended on the strategy established by each university, based on several regulations in this crisis period, but also on the effort of each participant in this process. The paper aims to analyse the changes regarding the way in which specialized disciplines and practical training of the Social Work study program (University of Oradea, Romania) are taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Context and Theoretical Insights

The education of social workers is complex and requires good theoretical and practical training. Both types of learning are equally important in this regard and it takes place both within universities and also directly in the field (Papouli, 2014).

Within the training process, the theoretical information needs to be adapted to the reality in the field and students should be helped to understand and apply in practice what they've learned in theory. The Social Work study programs in higher education are designed to meet these two requirements. In this sense, it is necessary to use didactic strategies that allow interaction, expressing opinions, experimenting, understanding and applying the theory, as well as mastering the culture of the profession, developing the necessary skills to practice the profession (Marc & Bacter, 2015). Practical training implies the application of theoretical knowledge in practical situations, developing intervention skills, analysing the impact of policy, and applying social work ethics for effective work with clients and groups (Noble & Ottmann, 2018).

The main teaching methods used for courses and seminars in Social Work study programs are lectures, debates and participatory discussions, working in groups, role-playing, case-studies, projects, writing reports (Marc & Bacter, 2015), and students appreciate these interactive methods (Roman, Oşvat & Marc, 2014). Students' participation in game activities (as role-playing) has a positive impact on the formation of their skills and abilities, such as subjectivity, creativity, responsibility, confidence, expressiveness, tolerance, empathy and reflection (Minzhanov et al., 2016).

The crisis situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to certain measures in order to facilitate the continuity of the teaching-learning process for all areas of study. In order to limit the intra-community spread of the virus and to protect all participants in the process, the solution was to conduct all the educational activities online. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic drew attention to the use and role of digital technology in education as well as the importance of digital skills, and raised questions about the online experience (Smoyer, O'Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020; Lup & Mitrea, 2020; Cabiati & Gómez-Ciriano, 2021). Technological innovations and online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, etc. are an alternative to face-to-face teaching, and, by facilitating online learning and teaching, they allowed many Social Work programs to continue to develop (Mclaughlin, Scholar & Teater, 2020).

This approach is not new. The use of e-learning technologies in Social Work is considered to be an advantage, both as a hybrid or blended process regardless of the teaching method, and the priority of the teaching process should be the effectiveness of learning (Phelan, 2015). According to research data, online curricula have rapidly developed within Social Work schools. Even if research shows that online and face-to-face learning experiences are

comparable, learning outcomes generated by practical courses are however difficult to be effectively measured, because it is necessary to take into consideration several factors such as: knowledge, skills and changes in skill levels as a result of participation in these courses (Forgey & Ortega -Williams, 2016).

The results of a study conducted by Kourgiantakis and Lee (2020, p. 764) promote blended learning approaches when teaching practical courses in Social Work programs, and show that, for an efficient online educational process, the faculty must consider factors such as the curricula, time, workload and policies.

Online classes during COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of communication and interactivity in motivating and involving students in all activities, as well as the importance of teachers' receptivity and feedback (Smoyer, O'Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020). A study conducted in Italy and Spain shows that, during online courses due to COVID-19 pandemic, Social Work students reflected on and debated 'their own problematics' as well, they were engaged in a critical dialogue, learned about key social work issues by observing and analysing their life, family and community (Cabiati & Gómez-Ciriano, 2021).

However, online courses have also several disadvantages. A study conducted between April 26 - May 30, 2020, on a sample of 3.603 students from 16 university centres in Romania, showed that 59% of respondents rated online courses as worse or much worse compared to those before (held face-to-face). Also, research indicates that the structure and teaching of online courses followed the way of coordination of face-to-face courses; also, the study program is overloaded with a large volume of topics and projects to be tackled, covered and solved (Lup & Mitrea, 2020).

3. Research Questions and Objectives

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic context most academic activities were forced to take place online and specific research is needed on how the teaching-learning process has changed. Starting from this point, our scientific investigation was based on the following research questions: How is the teaching-learning process developing online? What are the specifics of online education in the current pandemic situation? How do higher education students and teachers adapt to online education? We were interested in responding to these questions by undertaking a scientific approach in the field of Social Work study program, bachelor's and master's degree level at the University of Oradea.

Hence, our main research objective was to describe and analyse the teaching and learning process of Social Work disciplines in the online context. Accordingly, we outlined two specific research objectives:

Specific objective 1: Description of the ways in which the teaching-learning activity in Social Work field was carried out online during COVID-19 pandemic (educational content, teaching tools, evaluation methods)

Specific objective 2: Identification of risks and opportunities related to online teaching activities.

4. Research Methodology

Our explorative-descriptive research was conducted between 5 - 9 April, 2021. Our research strategy was quantitative and data was collected through self-completed questionnaires. The questionnaire was distributed online among students from Social Work study programs from the University of Oradea, followed by the completion by all of them. At the end of the data collection period, our final data sample consisted of 95 valid instruments.

Sample description - 95 students from the University of Oradea at bachelor's degree level (BA) and master's degree level (MA) participated in our study: 88 (92.6%) female students and 7 males (7.4%). Subjects have a mean age of 24.89 years old. 48 of them live in rural areas, while 47 of them are from urban areas.

Most of our subjects are currently in BA study programs – 68 (71.6%) students – and 27 (28.4%) of them are enrolled in MA study programs. Sample distribution by year of study shows that most of our subjects are enrolled in the first year (46 cases), while only 17 students are in the 3rd year of study.

5. Analysis and Results

Our students have already gained experience regarding online classes, as long as the current semester is the third one that is held online (starting from March 2020): 74 of subjects declared that they also participated in online courses or seminars in the past.

The main devices used by students to connect online are smartphones and laptops and only 2 students, respectively 1 student use a Desktop PC or a tablet. In fact, the access to suitable devices or technical issues with the devices are not mentioned as issues for our respondents.

During online classes students face several problems and challenges. The main problem refers to the way the university platform is working, as in this period a series of technical problems were registered. Another issue mentioned by our respondents refers to the internet connection, 27 students say that they have this problem to a very great or a great extent. There are also students who unfortunately don't have a proper place to study and to connect online for educational activities. On the other hand, digital competences and skills do not represent a challenge for our respondents.

Our data shows that most Social Work students have interest in their educational path and activities due to the fact that they feel the need to be informed and they access on a weekly or even daily basis the university, faculty or department web pages in this regard. Moreover, the majority of our respondents look for more online information related to their classes by using special portals with public access such as Google Academic. On the other hand, very few students are willing to look for specialized materials on international scientific databases such as ANELIS (a national platform to ensure access to online resources), SCOPUS, Proquest etc.

However, regardless of the problems encountered, a large number of students appreciate that their participation in online courses is not very different from face-to-face classes. Almost 56% of our respondents consider that their attendance is the same in both

educational contexts. Regarding a higher, respectively lower participation in online classes, the values are very close. Anyhow, there are more of them who appreciate that their participation is higher. This situation is confirmed by the responses regarding the attendance of classes: 60 of our respondents declare that they attended 80-100% of the classes in a regular school week, while only 2 students attended less than 40% of the classes.

Regarding the way the online classes were conducted, most of the teachers held audio-video sessions and uploaded course materials each week to online educational platforms. On the other hand, the submission of the entire class handout at the beginning of the semester is not a common practice.

In general, students positively appreciate the online courses. Most of them find these classes interesting and well organized and declare that they participated in the academic online activities with pleasure. Most of our respondents consider that the information and materials provided by teachers are sufficient. Anyhow, few students believe they have the ability to focus better during online classes, while one disadvantage refers to the possibility of cooperation with colleagues. Therefore, a relatively low number of respondents declared they would like to continue online classes.

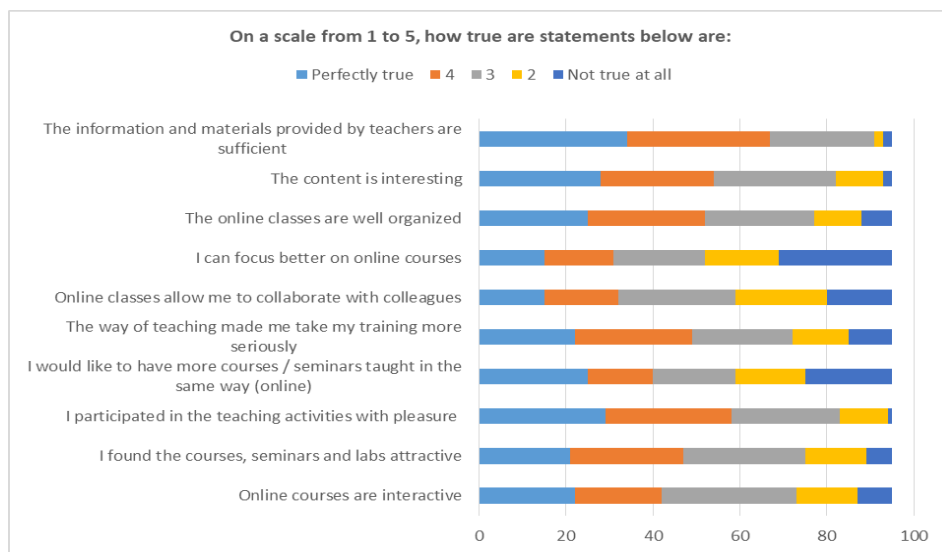


Fig. 1. Students' appreciation regarding online courses - On a scale of 1 to 5 how true are the statements below

The answers regarding the teaching techniques indicate that teachers have managed to properly respond to students' needs and adapt to the new conditions for carrying out online teaching activities. A large number of students appreciate that teachers asked questions during classes, offered students the possibility to ask questions and offered prompt and helpful answers. Several online educational activities involved the elaboration of individual papers and projects by students. There are few students who consider that they would have preferred other teaching methods or that the subjects taught were irrelevant.

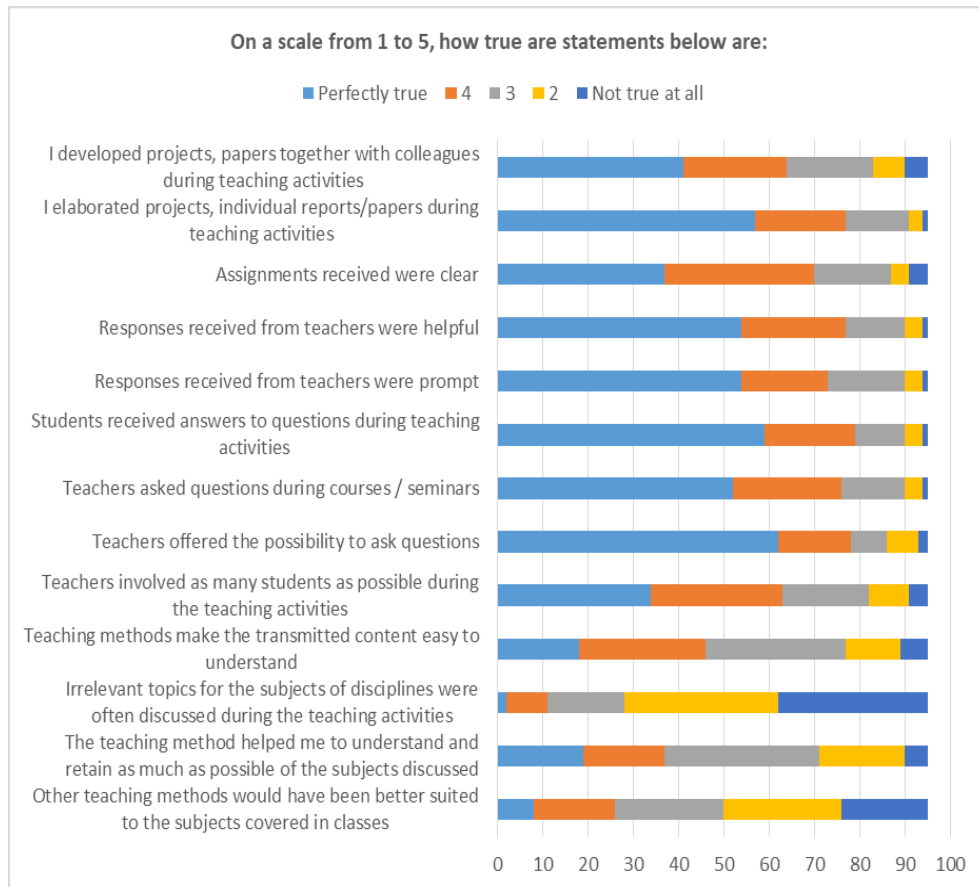


Fig. 2. *Characteristics of the teaching-learning process – On a scale from 1 to 5, how true are the statements below*

Positive reporting of students regarding online classes can also be identified with respect to the educational materials they received. Class objectives, themes, bibliography and requirements were presented at the beginning of the class. Materials received are helpful for students and themes are presented in a logical sequence. Anyhow, a relatively high number of students consider that classes cover too many subjects.

Moreover, most of our respondents (51 students) tend to appreciate that the number of tasks they have to solve for online classes and seminar is higher or much higher than they had to face during face-to-face education. This fact indicates the risk of overloading students with tasks and could generate the feeling of being overwhelmed which could decrease students' satisfaction regarding the educational process.

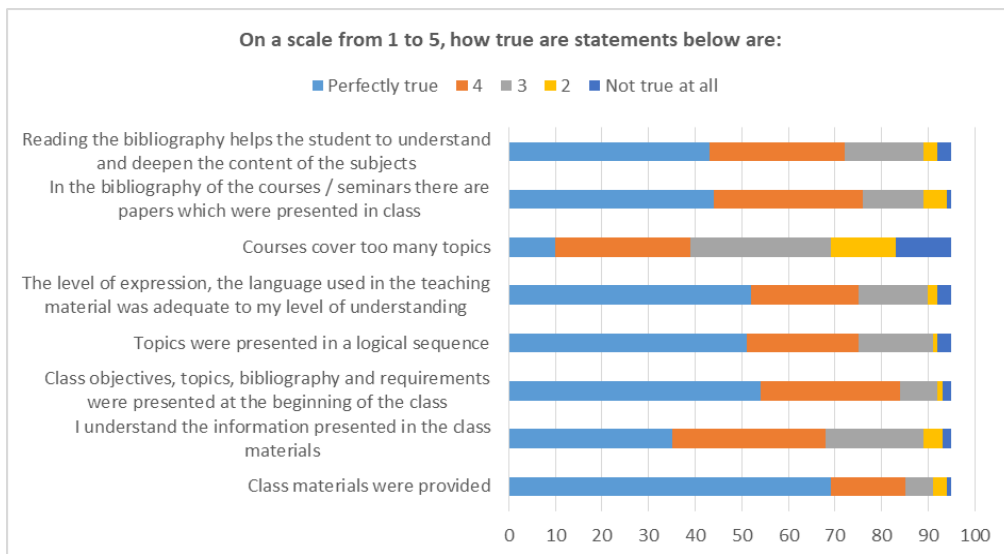


Fig. 3. Students' satisfaction regarding information, topics and materials for online courses - On a scale of 1 to 5 how true are the statements below

Students consider that subjects taught online ensure a proper balance between practice and theory in the field of Social Work. Most students identify a practical component within the activities in which they participated online.

We also collected data regarding the Practical training for Social Work students, taking into consideration that 89 respondents state that this class was one that they needed to take this semester, even if the educational process was moved online. This shows that practical training is seen as an essential activity both at BA and MA level. In general, our respondents declare that they are satisfied with by the way their Practical training was organized during the online educational process; the mean value is relatively high: 7.54 on a scale from 1 (Not satisfied at all) to 10 (Very satisfied).

Most respondents declare that the Practical training in terms of content, structure, topics, tasks, and evaluation methods was presented at the beginning of the semester by the teacher who is responsible for this activity. The information and materials in this regard were presented and made available to students mostly through audio-video sessions (using ZOOM), through uploading to the university online platform or via chat sessions (written discussions). Due to the pandemic, students did not have the opportunity to develop their Practical training within public and/or private institutions and organizations, so the structure and content of their training had to be adapted for the online context. Therefore, independently of the year or level of study, assignments and tasks related to the Practical training required mostly individual work from students (so, teamwork is not very present during this period). Moreover, documents, paper and projects elaborated by students for their Practical training need to be uploaded online on different educational platforms, and did not need to be orally presented and discussed at the end of the semester. However, in order to guide and support students to properly complete their assignments, most teachers scheduled several meetings with students during the semester to clarify and discuss aspects regarding this activity.

Table 1

Aspects regarding the structure, content and organization of Practical training in online context

Regarding the Practical training, during the period in which the courses took place online ...:	YES
The way of organizing and carrying out the Practical training has changed compared to the previous semesters	65
The practical training takes place outside institutions (organizations, associations, public institutions, etc.)	55
The teacher responsible with Practical training contacted the students to present the activity (structure, organization, practice topics, work tasks, evaluation, etc.) in a discussion session (chat)	73
The teacher responsible with Practical training contacted the students to present the activity (structure, organization, practice topics, work tasks, evaluation, etc.) through audio-video sessions	80
The teacher responsible with Practical training contacted the students to present the activity (structure, organization, practice topics, work tasks, evaluation, etc.) by posting materials on online platforms	78
The teacher responsible with the Practical training established several meetings with the students during the semester to clarify / discuss aspects regarding the activity	72
Most work assignments related to the Practical training require individual work from the student	86
Most activities for Practical training require teamwork (with several colleagues)	14
The teacher requested that the documents related to Practical training be uploaded on an online platform	84
Practical training assignments must be presented orally at the end of the semester	33

The general level of satisfaction regarding the way educational activities were undertaken online is relatively high among our respondents. The registered mean value, independently of the year of study or study level, is 7.4 on a scale from 1 (Not satisfied at all) to 10 (Very satisfied). There are rather small differences between mean values depending on the study level (MA students tend to be more satisfied with online classes), or year of study (2nd year students are more satisfied than the rest, mean value of 7.6).

6. Conclusions

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, the educational field was, as many others, subject of various and profound challenges and changes. In Romania, and other countries as well, both pre-university as well as higher education were moved online for a significant period of time and new online teaching methods were used based on digital technologies. Research on the development of online academic activities and their effects on both students and teachers is now starting to emerge. Our research is a scientific contribution in the area because it investigates the challenges and changes that the teaching-learning process had to face during the COVID-19 pandemic in the case of Social Work study programs. On one hand, it aims to identify students' opinion regarding the structure and

management of online classes, and, on the other hand, it describes the way practical activities were conducted during this specific period.

Data show that, generally, our students tend to positively appreciate and relate to online educational activities because they understood the need to adapt to this new teaching-learning context. The high attendance at online activities, as well as a mostly positive appreciation of the way in which the didactic activities were structured and managed by teachers, the materials used and the educational content transmitted support of this statement. Obviously, as revealed by different research (Smoyer, O'Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020; Lup & Mitrea, 2020; Cabiati & Gómez-Ciriano, 2021; Mclaughlin, Scholar & Teater, 2020), digital technology is intensively used by teachers and students during this period, and our results indicate that students use it also for other activities, such as searching for scientific materials and information on special online portals.

Anyhow, students do not consider that the longer this period of online activities, the better, and they want to get back to face-to-face classes. Moreover, in line with different research (Lup & Mitrea, 2020), our data show that students feel overwhelmed by tasks and assignments they have during the online educational process. Findings outline the role of interactive and efficient communication between teachers and students during online activities, as showed also by other studies (Smoyer, O'Brien & Rodriguez-Keyes, 2020). Our students feel rather helped and supported by teachers throughout the online learning process because teachers have managed to properly respond to students' needs and questions through interactive communication and helpful feedback.

Regarding the development of students' Practical training, our results show that, even if this activity is also held online because of COVID-19 restrictions, it remains an important part of Social Work curricula, at both BA and MA level. The professional formation and development of Social Work students is a complex process based on both theory and practice. Our respondents are satisfied with the way their Practical training was structured and developed online, and, in this regard, the coordinating teacher had a major role in presenting, explaining and guiding students towards a proper achievement of their practical tasks. Online teaching methods were diverse and interactive and are appreciated by our students, as revealed also by different research (Roman, Oşvat & Marc, 2014).

Overall, based on the investigation we conducted we can state that the teaching-learning process has been efficiently transferred online through digital technology during COVID-19 pandemic, so that the educational objectives of Social Work study programs from the University of Oradea would be properly met at BA and MA level. Of course, we do not disregard the fact that improvement of the online educational process still needs to be made.

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