E-learning under Covid-19

Students' perceptions of the changing online learning conditions

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This work documents the challenging situation of a part-time Master program in Content Strategy under the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic with shifting previously planned f2f-teaching to online only and the coping of students with the adaptation of different didactic interventions during that period.

E-learning & Covid-19

The shift from f2f- to online teaching has affected almost every university around the world creating many different approaches (Mseleku, 2020). Many universities had gone through different phases from "emergency" during the first lockdown to a more strategic implementation during the second lockdown in fall 2020 and especially during the summer term 2021. The reason for that is that the e-learning scenarios had to be tested and developed further in real life (Pausits et al., 2021). By collecting answers from 1.080 German students during the pandemic Knopf et al. (2021) have found that online collaborative learning in groups can lead to an improved individual learning experience as well as learning results. However, it may also require more time compared to settings without collaborative learning settings. Regarding the mental health and wellbeing of students stress, anxiety and depression are reported due to the sudden shift in lifestyle and uncertainty of the future (Mseleku, 2020).
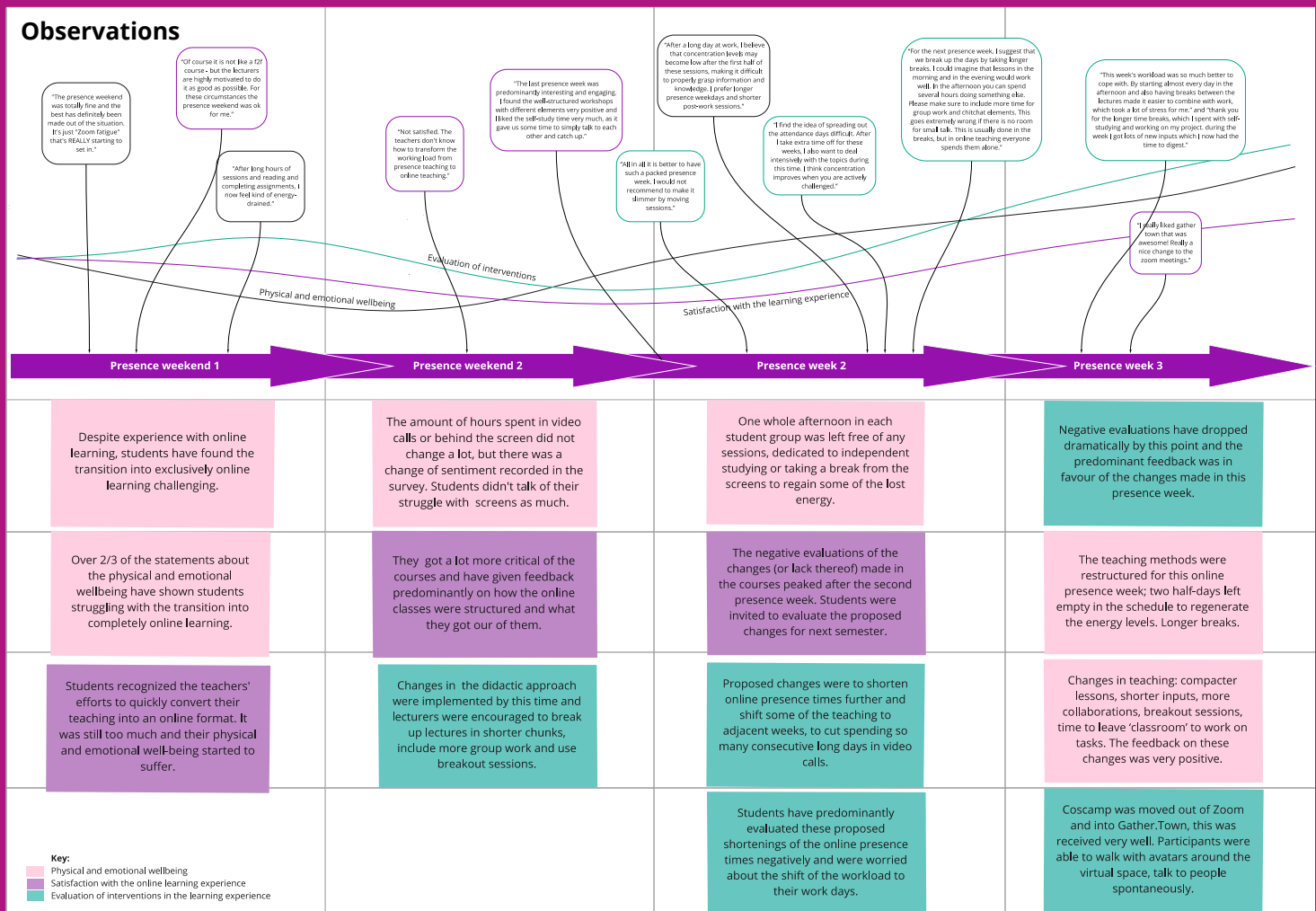
Method

Qualitative feedback by students was collected through online surveys several times during 2020 and 2021, asking about their wellbeing, experiences during online presence and their feedback on changes. The answers were coded using Nvivo and analyzed applying Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2000). In total, we had 113 responses out of a community of 54 students. Answers were collected between November 2020 and March 2021.

Context

The Master program in Content Strategy already had a high amount of e-learning (around 60%) with a special focus on task-based learning before the pandemic (Gutounig, 2018) and the students were well-acquainted with learning online in groups. They usually meet for two presence weeks and two presence weekends at the university (obligatory attendance) each semester. The questions arose how to adapt these learning settings to the online-only environment with a lot of uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Observations

Presence weekend 1	Presence weekend 2	Presence week 2	Presence week 3
Despite experience with online learning, students have found the transition into exclusively online learning challenging.	The amount of hours spent in video calls or behind the screen did not change a lot, but there was a change of sentiment recorded in the survey. Students didn't talk of their struggle with screens as much.	One whole afternoon in each student group was left free of any sessions, dedicated to independent studying or taking a break from the screens to regain some of the lost energy.	Negative evaluations have dropped dramatically by this point and the predominant feedback was in favour of the changes made in this presence week.
Over 2/3 of the statements about the physical and emotional wellbeing have shown students struggling with the transition into completely online learning.	They got a lot more critical of the courses and have given feedback predominantly on how the online classes were structured and what they got our of them.	The negative evaluations of the changes (or lack thereof) made in the courses peaked after the second presence week. Students were invited to evaluate the proposed changes for next semester.	The teaching methods were restructured for this online presence week; two half-days left empty in the schedule to regenerate the energy levels. Longer breaks.
Students recognized the teachers' efforts to quickly convert their teaching into an online format. It was still too much and their physical and emotional well-being started to suffer.	Changes in the didactic approach were implemented by this time and lecturers were encouraged to break up lectures in shorter chunks, include more group work and use breakout sessions.	Proposed changes were to shorten online presence times further and shift some of the teaching to adjacent weeks, to cut spending so many consecutive long days in video calls.	Changes in teaching: compacter lessons, shorter inputs, more collaborations, breakout sessions, time to leave 'classroom' to work on tasks. The feedback on these changes was very positive.
		Students have predominantly evaluated these proposed shortenings of the online presence times negatively and were worried about the shift of the workload to their work days.	Coscamp was moved out of Zoom and into Gather.Town, this was received very well. Participants were able to walk with avatars around the virtual space, talk to people spontaneously.

Key:
Physical and emotional wellbeing
Satisfaction with the online learning experience
Evaluation of interventions in the learning experience

Learnings

1. **Sessions planned for f2f teaching should not be transferred 1:1 to online**: recommended adaptations include strengthening of the collaborative teaching element, a more intimate learning setting to enable discussion among group members (e.g. through break-out rooms). It is also a challenge to teach the same amount of course content that has been defined for f2f teaching. To preserve the wellbeing and perceptiveness of students one must prioritise and lower the amount of content taught.
2. **Plan time for informal learning**: networking, chatting etc. are essential elements of social learning. Therefore, not 100% of the time should be devoted to instruction. Open learning formats (e.g. barcamps) may represent welcome variety as well as different online environments (e.g. avatar-based video streaming services).
3. **Awareness of the time needed to adjust to an unforeseen change**: Time and available space play a central role in mental adaptation. There it is recommended to address the issues at hand together with the students and to allow reflections rounds to be able to adapt to a completely new and unforeseeable situation.

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