Quality of Online Teaching in Higher Education – the Case of South East European University (SEEU), North Macedonia

Veronika Kareva
Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communication
South East European University
Tetovo, North Macedonia
v.kareva@seeu.edu.mk

Daniela Kirovska-Simjanoska
Language Center
South East European Univeristy
Tetovo, North Macedonia
d.kiroska@seeu.edu.mk

Abstract- **Online teaching has become obligatory for all higher education institutions in North Macedonia, like in many other countries in the world, during the pandemic crisis. Various platforms and numerous opportunities have been on disposal to university professors depending on their ability to utilize them, their creativity and willingness. The aim of this paper is to present the results of the first stage of a research project about the effectiveness of the online teaching in higher education. Its purpose is to provide answers to the following questions: Which instruments can be used for measuring the effectiveness of the online teaching? To what extent are university professors knowledgeable about the online activities that are the most engaging for students and bring about the best results? How can they gain more information about the quality of their online instruction? The research will examine the following main hypothesis: the characteristics of good quality online teaching resemble closely those of the traditional classroom. Data about online teaching activities of one hundred and ten (110) professors at the South East European University (SEEU) are being collected and analyzed. Results from a student evaluation survey of one hundred and sixteen (116) undergraduate courses at SEEU are examined in order to be compared to the results of the evaluation of the same courses taught online in the next phase of the project. Recommendations based on the conclusions are expected to be useful to policy makers, university management and the professors in order to organize and deliver good quality online instruction.**

Keywords—quality teaching, educational platforms, higher education

I. INTRODUCTION

The application of technology to the learning and teaching process or the so called digital or online learning started to boost in the early 1990s when word processors were introduced in schools. The commercialization and wider utilization of the Internet created many new opportunities and development of different categories of digital technology that could assist learning: they ranged from simpler ones, such as interactive boards and projectors, to more sophisticated interactive technologies that enabled application of modern pedagogical approaches. Online quizzes, flipped classroom, virtual reality, massive open online courses etc. are some of the most recent trends in digital learning (Carrier, 2017). Nowadays, technology prevails in all spheres of life and because of that, students of present time are used to learning with the help of technology. The so-called digital natives are surrounded by technology and learn best by application and interaction with peers through multimedia (Liton, 2014).

Responding to the newly created circumstances due to the COVID 19 pandemic crisis, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of North Macedonia (RNM) has adopted a regulation in a very short time, according to which online education and distance learning has become a must for all higher education institutions during that period. South East European University (SEEU) started with the online instruction even before the governmental decision. From its foundation, it has utilized different learning management systems (LMSs). In the past five years, Google Classroom (GC) use has been obligatory for all teaching staff with mechanisms for control of its application. With the shift to entirely online instruction, every member of the academic staff has been obliged to meet his/her students in real class time, according to the regular schedule, and in addition to that to continue with the already established practice of posting materials and assignments on GC.

1.1 Institutional Quality Assurance (QA)

Since the establishment, as a result of the international orientation and the then lack of national strategy for QA, SEEU has focused on development of a QA system that is heavily student related. It has introduced a quality structure and methods of external review which actively add insight into strategic and operational planning and improvement, but has also focused on internal procedures for enhancing learning and teaching, including and considering students and their feedback. Internally, there are different instruments for getting student feedback and ensuring student-centered learning and teaching. The staff is encouraged constantly to use modern teaching methodologies such as flipped classroom and digital technologies in order to be in line with the international trends. Student evaluation of academic courses is one of the instruments for QA. It is conducted

online at the end of every semester. At least one course per professor is evaluated through an anonymous survey utilizing GC.

The quality of learning and teaching is maintained and developed through an annual Teaching Observation scheme, yearly student evaluations, individual staff evaluation and professional development opportunities.

1. Observation of learning and teaching

One of the most significant factors in ensuring that we are continuously improving and developing what we are providing to students is the quality of our teaching. Therefore, the University has an annual observation scheme in order to:
- support the University's strategic aim of continuous improvement and development of learning and teaching
- provide evidence of quality assurance at Faculty and University level
- ensure that the students' learning experience is of the highest quality across each Faculty
 - acknowledge excellent practice and facilitate the sharing of good practice across each Faculty and the University
- support continuous, individual staff development
- inform other relevant processes, specifically, the annual self-evaluation process and the allocation of staff bonuses
- ensure that learning and teaching is inclusive and addresses the University's commitment to equality of opportunity

2. Student Evaluation

In order to give students the opportunity to evaluate academic staff, courses and the effectiveness of the administrative services and facilities, students at SEEU complete an annual Evaluation Survey. This is implemented in a confidential and anonymous way so that we receive honest and constructive comments to help us improve.

3. Staff Evaluation

The University recognizes that staff are a key resource and aims to acknowledge achievement, support continuous development and manage individual and overall performance. Therefore, there is an annual process of evaluation for both academic and administrative staff which meets these aims and provides information for the processes of contract renewal and promotion. The procedure utilizes other evaluative mechanisms and evidence, for example, success data, teaching observation and student evaluation.

1.2 The Problem

During regular teaching periods, GC is used only as additional support to traditional classroom teaching, while when the University was closed for students, it became the only way for organizing the instruction. Such a rapid move to complete online operation did not allow any time for preparation and training of the academic staff for full and successful implementation of the teaching process with all its components, such as presentation of new material, interaction with students, practice, assessment and feedback. Among many challenges for the institution that aroused from this change, the issue of quality was the one that could be addressed with immediate action. The aim of this paper is to analyze the effectiveness of the online teaching at university level and answer some of the following questions: Which

instruments can be used for measuring the effectiveness of the online teaching at tertiary level? To what extent are university professors knowledgeable about the online activities that are the most engaging for students and bring about the best results? The main research hypothesis that the study in progress will investigate is that the characteristics of good quality online teaching resemble those of the traditional classroom. In other words, we intend to prove that no matter what the mode of instruction is, the characteristics of good teaching, as pointed out in the literature and perceived by students, are the same.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers argue that the main role of any kind of instruction is to promote learning (Anderson, 2008; Smidt, Bunk, Kochem and Mcandrew, 2017) and that the online teaching is not an exception to this. According to Shelton (2011), since its emergence, online education has been critiqued and compared to traditional teaching and these criticisms implied low quality. As a result, many different approaches for evaluating quality online education exist in the literature. The same author points out a model by Lee and Dziuban (2002, in Shelton, 2011), suggesting that "the overall success of online education greatly depends upon the quality evaluation strategies integrated with the program" (para V). Constructivism, as one of the most influential learning theories is considered to offer the basic principles underling the quality of online teaching (Koohang, Riley and Smith, 2005). According to the constructivists' view, knowledge is constructed based on learner's prior experience. These authors advocate a model for online teaching based on constructivism, which includes three categories: the design of learning activities, learning assessment and instructor's role. The design of learning activities includes collaboration, cooperation, multiple perspectives, real world examples, scaffolding, self-reflection, multiple representations of ideas, and social negotiation. The learning assessment consists of instructor assessment, collaborative assessment, and self-assessment while the instructor's role is the one of a coach, mentor, feedback provider and assessor. According to this model, good quality online courses have to integrate all the previously mentioned elements. Furthermore, researchers also claim that the experience of a distance learning student should be "as rich, both intellectually and affectively, as the experience of a student in a traditional classroom" (Bower, 2001, p. 3). In this regard, Ascough (2002, in Yang and Cornelious, 2005), points out that because of the fact that most instructors have been trained in traditional instruction, it would be challenging for them to adjust to the role of a facilitator instead of being the leading speaker in class. Smidt, Li, Bunk, Kochem, and McAndrew (2017) advocate a few main quality features that should be emphasized in every online course: clarity, availability, feedback and interaction. The student evaluation survey that will be used as an instrument for measuring the quality of online teaching at SEEU has been created based on the principles of constructivism, pointed out in the literature and the last mentioned quality characteristics.

III. METHODICAL APPROACH

In order to test the main research hypothesis and examine if the characteristics of good quality online teaching resemble the ones in a traditional classroom, as well as to answer the research questions, the following actions are or will be undertaken:

1. Analysis of the weekly reports of all GC activities of 110 professors at undergraduate level – completed already

2. Creation of a student evaluation survey based on the characteristics of good quality online teaching described in the literature - created (Appendix 1)

3. Distribution the survey to students of 116 undergraduate courses – to be completed at the end of the current semester

4. Comparison of the results from this student evaluation survey at individual, Faculty and University level, with the results from the student evaluation of the same professors in the previous semester – final stage

5. Bring conclusions and offer recommendations

IV. INITIAL FINDINGS

The analysis of the reports of all teaching activities by 110 professors at undergraduate level has shown that the main self-reported activities have been lecturing and posting materials on GC. It was very indicative that only few professors have entered in the reports description learning experiences that promote online interaction in terms of a paradigm shift to a student-centered classroom with students as active participants and not passive receivers of knowledge (Jacobs and Hayirsever, 2016). On the other hand, the results from student evaluation from the previous semester indicated that in the traditional classroom, professors did assign tasks to students and provided feedback. University average value on the item examining students' perceptions about this issue was 4.5 on a scale from 1 to 5. Students rated the traditional course content with 4.5 and the professors even higher, with 4.6.

Figure 1 below illustrates these values at Faculty vis-vis University level for the winter semester, academic 2019/20.

1. Figure1. University and Faculty average values from student evaluation survey, winter, 2019/20
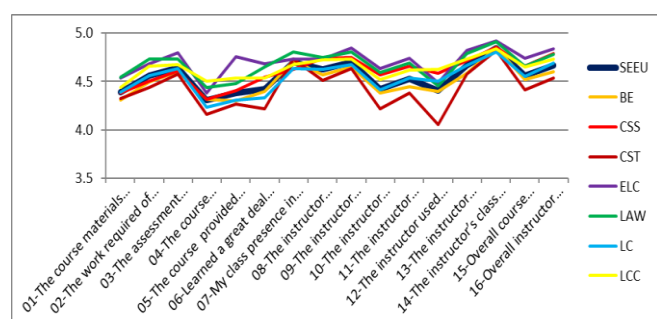
V. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The main conclusion from the analysis of the reports about online teaching activities is that professors are barely aware of what constitutes an effective and good quality online teaching pedagogy. They do not seem to understand that technology is only a tool and that it is the choice of activities that work well and not technology what drives effective online instruction. The opportunities for learning, created by selection of appropriate methodology in the online mode should be enhanced by technology, not dictated or subsumed by it. The elements of the new survey, selected according to what the literature has pointed out to be the characteristics of good quality online teaching, have shown that they equal those of the traditional classroom. This provides some evidence in favor of confirming the main hypothesis of the study: good quality teaching has the same characteristics; it is the mode of instruction (traditional or online) that differs. Additional evidence will be provided in the final stage of the project by comparing the results from the two surveys. It is expected to indicate whether according to students' perceptions, the same quality features apply to both modes of instruction. The final conclusions will serve for offering recommendations for actions and identifying areas for improvement and training at institutional level, but also national and wider since SEEU is considered to be a pioneer in establishing and cherishing a quality culture in the region. It is almost without any doubt that these findings will become even more relevant in the period that follows as distance education will be gaining on popularity and application after such a wide use all over the world.

REFERENCES

[1] Anderson, T. (Ed.), The theory and practice of online learning. Edmonton, AB, Athabasca University Press, 2008.

[2] Carrier, M., Damerow, R. & Bailey, K. (Eds.), Digital language learning and teaching: Research, theory, and practice. Rutledge New York, 2017.

[3] Jacobs, D.B., Hayirsever, F., "Student Centered Learning. How does it work in practice?", British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioural Science. 18/3 pp. 1-15, 2016.

[4] Koohang, A., Riley, L., & Smith, T., "Learning and Constructivism." Interdisciplinary Journal of E-Learning and Learning Objects vol. 5, pp. 91-109, 2009.

[5] Liton, H., A., "Exploring Teachers' Attitude towards ICT integration into ESP and EFL Classroom" International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning 11/5, 2014 Retrieved https://www.academia.edu/10156678/Exploring_Teachers_Attitudetowards_ICT_integration_into_ESP_and_EFL_Classroom, December, 27, 2019.

[6] Shelton, K., "A Review of Paradigms for Evaluating the Quality of Online Education Programs." Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, vol. 4, number 1, 2011. Retrieved from, https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring141/shelton141.html, April, 16, 2019.

[7] Smidt, E., Li, R., Bunk, J.,Kochen, T., &Mcandrew, A., "The Meaning of Quality in an Online Course to Administrators, Faculty, and Students." Journal of Interactive Learning Research. 28/1 pp. 65-86, 2017.

[8] Yang, Y., Cornelious L., "Preparing Instructors for Quality Online Instruction.", Semantic Scholar, 2005.
    Retrieved,https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Preparing-Instructors-for-Quality-Online-Yang Cornelious/1ad185beeb9c3a1cd8ac35e0af1699c207c34d8a, April, 05. 2019

Student evaluation survey

Instructions: Tick the answer that best explains your opinion: SA (strongly agree), A (agree), N (neutral), D (disagree); SD (strongly disagree)

Course/instructor:
1. The course materials posted online (topics, lectures, videos, etc.) were well organized and user friendly (easy to follow). SA   A   N   D   SD
2. The information and instructions by the instructor for following the course through the GC platform were clear.
3. The selection of materials and tasks on GC was relevant and appropriate for reaching the course objectives.
4.The instructor used the opportunities for online interaction with students (discussions, chats, assignments, etc.)
5.The assessment (mid-term exam, assignments, quizes, projects etc.) was well organized and appropriately reflected the syllabus.
6. The instructor provided regular feedback on the given assignments.

Summary statements
 (1) Please respond to questions 7 and 8 using a 5 point scale, from excellent (5) to poor (1).

7. Overall course content rating   5   4   3   2   1
8. Overall instructor rating   5   4   3   2   1

Comments
Please provide any comment or suggestion related to the course.