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Online Learning's Impact on Mental Health

By: Alexandria Palmieri

Right now, we are all struggling with the effects of the pandemic. Everything in our lives are changing. One thing that has changed is the way we are doing education. Most schools are doing online learning. Online learning is a wicked problem. Rittel and Webber (1973) defined a wicked problem as a problem that has no structure, a problem that does not have one strict solution. While online learning is helpful to keep education moving forward there are some problems with it as well. I am not just talking about problems with technology. The students are struggling to keep up with online learning, causing their mental health to take a major hit. Most students in college were already stressed before online learning started but now, they are even more stressed. There are many aspects of online learning that are causing problems however the main problems for students are the social interaction, their participation in class and the overall stress of dealing with online learning.

Social Interaction

A big part of education is the social interaction students get with other students as well as teachers and other faculty members. Students get that interaction when they are in a stereotypical school setting, meaning face-to-face classes. They are able to talk to their peers face-to-face and make instant connections with them. They are able to talk directly to teachers when they have questions or need help on an assignment, without having to wait for a response online. When doing online learning students are not getting that interaction. They are usually at their own house, in their room. They do not get a sense of community when they are by themselves staring at a computer screen all day.

Students need a sense of community. When they have a sense of community with their classmates, it is usually easier for them to make friends and participate in class. They do not always get that when they are doing only online learning. Tami Oliphant (2016) pointed out that the best sense of community in online learning comes from using both face-to-face and online setting. A study was done at the University of Alberta with students participating in online learning. The study found that the students find the sense of community diminishing. One student said that they have found the interaction awkward. Hye Sook Chang (2020) suggested that this is due to the limited interaction between students. Students are not interacting as much for several reasons but mainly because they find it weird to develop relationships online. This makes it even harder to develop these relationships with others online. Since students are not interacting with each other in the same way as before it causes students to feel isolated or alone and can cause students to start struggling academically.

Participation

Participation is another big part of a student's success in school. The more a student participates and asks questions during class, the more likely they are to understand and grasp the concepts or ideas they are learning in class. Teachers often have a hard time with student participation in face-to-face class, but it can be a lot more difficult when doing online learning.

In face-to-face class students often do not like to participate and ask or answer questions for fear of getting the answer wrong or being judged by their classmates. Online learning can make it difficult for students to speak up and actively participate in class. A study was done in 2017 by professors at the University of Brussels to see the relationship between student participation and different success factors in online and blended learning (OBL). Bileck,

Kauwenberghs, Zhu, Struyven, Pynoo, and DePryck (2019) found that there are 3 factors that students found important in OBL, how resources are used, transparent communication, and access to student support. Students find it important to know what resources the teacher is using and how/if they are available for the students. When students know and are able to access the resources they need, it helps them be prepared for class and therefore are more willing to participate. The need for transparent communication is also important for students. It can be hard when communicating with your teachers online. You might have to wait for a response, or you might not completely understand what they are trying to say. When students have a transparent communication with the teachers and are able to easily ask questions and get a response it makes it easier for them to participate in class. Lastly, the students find that access to student support is key to their participation. Students find that it is easier for them to engage in class when they have the help of their teachers and classmates. They use the student support to help them interact with their peers and get the support they need to help them succeed.

Motivation

School is usually, if not always, stressful for students. They have different assignments due at different times, they have tests, papers, homework, balancing school, and free time, and more. There is a lot that can cause students to feel stressed when dealing with any type of school. However, online learning can bring a whole new level of stress to students. One of the most prevalent factors is that of a student's motivation.

Motivation can be a hard thing to find. We all have off days where we do not want to do anything and relax. It is even harder to find that motivation to get stuff done when doing online learning. Sinan Keskin and Halil Yurdugul (2019) recognized "that learner motivation is a

critical part to play in the adoption of online learning environments... Different levels of motivation affect a student's interaction in the online learning environment." There are many factors that go into student's motivation or lack thereof. Hye Sook Chang (2020) claimed that online learning can become monotonous or boring causing the students to zone out and not pay attention. Since they are not paying attention, they have a harder time grasping the concepts that are discussed. Another big factor is that some students do not have a lot of knowledge on the technology being used. When this happens, it causes the student to fall behind and sometimes just give up all together.

My Research

Since there are many different factors that hurt a student's mental health in an online learning environment, I wanted to get a better understanding of how students are feeling right now. To do this, I asked a group of college students five questions.

- With doing online learning do you have any social interaction outside of class?
- Would you rather have your camera on or off and why?
- If you are required to have your camera on how does it affect your learning?
- In regard to your online learning in your opinion how is that overall affecting your mental health?
- Do you have any stress relivers or anything that helps you when dealing with the stress of online learning?

Question 1: Social Interaction outside of the classroom?

The first question I asked was, if the students had any social interaction outside of the virtual classroom? Overall, the students had little to no interaction outside of the class. Due to the

online learning environment and the current pandemic situation, the students are not as socially active. The social interaction they do have is either with family or, for the ones living on campus, their roommates. The majority of the students who said they have social interaction outside of class say that their interaction is at work. Since the students are not being socially active, they are starting to feel isolated and lonely. It is hard for them to form connections with other people. One student stated that it is hard “because you can’t connect with anyone and form friends within the class.”

Question 2: Cameras on or off and why?

The second question I asked was if students would rather have their cameras on or off while participating in class and why. I asked seven students this question. Five students said they would rather have their camera off. While only two students said they preferred the camera on. The two students who say they like their camera on said that it makes them feel like they are part of the class and it is easier for them to work. The students who said they would rather have their camera off, said they like it off because they either find it awkward or they tend to focus on what their camera is seeing and not the class. Having their camera on affects their learning and academic success since they are not paying attention.

Question 3: How does having your camera on affect your learning?

Following from question 2, the third question was, if you have to have your camera on how does it affect your learning? The students who prefer their cameras off are heavily impacted when they are required to have them on. Some get easily distracted by their camera. One student states that “It impacts my learning when I start to look at myself on the camera more than actually focus on the lecture.” They can get easily distracted when they see their roommate or

something in the camera causing to turn and look at what they saw and zone out of the lesson. On the other hand, some students prefer to have their camera off because they find it awkward to have it on. One student states that they find it strange because "... anyone in your class can just sit and watch you instead of your professor..." Some students find it awkward that other people can see them while some find it awkward that people can see where you are, like your house or outside.

Question 4: Overall Mental Health Impact?

The fourth question that was asked was, in regard to your online learning in your opinion how is that overall impacting your mental health. All seven of the students who participated said that online learning has had a negative impact on their mental health. They said that online learning causes them to feel antisocial, lonely, isolated, and frustrated. The one impact that seemed to stand out, not just in this question, was that the students have a lack of motivation. One student states, "I do not have as much motivation to get the class done as I do to go to an in-person class." When doing online learning at home students can get easily distracted and can have a hard time focusing on the work they need to complete.

This connects back to my third research question, where students said they get easily distracted in class when having their cameras on. However, this is just one reason why students seem to lack motivation when participating in online learning.

Question 5: Stress Relievers?

The final question I asked was, do you have any stress relievers or anything that helps you when dealing with the stress of online learning? It is important to have something that helps you when you are stressed or frustrated. A lot of the students that responded stated that one of

their stress relievers is music. Many of us listen to music because we like too but many use it as an escape. One student explains, “I listen to a lot of music when I do stressful assignments because they help me focus and relax...” Other students use exercise as their stress reliever. One student says, “I like to go outside and disconnect myself from the stress of school.” They use exercise to get away from school and focus on what makes them happy.

Other than using these tips to take your mind off of school, there are things you can do to help yourself get organized and gain control of your schoolwork. There are multiple ways to get organized. It is a good idea to use folders or binders to separate the work from your different class. There are planners you can use to keep track of all of the different assignments and their due dates. You can also use a to-do list for each day. Write down what you want to accomplish each day and that way you can keep all your work and yourself organized.

These are just a few examples of stress relievers. Notice that not everyone uses the same techniques to relieve their stress. Some students listen to music, others exercise, some spend time with friends/family, and some do other hobbies. You have to find what works best for you. You might have to try a few different methods and you might need to use multiple different methods as well. Sometimes it is not an activity that helps, sometimes it is trying to get yourself organized by using a planner or notecards. While other times when you are frustrated you might just need to let out your frustration. Like this student who says their way to relieve stress is to complain to their classmates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, online learning is something that everyone is dealing with at the moment. Even though online learning is helpful in the current pandemic, it can bring more stress to

students. Students are constantly feeling the impact of online learning through their social interaction, their participation in class, and their motivation. I asked current college students about the impact online learning had on their mental health. They all talked about the negative impacts it had. While online learning is stressful it is important to know that you are not alone. Every student is feeling the impact of online learning. Find what helps you relieve the burdens that online learning brings. Online learning is a great way to continue educating during this pandemic. However, it brings its own set of problems. Online learning is a wicked problem, meaning that it does not and never will have a concrete solution. There is not one way to deal with this problem. Everyone will have their own solution.

Resources

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