ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Problem Statement

The COVID-19 pandemic caused most of the universities to make a shift from campus-based in-person teaching to online teaching. This urgent and unprecedented change has revealed the importance of student engagement in online courses. Krause (2005) defines student engagement as "energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university" (p.3). Engagement is linked to several important issues in higher education such as participation in educational activities, learning outcomes, and student achievement. Engagement is a multifaceted concept and examined under different dimensions in the literature. Redmond, Abawi, Brown, Henderson, and Heffernan (2018) define the concept of online engagement with behavioral, collaborative, emotional, social and cognitive dimensions.

Since engagement and motivation are interrelated issues (Reeve, 2012), students are more likely to engage in educational activities when they are motivated. Student motivation can be significantly influenced by the design and delivery of online courses. A well-structured course attracts students and leads to active participation. Besides, instructor presence in the group and interaction, such as feedback, contribute to student motivation and active participation in online courses (Gedera, Williams, & Wright, 2015). In this respect, Bryson and Hand (2007) concluded that students are engaged when the instructors are enthusiastic and engaged during the lessons.

The instructional design including pedagogical elements is greatly emphasized for providing an effective and qualified online course (Soffer, Kahan, & Livne, 2017). Instructional strategies supporting the constructivist roles of the instructors and students can promote success in online learning environments. Therefore, instructors should involve the students in learning process active and assist in building a learner community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Furthermore, there is an emphasis on implementing educational technology in online courses to enrich learning experiences in online environments to increase engagement and retention (Salazar, 2010).

This study aims to explore the experiences of instructors and undergraduate students regarding student engagement during online courses in the times of Covid-19 Pandemic. Identifying and describing online student engagement can provide several recommendations about online teaching and learning process.

Method

Qualitative phenomenological method, adopted to identify the common senses of individuals' experiences around a concept, was employed to explain online student engagement from the perspectives of instructors and students (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants of this study consist of 6 instructors and 6 undergraduate students from various public and private universities in Turkey. Instructor participants, who met the criteria of teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic in different departments at various universities, were determined through snowball sampling. Student participants were the voluntary participants who follow the online courses of the corresponding instructors. In-depth interviews were carried out for data collection.

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All the participants were informed about the study, interview process and their rights before conducting the interviews. Open-ended questions, with expert opinion and pilot implementation, were asked during the interviews. Interviews were conducted and recorded via zoom meetings. The records were transcribed and shared with the participants to review their own statements. The transcripts were then analyzed and coded through content analysis method.

Findings

Based on the data obtained, it can be concluded that students face various difficulties concerning online engagement. Inactivity due to sitting in front of the computer screen for long hours and the sense of being isolated are the main physical and psychological factors that cause a loss in concentration, motivation and engagement during online lessons. For students studying applied sciences, the lack of hands-on training in laboratory courses is a major challenge to be engaged. Other significant factors that adversely affect student engagement are the high number of students in online classes, technical problems, a low degree of effort and enthusiasm of instructors, and a teacher-centered approach to teaching. The teacher-centered approach to teaching minimizes the interaction between the instructors and students. Due to the lack of interaction, students do not feel connected, motivated, concentrated and engaged during online lessons. Some of the instructors stated that they employed additional technological and instructional methods in order to make students more motivated and engaged during online courses. It is important to underline that these instructors were equipped with the necessary knowledge about online teaching. However, for the large number of students in online classes the technical problems are crucial issues that the instructors have to deal with. Despite all the disadvantages experienced, the participant students emphasized that they were more engaged if the instructor provided timely feedback and demonstrated effort, motivation and engagement during the lessons. This study is an ongoing research and the current study results are limited to 6 instructors and 6 undergraduate students.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, engagement, higher education, undergraduate student

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