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The perceived effectiveness of an online course: a comparison between two types of student audience

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF AN ONLINE COURSE: A COMPARISON BETWEEN TWO TYPES OF STUDENT AUDIENCE

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Abstract

This chapter presents a course of FFL (French as a Foreign Language) didactics, designed by the author, and given online—from September to December 2020—for two different types of second-year university students from Université de Caen Normandie (France): distance learning students due to COVID-19, and distance learning students by choice. It aims at identifying the levers and obstacles to the success of an online course through the observation of these two cases and the feedback received from the students. A comparative analysis shows the differences in the perceived effectiveness of this course according to its student audiences and highlights a difference in the way these two audiences were able to engage with the proposed communication scenario which was integrated in the pedagogical scenario.

1. Introduction

This chapter presents a course of FFL (French as a Foreign Language) didactics, designed by the author, and given online – from September to December 2020 – for two different types of second-year university students from Université de Caen Normandie (France): distance learning students due to COVID-19, and distance learning students by choice. It aims at identifying the levers and obstacles to the success of an online course through the observation of these two cases and the feedback received from the students.

The course presented here is an optional course offered to French-speaking university students, interested in learning how to teach French to non-native French learners. This course is not given to first year students, so it is a new subject for them.

The first kind of student audience that will be described are second-year initial training students that should initially have had face-to-face lessons but had to follow this course on a distance basis due to the health constraints resulting from COVID-19, that is students usually around 20 years old. The second kind of audience corresponds to students in initial training, continuing education or professional retraining, for whom distance learning was their first choice (for professional, family, health, or other reasons, not specifically linked to COVID-19).

The data used here to get some feedback on the effectiveness of the course as perceived by these two kinds of audience come primarily from two anonymous questionnaires that were proposed to the two different student audiences on their own learning-site on the Moodle Learning Platform (which is the LMS¹ used at Université de Caen) at the end of the semester. They also come from mails sent by the students, from the optional personal presentation forms that they were able to post on the platform at the beginning of the semester, and from some Moodle monitoring facilities.

The impressions that could stem from the observation of these data during the semester are necessarily fragmentary, and the limited quantitative aspect of the questionnaires leads us to make a mainly qualitative use of them, considering they help nevertheless to better understand what worked well and what did not.

2. Case 1: distance learning due to COVID-19 – An initial training student audience used to face-to-face lessons

With regard to the course originally designed for face-to-face lessons, it must be said that as a teacher of this course I had already made extensive use of the Moodle learning platform in previous years, as an additional support for my students, but at the beginning of the reporting period the students themselves were not particularly used to it, as it was a new course for them (not given during the first year) and as most of my colleagues did not use the platform much before the emergence of the pandemic.

In order to help these new students switch to distance learning, I had to adapt the pedagogical scenario (Nissen 2004, Manganot 2008) previously

¹ Learning Managing System

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

offered for this course and audience. I present here the different pedagogical², organisational³, and socioemotional⁴ scaffolding items that I designed for students of Case 1 (see also Blanvillain et al. 2021), according to three of the tutoring categories identified by Quintin (2008) through his survey of the literature on the subject.

As “human mediation through the tutoring activity of the trainer and collaborative peer-to-peer interactions is identified as having the potential to reduce drop-out by promoting learner perseverance”⁵ (Denny 2020), my aim has been to develop a new pedagogical scenario elaborated in detail for distance learning, as well as a communication scenario between the participants, to best support the students.

Regarding the pedagogical scenario and the communication scenario, my position follows that of E. Nissen (2006), considering that the communication scenario is not an independent entity, parallel to the pedagogical scenario, but is an integral part of it. Developing a pedagogical scenario therefore consists of devising, planning, and informing learners of:

- “the training objectives, prerequisite and target skills, resources and tools available to carry out the proposed activities and tasks, the way in which activities are linked and the production tasks that the learner will have to perform;

- their potential interlocutors and the type of interaction they may have with them during their training – interactions which are seen as an aid to their learning”⁶ (Nissen 2006).

We will now consider – through student feedback – what worked and what proved to be a hindrance, beginning with what seems to have worked positively for the perceived effectiveness of this online course and thus as a lever for its success.

² concerning instructions, objectives and evaluation criteria, contents, and method

³ concerning the planning of tasks, and time management

⁴ concerning motivational dynamics and teacher/student or peer to peer relationships

⁵ my translation of the original text: “La médiation humaine par le biais de l’activité tutorielle du formateur et des interactions collaboratives entre pairs est repérée comme pouvant réduire l’abandon en favorisant la persévérance des apprenants.”

⁶ “- des objectifs de formation, des compétences préalables et de celles qui sont visées, des ressources et outils mis à disposition pour la réalisation des activités et tâches proposés, de la manière dont les activités sont liées et des tâches de production que l’apprenant devra réaliser;

- de ses possibles interlocuteurs et du type d’interaction qu’il peut avoir avec eux dans le cadre de sa formation, interactions qui sont considérées comme une aide dans son apprentissage.”

The questionnaire proposed to Case 1 students⁷ presented 28 items (relating to the distance-learning nature of the course, but also to other aspects): 4 items corresponded to optional open questions, 2 to estimates on their part (working time invested weekly, and quality of the course as a whole), and for the other 22 (mandatory to advance in the questionnaire) a five-point Likert scale was used to collect the responses (that is statements that had to be qualified on a scale of 1 to 4 (strongly agree / agree / disagree / strongly disagree) with a possible DNK⁸ box).

2.1 Positive elements

From the organisational point of view, the students were given a provisional calendar and the structure of the course was visible on the learning platform from the beginning of the semester (with dates of availability of the documents and activities). Each week (at the same day and hour), new documents and activities became available, and a detailed message presenting the weekly instructions was posted on the course forum. This organisational aspect received 100% agreement from the students who responded to the questionnaire.

The course was planned globally in an asynchronous way, framed on a weekly basis. On this aspect of the course, it was the freedom of organisation it provided that was enhanced by the feedback given in the open questions: “This made it possible to lighten my schedule while allowing me to work on this subject when I wanted, it allowed me to organise myself as I wanted (especially since we had the dates for homework, etc. at the start of the semester)”⁹; “Having a week to assimilate the lessons and do the quizzes made it possible to have a good organisation”; “the fact that it is not synchronous and that we have a week each time to do the work, it allows us to organise ourselves”.

The asynchronous nature of a course requires a certain amount of autonomy on the part of learners, who need to take responsibility for their own learning and self-regulate their workload¹⁰, which is not necessarily self-evident, as A. Chateau and H. Zumbihl (2010) reminds us: “Learners’ ability of learning to learn is not innate [...]. It is therefore a question of enabling its development, i.e. the empowerment of the learner.” Little (2003), in a definition of empowerment, insists that the role of the teacher

⁷ 28 out of the 39 registered students responded to the questionnaire.

⁸ Do Not Know

⁹ I translated all student comments.

¹⁰ on a weekly basis here

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

is “to create an environment in which students take charge of their learning”¹¹.

The guiding framework provided here, although requiring some initial autonomy, has undoubtedly helped to develop a certain empowerment of these students and seems to be in line (for those who were able to take advantage of it) with J.-L. Denny’s (2020) findings concerning a group of second-year female students in a pre-professionalisation curriculum for future school teachers: “This situation is nevertheless felt positively by the students brought to experience autonomy, at a distance from their usual points of reference, guided by teachers usually acting as regulators. This empowerment process is a foundation of self-study”¹².

From the pedagogical point of view, the large amount of information available from the beginning of the semester on the dedicated Moodle course area for this course¹³ made it necessary to set up various aids to help students getting some grip on this learning environment:

- a visual structuring aid using the presentation elements proposed by Moodle, such as the grid course format (with a grid of clickable images linking to each section of the course), or the use of labels indicating the type of documents (such as “Texts to introduce this chapter”, “Course document”, “To go further”, etc.);

- pedagogical support through a detailed syllabus announcing the content and objectives of the course, along with some methodological aids and a short video presentation of the teacher;

- a clear sequencing of each chapter, each of which ends with a quiz to highlight the important points.

The visualisation of their progress for each student and the identification of important elements of the course were also facilitated by:

- the Progress Completion Bar (provided by the Moodle platform) which is a visual colour-coded representation of the activities completed or to be completed, available for each student;

¹¹ “la capacité d’apprendre à apprendre des individus n’est pas innée. Il s’agit donc de permettre son développement, c’est-à-dire l’autonomisation de l’apprenant. [...] Little (2003), dans une définition de l’autonomisation, insiste sur le fait que le rôle de l’enseignant est de créer un environnement dans lequel les étudiants prennent en charge leur apprentissage.”

¹² “Cette situation est néanmoins ressentie positivement par les étudiantes amenées à faire l’expérience de l’autonomie, à distance de leurs repères habituels guidés par des enseignants habituellement régulateurs. Ce processus d’autonomisation constitue un fondement de l’autoformation.”

¹³ even if the actual availability of documents followed a progressive schedule

Second Language Teaching in the Digital Era: Perspectives and Practices

- Moodle “milestones”, identified by a small specific logo, providing another visual aid to structure the course space. These milestones mark documents or activities corresponding to important pedagogical steps in the course (e.g. activities to be carried out to access the following documents) and clearly identify the elements that are subject to assessment. This clarification effort is consistent with Nissen’s (2019) remarks on the importance of indicating to learners what is compulsory or optional.

This structuring effort on the visual and navigational aspects of the course, and the syllabus (course presentation document with objectives, content, methodological aids) met with a rather high degree of satisfaction among students, with 86% agreement¹⁴ (but still 7% strongly disagreed concerning the presentation document, and 11% disagreed concerning the structuring aspect of the course).

The effort that was made for this course to adapt and vary the course materials (commented slideshows, highlighted pdf, interactive videos, quizzes, etc.) was highly appreciated (96% agreement).

The end-of-chapter online quizzes¹⁵ were particularly well received, with 90% agreement, and this comment is worth mentioning: “I particularly enjoyed the quizzes at the end of each chapter because it allowed me to take stock of what I achieved, not achieved and what I really understood”.

Concerning the socioemotional point of view, the perception of the teacher availability worked well since 100% of the responses were positive (79% strongly agreed and 21% agreed).

In this respect, I would agree with Denny (2020): “A tacit contract emerges with the teacher who makes the effort to rework their lessons and who becomes involved in an affective dimension that is felt to be more genuine [...]. A form of unformulated contractualisation emerges, producing a dynamic of commitment to learning. An ethical deliberation appears which leads the learner to assign meaning to academic tasks by giving them value. This process plays an important role in maintaining the quality of student involvement...”¹⁶.

¹⁴ strongly agree + agree

¹⁵ corresponding to (graded) summative assessments for these students

¹⁶ “Un contrat tacite se dessine avec l’enseignant qui fait l’effort de retravailler ses cours et qui s’implique dans une dimension affective ressentie comme plus vraie [...]. Une forme de contractualisation informulée émerge produisant une dynamique d’engagement dans les apprentissages. Apparaît une délibération éthique qui amène l’apprenant à attribuer du sens aux tâches universitaires en leur donnant une valeur. Ce processus participe grandement du maintien de la qualité d’implication des étudiants ...”

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

2.2 Negative elements

From an organisational point of view, the asynchronous nature of the work which was appreciated by many students remained nevertheless a stumbling block for some students, as shown by two comments: “Sometimes it was hard to remember that there was an ongoing course”, and “Just sometimes we did not think too much about FFL, and so we’d end up doing everything at the last moment”.

From an organisational and socioemotional perspective, the lack of synchronous videoconferencing classes¹⁷ was experienced by students as a challenge in connecting with the teacher, particularly at the beginning of the semester, as indicated by some of the comments in the open-ended questions of the questionnaire.

From a socioemotional point of view, the good perception of the teacher’s availability (100% agreement, as mentioned before) should not be confused with the fact that the students felt well supervised, since this point received only 85% of positive responses (37% strongly agreed and 48% agreed), and 11% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed.

As an illustration of these different points, here are some comments from the students concerning the difficulties they experienced: “It’s a new course, a course that we discover completely and it was difficult to be directly alone for that, even if the teacher remained at our disposal, it’s not the same as being in class”; “Hi, I am very happy that you provide us some space for discussion at the end of this questionnaire. Distance learning in my opinion is demotivating and doesn’t allow for comprehensive education. Nothing stimulates effort and being alone in front of one’s screen trying to integrate new and as abstract concepts as those appearing in this course is really demoralising. [...] in my opinion your students would have a lot to gain by being able to see you in person and receive teaching alongside what you provide as documentation and online assessment tools”; “It’s a pity not to have had video conferencing classes from time to time”.

It can be noted that the online forum open to students where everyone could ask questions to be answered by their peers or the teacher, and which had been designed as part of the communication scenario and to facilitate social bonding within the course was not at all used by the students, and

¹⁷ Only two videoconferencing sessions were initially scheduled. And the one planned to study an FFL textbook in working groups had to be replaced by a session of written synchronous work on etherpad for technical reasons. The other one was held at the end of the semester so that the students could give me oral feedback and receive their marks.

thus failed at supplementing the missing socioemotional aspect due to the lack of videoconferencing sessions noticed by some students.

Denny (2020) also noted that institutionalised exchange spaces such as the Moodle platform were not used because students felt less free and more at risk of being judged than on non-formal websites. And C. Papi (2012) had already observed that this type of forum did not provide real help to struggling students probably because they could not identify and formulate their difficulties.

The other reason mentioned by Papi (2012) for the failure of these forums is that “[...] students systematically look for the way they feel is the quickest to find a solution”¹⁸, and searching by keywords on the net, soliciting peers on social networks or sometimes even on internet forums are approaches “perceived as quicker and more independent than exchanges on the forums of the training platform and/or with the instructor”¹⁹.

Another interesting fact is the estimate that the students made about the time they spent working for this course. Only 4% estimated to have worked more than 90 minutes per week (and 33% 90 minutes or more), whereas a face-to-face course would have taken them a minimum of two hours (i.e. the weekly duration of the face-to-face lesson itself) plus the time spent on homework to be done each week.

These results may suggest that some students have invested little in terms of participation and attendance (presence on the online platform), and have probably often taken some shortcuts in their personal work, thus using a kind of student strategy described by R. Fischer (2012) and called “expedient lesson completion”: “the principle of “expedient lesson completion”, a pragmatic orientation to task completion in which minimal (or perhaps simplistic) effort is made to achieve an objective in the shortest period of time”. Papi (2012) mentions too that “a logic of efficiency appears in the sense of investment/result ratio, even of least effort”²⁰.

The low time commitment of students may be a source of failure and according to Denny (2020): “Poor estimation of study time is a major cause of drop-out”²¹.

¹⁸ “[...] les étudiants cherchent systématiquement le moyen qu’ils estiment le plus rapide pour trouver une solution.”

¹⁹ “[Ces démarches sont] perçues comme plus rapides et plus indépendantes que les échanges sur les forums de la plate-forme de formation et/ou avec le moniteur.”

²⁰ “une logique de l’efficacité apparaît au sens de rapport investissement/résultat, voire de moindre effort”

²¹ “La mauvaise estimation du temps d’étude est massivement à l’origine des abandons”.

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

As with other audiences not prepared for distance learning (e.g. in primary education, see Descamps et al. 2020; Frau-Meigs 2020), some students lack digital skills and this period highlighted the existing digital divide among them and at worldwide level (see UNESCO website from 21st April 2020).

However, Papi (2012), reporting on a study in the context of initial training, points out that issues of equipment or lack of familiarity with digital technology are not the only reasons for the possible non-use of ICT²², which respond to “more personal logics”²³ and would require more in-depth study. In particular, she stresses the importance of “culture, i.e. in particular the life histories and situations of the groups surveyed”²⁴ and the “learning patterns of current students”²⁵ to understand their (non-)uses.

It should be added that despite the difficulties mentioned and particularly noticeable at the start of the semester, they seem to have faded during the following semester when the students acquired some experience of distance learning.

To conclude this overview of the negative elements of Case 1, I would just like to mention the results as regards the overall perception of the course to be able to compare them later to the figures of Case 2: 68% of the students who answered the questionnaire considered this course “very good” or “good”, 25% “fairly good” and 7% “average”.

3. Case 2: distance learning by choice – A mixed student audience already used to distance learning

3.1 The student audience

The audience of Case 2 is a mixed audience of initial training, continuing education and professional retraining students.

18 students out of the 98 registered submitted their optional personal presentation form. The information available to me on this subject and presented here therefore comes from these forms.

The age of this group ranges from 19 to 55 years old. Fourteen of them have had previous and/or ongoing professional experience. Of the remaining four, one (48 years old) has devoted the years following her studies to the education of her seven children, one is following a double

²² Information and Communications Technology

²³ “à des logiques plus personnelles”

²⁴ “la culture, c’est-à-dire notamment les parcours et situations de vie des groupes enquêtés”

²⁵ “schèmes d’apprentissage des étudiants actuels”

curriculum (Language Sciences/Music Studies), and the other two have chosen distance learning for medical or personal reasons. Several described rich and varied study and/or professional backgrounds, a habit of travelling/moving, difficult life experiences (serious health problems, traumas, school phobia), and five explicitly stated that they were planning to change careers.

3.2 Positive elements

The questionnaire proposed to Case 2 students²⁶ presented 26 items: 3 items corresponded to optional open-ended questions, 2 to estimates on their part (working time invested weekly, and quality of the course as a whole), and for the other 21 (mandatory to advance in the questionnaire) a five-point Likert scale was used to collect the responses.

From the organisational point of view, as for Case 1, a new message was posted each week on the course forum, detailing *what* was to be done (with possible indications on the *how* to do it), and new documents and activities became available. For both cases, particular care has been taken to make the instructions accompanying the proposed tasks explicit and precise and to ensure that the best use was made of the documents provided, as it seems important to “explain the process and not just the final objective, developing its steps to avoid believing that learners read our minds and can solve the uncertainties of our instructions and assignments”²⁷ (Frau-Meigs 2020).

The students were also given a provisional calendar and the structure of the course was visible on the learning platform from the beginning of the semester (with dates of availability of the documents and activities). This aspect of the course received a satisfaction level of 96% from the students.

According to E. Nissen (2019), the imposition of a work pace is widely appreciated by learners. This seems to have been the case for our students as well, as shown by this spontaneous comment from a personal presentation form: “First of all, I wanted to tell you that I find the organisation of your course very pleasant and reassuring for us distance students. Having a clear guideline and course documents provided on a weekly basis help a lot to know where we stand”; or this one from the questionnaire: “I appreciated the organisation of the course and the fact that the entire course is not available at once, this gives better visibility on our progress in learning”.

²⁶ 54 out of the 98 registered students responded to the questionnaire.

²⁷ “Expliquer le processus et pas seulement l’objectif final, en développant les étapes pour éviter de croire que les élèves lisent dans nos têtes et peuvent résoudre les incertitudes de nos consignes et devoirs.”

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

Concerning the pedagogical point of view, the structuring of the course (visual aspect) and the syllabus document met a level of satisfaction of 100%, and comments in the questionnaire like: “I appreciated the clear and orderly structure that helps organise knowledge during learning”; “The course as a whole is well constructed and encourages learning”; or in a personal presentation form: “First of all, thank you for [...] the presentation of the course that allows us to have a clear vision of what awaits us”.

The variety in the learning resources and the various formats of the course documents that were provided²⁸ met full agreement (100%), which was also reflected by several comments such as: “I really liked the variety of materials”; “It is very appreciable to have had several formats of courses, which was really good because we do not all learn in the same way and for distance students, it is all the more appreciable. [...] Thank you”; “It was very well structured, very pedagogical. I really liked having the course in different formats and being able to choose the one that suited me best”; “The various course formats offered: slide, text, or video. The quizzes are welcome as well”; “the different working materials (especially the commented slideshows on which it is more pleasant to work – compared to PDF documents for example)”.

The end-of-chapter online quizzes²⁹ also achieved a level of 100% satisfaction and were often mentioned when students were asked what they had particularly liked: “I appreciated [...] the different tests offered during the course, they valorise the good assimilation of the course”; “The Quizziz³⁰!!! To be kept and shared with colleagues for other courses. A super practical and fun-learning tool :)”; “I particularly appreciated the quizzes (Quizziz) which helped me checking my knowledge on a very good medium and in a pleasant way”; “I particularly appreciate the quizzes. They allow you to learn while having fun”; “I also appreciated the quizzes, which are a good way to review the lesson”, etc.

Concerning the socioemotional point of view, as in Case 1, the perception of the teacher availability worked well since 100% of the responses were positive (88% strongly agreed and 12% agreed) and received comments like: “Thank you [...] for your availability during the

²⁸ The main course material of a lesson was offered either in pdf format (recommended for reviewing the lesson), or in the form of a dynamic commented slide show (with some additional oral explanations to the written text), running slide by slide, or with the same content, but in a video format (only the type of navigation in the document was then different).

²⁹ corresponding to non-graded formative assessments for these students

³⁰ The quizzes were made with the online site Quizziz.com.

semester and for allowing us to give you a feedback”; “Benevolence and availability of our teacher”, “Ms Blanvillain [...] demonstrates great pedagogy and is always available to the students”, etc.

Unlike Case 1, there was no difference for the students in Case 2 between their perception of the teacher’s availability and the fact that they felt well supervised³¹ (100% agreement for both points here). One positive comment seems also worth quoting on this subject: “In this subject and with this teacher, every means is implemented to best support the students in their learning, and thus lead them to success in their studies”.

The fact that Case 1 students felt less well supervised seemed to be partly linked to the lack of videoconferencing sessions, allowing direct (visual and synchronous) contact with the teacher. On the contrary, Case 2 students did not express any specific expectations regarding a possible synchronous aspect of the course, which is probably related to the fact that these students generally had external specific time constraints.

Another element that I think is relevant to this feeling of being well supervised or not is the use of the forums open to students (one for each platform). As seen previously, Case 1 students did not use theirs, whereas there were 30 posts³² from Case 2 students on their forum during the semester. On this point, this comment from a personal presentation form: “[...] As a distance student, I really appreciate the forum and all the communication we can have with teachers and students” also seems worth quoting.

The use of the forum thus certainly played an important role from the point of view of socioemotional support for Case 2 students, who were not easily available for synchronous sessions, while Case 1 students – who would have preferred a few videoconferencing sessions (especially at the beginning) – did not feel free to express themselves through the forum. This leads us to conclude that the communication scenario was more effective for the students in Case 1 than for those in Case 2.

What emerges globally from this study of Case 2 is that the student perception of the course was more positive than for Case 1, as also shown by the results concerning the overall quality of the course: 98% rated it “very good” or “good” (and in the worst case: “fairly good”: 2%).

³¹ 75% strongly agreed and 25% agreed concerning the feeling of being well supervised (Case 2)

³² The first messages were about the Facebook support group dedicated to these students and created on their initiative (without any intervention from the teacher).

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

3.3 Negative elements

As already mentioned, the course on the online platform corresponding to Case 2 was generally very well received by the students. The only negative elements are to be found in the comments in response to the open-ended question: “In your opinion, what are the weaknesses of this course? What improvements could you suggest?”.

What is remarkable here is that the few negative comments made were all focused on points of content (course too dense and theoretical, documents not going to the heart of the matter, too many documents, etc.) and details in the formulation of some instructions: “Very few weak points, even if to my taste there were a lot of quotes from references in the course, and so sometimes it is difficult to distinguish what is important:”); “Sometimes it’s hard to find the key information because the course is so comprehensive”; “the documents are sometimes too long, [...] too detailed (we no longer know where to look, what information is really important, what to remember, etc.). It may be necessary to reduce their number or at least their length (or to highlight the information to be retained in each document, as has been done in some texts)”; “Just a small remark on an exercise on the CEFR [...], the question ‘what is the most discriminating for the level A2 ...’. [...] the use of ‘discriminating’ misleads me [...]”.

4. Comparative analysis of the two types of student audience

The audience of Case 1 were 2nd year initial training students, that is students usually around 20 years old.

The characteristics of the audience in Case 2 presented before can be summarised as follows:

- an older audience;
- with previous or current professional experience (even among those of an age equivalent to the audience in Case 1);
- longer study experience (duration, variety);
- personal factors suggesting the acquisition of a certain maturity (apart from the age criterion): parental responsibility, taking on a double university curriculum, a heavy professional load, or managing health problems, etc.

What are the characteristics of these two audiences that would explain the differences we found in their perception of the course?

Age can obviously be a decisive factor, as observed by Fischer (2012), and the higher average age of Case 2 students may lead us to assume greater maturity in work organisation and attendance. 19% estimated to have worked more than 90 minutes per week, and 49% 90 minutes or more, which is more than Case 1 students.

Case 2 students generally started their curriculum on a distance basis from their 1st year and were therefore more accustomed to distance learning (regarding the LMS used and a certain learning methodology) than Case 1 students, who were used to face-to-face lessons. Case 2 students usually also had acquired some maturity (through age and/or life experience), which seemed to have allowed them to avoid the hesitations at the start of the semester that the other students experienced. They had fewer organisational and personal investment problems in their learning process and were thus able to concentrate more on the course materials themselves³³.

Another difference between the two audiences may be that of motivation, Case 2 students usually having more personal and/or professional experience behind them and a professional project. Conversely, as Denny (2020) assumes from his own observations: “the analysis can shed light on a negative impact on students without a stabilised career plan”³⁴.

The last point which may be relevant to the perception of this course is the element of individual choice concerning the learning mode. Distance learning constituted an initial and personal choice for the audience of Case 2, while students in Case 1 had had no choice in that matter and had to adapt without much prior experience of this kind of learning.

5. Conclusion

The sudden and imposed radical change brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic was not always well received by teachers and students used to face-to-face learning (Blanvillain et al. 2021; Descarpentries and Andrieu 2020). And what researchers in the field already knew became obvious for all during this period: “[...] designing online training devices requires specific skills” (Denny 2020)³⁵. But what is true for teachers and course designers is also true for learners, for whom online learning requires the development of different habits and the need for some autonomy (which does not mean the absence of tutoring support).

With distance learning, both learners and teachers need to create and understand “proximity differently”³⁶ (Frau-Meigs 2020). Indeed: “Education is not a technology, but it is not incompatible with it. It doesn’t

³³ which explains the fact that the negative points they could think of concerned the inner content of the course and not the way it was delivered.

³⁴ “l’analyse peut éclairer un impact négatif sur les étudiants sans projet professionnel stabilisé.”

³⁵ “[...] concevoir des dispositifs de formation en ligne nécessite des compétences spécifiques”

³⁶ “la proximité autrement”

The perceived effectiveness of an online course

mean replicating exactly what is done in the classroom, but adopting a pedagogy based on flexible, dynamic and multi-media tools that allow for active and differentiated pedagogy at the same time...”³⁷ (Frau-Meigs 2020). Following Th. Soubrié (2020), we should also add that the very materiality of digital technology must be considered, and that the specific properties of the tools used³⁸ are not neutral and naturally influence the interactions within the proposed digital learning environment.

As far as the type of audience is concerned, the maturity of the learners certainly plays a role in mastering the organisation of distance learning, but familiarity with the learning platform is also important, and even a younger audience can gain autonomy when they acquire this familiarity.

The observation of the different student feedbacks from the two cases presented here seems to show that the students’ perception of this course is rather positive, even for the students in Case 1, thus confirming the importance of a pedagogical scenario elaborated in detail (cf. also Nissen 2004, Blanvillain et al. 2021). The main difference in the way the two audiences functioned concerned the communication scenario that was integrated into it.

The feeling of being well supervised is what worked out most poorly for the Case 1 students, which can be related to the lack of videoconferencing and the lack of use of the forum. Case 2 students had created their own support and exchange group on a social network, outside the course forum (while continuing to use it). In contrast, Case 1 students did not use the forum of the course at all. And although I have no definite information on this point – but judging from the emails reporting the lack of communication between peers that I received when setting up collaborative activities – they also do not seem to have created a group on any social network for this course.

It appears, therefore, that the designer of a course does not necessarily have control over all the variables for its success. The communication scenario developed for this course worked well for a mature audience used to distance learning but would have needed to be rethought for the other

³⁷ “L’*éducation n’est pas une technologie mais elle n’est pas incompatible avec elle. Il ne s’agit pas de répliquer exactement ce que l’on fait en présentiel mais d’adopter une pédagogie appuyée sur des outils flexibles, dynamiques et multi-médias qui permettent une pédagogie active et différenciée à la fois...*”

³⁸ for the course presented here, that means tools from the Moodle platform (the grid course format, milestones, tests), quizzes from the Quizizz.com website, H5P tools for didacticising videos, etherpad, etc.

type of audience, especially as the learners did not know each other at the beginning of the course.

Within the limits of their own field of action, it remains for teachers to keep in mind the importance of a well-thought pedagogical scenario, and how best to integrate the communication scenario according to the type of audience concerned.

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The perceived effectiveness of an online course

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