

Chapter 9

Cooperative Learning and Accounting Students Transitions Into Higher Education: Lessons From Learning Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on best practices for face-to-face cooperative learning as part of blended learning in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores whether cooperative group dynamics, in particular, face-to-face small-team activities, have impacted first-year student experiences. Interviews were conducted with freshers who were enrolled in an accounting degree programme at a United Kingdom university. The findings indicated that in-person classes are integral to the process of blended learning. Overall, freshers have shown that small-team work has fostered their sense of belonging to the university community, enhanced their teamwork skills, made them more responsible for their studies, and strengthened their commitment to attend the classes. By presenting the benefits, challenges, and improvement techniques of small teamwork, the results of this study might be of use to sustain a continued engagement of freshers towards facilitating their school-university transition in blended learning.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the need for implementing distance learning modes in higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide (Sangster et al., 2020). Most United Kingdom HEIs have been at the forefront of offering remote learning to help in combatting the spread of COVID-19. Higher education (HE) students are identified as a key risk group who are subjected to significant COVID-19-related negative impacts on their academic outcomes (e.g., performance) and beliefs (e.g., efficacy; Talsma et al., 2021). This chapter examines the development and impacts of small face-to-face (F2F) teamwork activities during the pandemic. Students have had to adapt to “new at-home study environments” (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020) that require applying a toolkit of well-developed skills in self-regulation (Broadbent, 2017; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Aristovnik et al., 2020), time management, and IT (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020) to engage effectively in remote learning compared to face-to-face (F2F) learning.

Few studies have explored the perceptions of HE students about their experiences (see Potra et al., 2021) and interaction (see Aguilera-Hermida, 2020) during the pandemic. Potra et al. (2021) interviewed 149 Romanian freshers to explore the extent to which their initial expectations about higher education, interaction desire, and motivation have changed after introducing the hybrid learning approach. They showed that students preferred the F2F component of the hybrid system due to having a better understanding and immediate and accessible feedback. However, the students referred to pandemic restrictions, such as distancing and wearing masks, as hurdles to their socialization needs and learning processes.

Educational interaction refers to interpersonal communication in the classroom. Sollitto et al. (2018) found that academic uncertainty tends to be less for students who communicate with their peers. Besides this, Wilks (2008) reported that student resilience and adaptation rely on social support and knowledge exchange among classmates. These insights explain Aguilera-Hermida's (2020) findings that, in the COVID-19 pandemic context, students have concerns about the possible adverse impacts of a lack of communication with tutors and fellow students due to online learning on their academic performance. This is particularly true for first-year undergraduate students, for whom peer support is equally vital to academic support towards facilitating a smooth transition into HE life (Collier, 1980; Liu & Dall'Alba, 2012; Meehan & Howells, 2017; Nelson et al., 2012). In higher education, teamwork-oriented (i.e., cooperative) learning is acclaimed as an effective active learning tool (Wolfe, 2012; Kelly et al., 2020).

There is no knowledge of how small-team activities, which had to run with masks and distancing, have impacted first-year student experiences. This action research investigates the perceived effectiveness of small F2F teamwork activity as a core cooperative learning technique in blended learning. Interviews were conducted with

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