

Chapter 13

From Routine Mode to Emergency Mode and Back: Reflections on Israeli Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education After the COVID–19 Period

Hagit Meishar-Tal

Holon Institute of Technology (HIT), Israel

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses Israeli higher education institutions' transitions from campus learning to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic and critically discusses the transition back to routine campus-based learning. The chapter reviews the state of online teaching in pre-COVID-19 academia, the changes required during lockdowns and social distancing restrictions, and the essential difference between routine and emergency online teaching. It also discusses the consequences of returning to campus-based learning and ways to leverage the changes that took place during the COVID-19 period and adapt them to routine mode again.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 breakdown and the quarantines and social distancing restrictions followed, was a shaky and challenging period for higher education institutions (HEIs), which have always been considered a stronghold of conservatism. However, they proved their ability to adapt to the new situation quickly and effectively. Academic institutions in Israel are part of the few public institutions that were not paralyzed during the pandemic. Teaching continued almost uninterrupted, with a rapid and impressive transition from face-to-face to online learning (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; Cohen & Sabag, 2020). The higher education system has proven that it can address the changing needs of students and be flexible and adaptive to a changing situation. However, the “day after”, we will have to address complex dilemmas: how to manage the change in academic teaching and what to preserve and what to improve.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-5934-8.ch013

The State of Online Teaching in Higher Education in Israel Before COVID-19

Integrating online technologies into teaching is not new in higher education worldwide (Perry & Pilati, 2011). Adopting these learning technologies is a recognition of their contribution to improving teaching, learning, and assessment (Goodison, 2001). For many years, HEIs in Israel have been working to integrate tools for online learning in teaching (Cohen & Davidovitch, 2020). Online learning management systems have been commonly used in Israeli HEIs to provide online environments that accompany courses for about two decades (Naveh et al., 2010; Ghilay, 2019). They enable access to study materials, presentations and articles, lesson summaries, and the submission of assignments. However, many studies conducted in academia have shown that these sites do not constitute a significant pedagogical change and that the quality of educational activity in these environments is pretty low (Roth, 2015). While the many attempts to develop meaningful learning based on interaction and knowledge construction in these environments, have yielded some successful examples of student activities (e.g., Anatolievna, 2018; Palahicky & Halcomb-Smith, 2020; Munni & Hasan, 2020; Ng et al., 2020), from a systemic perspective, they did not bring about any significant change in learning in the pre-COVID era (Nichols, 2008). As long as they are accompanied by face-to-face sessions their main advantage was mainly as a repository of learning material for students and asynchronous communication with the lecturers between sessions in question and answer forums (Carvalho et al., 2011; Olmos et al., 2015).

Synchronous learning systems, such as Zoom, which is now in use in every home in Israel following the COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines, were also used in HEIs before the pandemic as a substitute for face-to-face sessions (Stewart et al., 2011; Warden et al., 2013). Synchronous distance learning enabled immediate communication between students and distant lecturers. It allowed students to get to know each other and communicate during class without meeting physically. Indeed, students participating in these classes reported high levels of involvement during synchronous classes (Falloon, 2011; Hrastinski, 2008; Stein et al., 2009). However, since these systems allow recording of the session and later viewing of the recorded session at the students' convenience, some students took advantage of this option and made no effort to participate in the live sessions (Kear et al., 2012). Moreover, lecturers who taught in synchronous courses indicated a decrease in interaction with the students and an inability to 'feel' the students during the live sessions (Villalón et al., 2012). Another phenomenon in synchronous teaching is the avoidance of students turning on their camera in synchronous classes, thus further reducing their involvement in the class (Bedenlier, 2021; Castelli & Sarvary, 2021).

Another phenomenon that shaped online learning in higher education before COVID-19 was the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). MOOCs are courses designed for the public and developed according to the asynchronous model, allowing self-learning and maximum flexibility in time and space. These courses do not accompany face-to-face courses but stand alone as distance learning courses, when there is usually no lecturer who supports the learners by providing feedback and assessment (Pappano, 2012). The courses are usually based on short videos in which the lecturers are recorded and on interactive activities and/or interaction with other learners (Baturay, 2015). One of the challenges students face in learning with MOOCs is the self-regulation required of the learner and the lack of framework provided by an official academic institution (Onah & Sinclair, 2017; Reparaz et al., 2020). The result is that despite the great attractiveness of these courses, there is a high dropout rate and a lack of perseverance (Aldowah et al., 2020; Feng, 2019; Gitinabard et al., 2018).

At first, it seemed that the MOOCs were threatening to render academia irrelevant as they provided an easily accessible alternative for students to acquire theoretical and practical knowledge in courses

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