The pedagogical relationship in Distance University courses through the eyes of teachers and students: a comparative approach

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Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic has led to a violent adjustment of university education to distance learning. This paper examines the impact of distance education on the pedagogical relationship between university teachers and students. Our sample includes both university teachers and students of Greek universities. The analysis of the data shows that the majority of both university teachers and students consider distance education necessary, although individual differences are apparent. It is also important to stand by a significant minority of both teachers and students who have a different opinion. Two concluding formulations stand out. First, that distance education is here to stay and that it enriches university teaching by making it more flexible. Second, that more research is needed on the effects of distance education on the pedagogical relationship between teacher and students.

Keywords: University courses, Pedagogical relationship, Communication, Teaching strategies, Comparative approach.

1. Introduction

The pedagogical relationship, defined as "the set of learning, teaching and didactic relationships in a pedagogical situation" (Legendre 2005, Friesen 2017), is at the heart of questions about the learning process. The pedagogical relationship, as a social interaction, takes place in a social context and is characterized by a series of exchanges,

mutual influences, actions and reactions between teacher and student (Weigand and Hess 2007). For this reason, pedagogical theories place it at the center of their interest. According to Kozanitis (2015), several studies argue that good teaching is determined by the quality of the pedagogical relationship established, which depends on the teacher-student interrelationships. It can have a crucial influence on the academic success of students when it aims to provoke in the student a positive attitude towards knowledge. This important role in creating positive interrelationships in the learning process is analyzed by several authors (Marsollier and Obin 2004; Potvin 2005; Roorda et al. 2011) who argue that they produce links that are indispensable to any educational endeavor (Kozanitis 2015).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary online, the notion of "relationship" expresses the way in which two or more people feel and behave towards each other. So, communication and contact are two constituent elements of a "relationship."

Pedagogy as a component of education is a set of practices designed to ensure educational training (Houssaye 1992).

The "pedagogical relationship" is therefore crucial in the learning process because it involves, on the one hand, contact and communication between at least two people (teacher and student) and, on the other, the practices reflected upon. The whole of this relationship is a necessary whole for the student to learn. However, this relationship has been influenced by the massification and diversification of the student population (Maringe& Sing 2014). Furthermore, YürekliKaynardağ (2019) argues that, for students, the fundamental dimension of the pedagogical relationship is communication.

Any change in the construction of the "pedagogical relationship" is likely to have an impact on the learning process. Change is, therefore, a source of "risk" (Beck 1992) both in the final outcome of the training, and in the learning and its quality. Of course, risk can also be an opportunity for renewal, and thus a vehicle for improvement and evolution, hence the importance of thoughtful monitoring of the changes introduced.

The introduction of ICT in teaching seems to have repercussions on the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student, since it influences its two constituent pillars: communication and reflective practices. If we remain within the logic of Houssaye's five postures (knowing, teaching, training, learning and educating) (Houssaye, 2000), we can see that ICT influences all five postures. Indeed:

a. Knowledge: Technologies multiply sources, store information and change the conditions of research and knowledge production.
b. Teaching: Teaching is becoming more flexible. As a result, there are changes in the way knowledge is transmitted, in student work and in evaluation methods.
c. Training: ICT radically changes the way of communication and produces a training environment that is both synchronous and asynchronous. The possession of the necessary tools is a sine qua non condition for access to training.
d. Learning: Technologies shake up learning models by reformulating them in a radical way, sometimes producing hybrid situations.
e. Educating: ICT transforms: e1. Knowledge, e2. The strategies of transmission to learners, and e3. The communication between the actors of learning.

It should be noted that the reflection on ICT and higher education already has an extensive bibliography. As an example, Endrizzi (2012) in her technical report examines the challenges and opportunities of the introduction of ICT in higher education. She points out that the impact of digital technologies on learning is complex and not fully understood. However, the dynamics of ICT are such that they are pushing towards a profound renewal of teaching and learning practices. Three challenges emerge: a) the digital literacy of the three groups which are a part of university life (teachers, students, other university staff), b) the guidance by professional mentors, and c) the recognition of the teaching mission of research teachers. Lietart (2016) discusses the effects of ICT on learning theories and later connects the use of ICT to the concept of pedagogical innovation, while pointing out two initial postures, one epistemological and one ethical. Paivandi and Espinosa (2013) deal with the relationship between teachers and students. They point out that this relationship was already modified (degradation and distancing) by the fact of massification. The introduction of ICT for the higher education teacher, on the one hand, modifies the pedagogical situations, and on the other, poses a problem at the level of ICT use. Indeed, the ability

to use ICT influences both communication and learning strategies, and is therefore essentially involved in the teacher-student relationship. Guennoun and Benjelloun (2016) are interested in the views of students with regard to the use of ICT. The authors point out that most students are familiar with ICT but they do not necessarily know the specific tools related to their learning. There is also a minority who do not have the means to familiarize themselves. In any case, both the majority and the minority need training in order to be able to appropriately use and benefit from the use of ICT at university. According toKamarianos, Adamopoulou, Lambropoulos and Stamelos (2020), the changes that have taken place seem to accelerate a trend that is already underway and with which students seem more familiar than teachers.

In spite of the fact that in the last 30 years the specialized bibliography has been enriched and the experimentation in the use of ICT has multiplied, the accumulated knowledge was not such as to lead to the adoption of ICT as a device for the reconfiguration of the teaching operation of higher education (with the exception of Open Universities).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has provoked an abrupt and radical digitalization of the educational process in academic institutions. The pedagogical relationship in higher education (HE) has thus undergone a brutal and fundamental transformation. For this reason, we have considered it appropriate to ask teachers and students in higher education about this transformation, about the new academic reality and about the effects of digitalization in the pedagogical relationship. In addition, we also tried to compare the answers in order to verify if there are differences in the representations that these HE actors have of this new academic reality.

2. The Study

The data comes from a study conducted in the fall of 2020 in which teachers-researchers and students of Greek universities participated[1]. 160 teachers responded to the questionnaire sent to them and 524 students responded to theirs. For the responses a 4-point Likert scale was used: (++ (totally agree), + (agree), - (disagree), -- (totally disagree)).

The objective of the study was to understand whether generalized distance learning had an impact on the different aspects of the teacher-student relationship. In addition, the question of whether the new type of "distance communication", synchronous, which took place in an unusual university context, had an influence on the process and quality of the training and monitoring of the students, as well as on the performance of the latter,was examined.

2.1 Questionnaire for teachers

The questionnaire for teachers was composed of five parts: a) general questions, b) questions related to the pedagogical aspects of the teacher-student relationship, c) questions related to student performance, d) reflective questions, and e) predictive questions.

2.2 Student Questionnaire

The questionnaire for teachers was composed of five parts: a) general questions, b) questions related to the pedagogical aspects of the teacher-student relationship, c) questions related to student performance, d) reflective questions, and e) predictive questions.

2.3 Research analysis

2.3.1 Demographic data

525 students participated in the survey. 84.2% of the sample were female students (442) and 14.1% were male students (74), while 9 people did not respond. 35.2% of the students studied at the University of Patras (185), 25.3% at the University of the Aegean (133), 13.7% at Democritus University (72), 9% at the Technical University of Crete (47) and the remaining 17.8% studied at various universities in the country.

Of the 161 university teachers who participated in the survey, 39.1% were female (63) and 58.4% were male (94), while 4 did not respond. 46.0% of them serve at the University of Patras (74), 16.1% at the Mediterranean

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[1] This survey is the national component of an international survey led by George N. Nahas, University of St.Joseph, Lebanon.

University (26), 5.6% at the Technical University of Crete (9), 5% at the University of the Aegean (9), 5% at the University of Athens (8) and the remaining percentage at various universities in the country.

Of the 161 university teachers in the sample, 21.7% are professors (35), 17.4% Associate Professors (28), 23.0% Assistant Professors (37), 5% Lecturers (8), 13.7% other categories (22) and 16.8% contract lecturers (27), while 4 persons did not answer the question. Regarding their academic experience, 2 out of 10 have up to 5 years of experience in higher education (20.5%), almost 1 out of 10 have between 6-10 years (9.3%), while more than 3 out of 10 have 11-20 years of experience (34.2%) or more than 20 years (36.0%).

2.3.2 Analysis of the pedagogical relationship

2.3.2.1 Importance

As we can observe in Table 1, 99.2% of students and 100% of faculty members state that they agree or strongly agree with the statement "the teacher-student relationship is an important dimension of "university pedagogy".

Similar levels of agreement are shown for the statement "The professor-student relationship is a component of university life", with 93.9% of students and 100% of faculty agreeing (Table 2).

Table 1: The professor-student relationship is an important dimension of university pedagogy

		N	%
STUDENTS	Strongly agree	299	57.0
	Agree	222	42.3
	Disagree	2	0.4
	I don't know/no response	2	0.4
	Total	525	100.0
TEACHERS	Strongly agree	136	84.5
	Agree	25	15.5
	Total	161	100.0

Table 2: The teacher-student relationship is a component of university life

		N	%
STUDENTS	Strongly agree	185	35.2
	Agree	308	58.7
	Disagree	14	2.7
	I don't know/no response	18	3.4
	Total	525	100.0
TEACHERS	Strongly agree	125	77.6
	Agree	36	22.4
	Total	161	100.0

2.3.2.2 Content

The pedagogical relationship is defined as a) communication between university teacher and student, and b) as learning strategy.

a. Communication

As we can see in Table 3, there are two statements with very high agreement rates among both students and university teachers. The majority of students (93.7%) and university teachers (96.9%) agree with the sentence "B4-1: Distance education cannot replace physical expression in the context of face-to-face education". 70% of students agree with the sentence B2-6: Maintaining the teacher-student relationship requires more time on the part of the student in distance education and this percentage increases for university teachers to 91.7%.

With the sentence "B2-3: Distance communication has a positive effect on the teacher-student relationship" only 21.6% of students agree, i.e. one in five students, but the rate of agreement among university teachers rises to 32%.

Only one in four students agree with the sentence "B2-4: Distance communication has a positive effect on the atmosphere of cooperation with the professor", while among lecturers it is almost one in three.

One in three students agree with the sentence "B2-5: Distance communication has a positive effect on the monitoring of the progress of student work (individual or group) by the professor", while on the contrary almost half of the lecturers agree with it.

Large differentiationis observed in the sentence "B2-7: Distance communication did not affect the quality of the pedagogical process", where one in three students agree, while on the contrary less than one in five lecturers agree.

Also, differences in the percentages between students and lecturers can be observed in the statements "B4-4: Both distance and face-to-face education provide the same opportunities for developing pedagogical relationships even if the forms of education are different", "B4-5 Distance education provides opportunities for freedom of movement for students, which can contribute to the development of human relationships between teachers and students" where one out of three students or more, but less than one in four university teachers, agree with both statements.

Table 3: Rates of agreement and disagreement between students and university teachers

		B2-3	B2-4	B2-5	B2-6	B2-7	B2-9	B2-10	B4-1	B4-4	B4-5
STUDENTS	Strongly disagree /disagree	78.4	75.9	66.7	30.0	67.1	67.8	61.5	6.3	64.3	64.3
STUDENTS	Agree/ Strongly agree	21.6	24.1	33.3	70.0	32.9	32.2	38.5	93.7	29.0	35.7
TEACHERS	Strongly disagree /disagree	68.0	70.4	52.9	8.3	80.7	64.2	61.5	3.1	75.2	75.2
TEACHERS	Agree/ Strongly agree	32.0	29.6	47.1	91.7	19.3	35.8	38.5	96.9	22.4	24.8

B2-3: Distance communication has a positive effect on the teacher-student relationship
B2-4: Distance communication has a positive effect on the atmosphere of cooperation with the teacher
B2-5: Distance communication has a positive effect on the monitoring of the progress of student work (individual or group) by the teacher
B2-6: Maintaining the teacher-student relationship requires more time on the part of the student in distance education
B2-7: Distance communication did not affect the quality of the pedagogical

process

B2-9: Students show enthusiasm for ensuring the teacher-student relationship through distance communication

B2-10: Students have the necessary time to maintain relationships with fellow students in distance education.

B4-1: Distance education cannot replace physical expression in the context of face-to-face education

B4-4: Both distance and face-to-face education provide the same opportunities for developing pedagogical relationships even if the forms of education are different

B4-5 Distance education offers opportunities for freedom of movement for students which can contribute to the development of human relationships between teachers and students

In order to investigate any differences in the ten propositions regarding distance communication between students and lecturers, Figure 1 shows the averages in each proposition for students and lecturers.
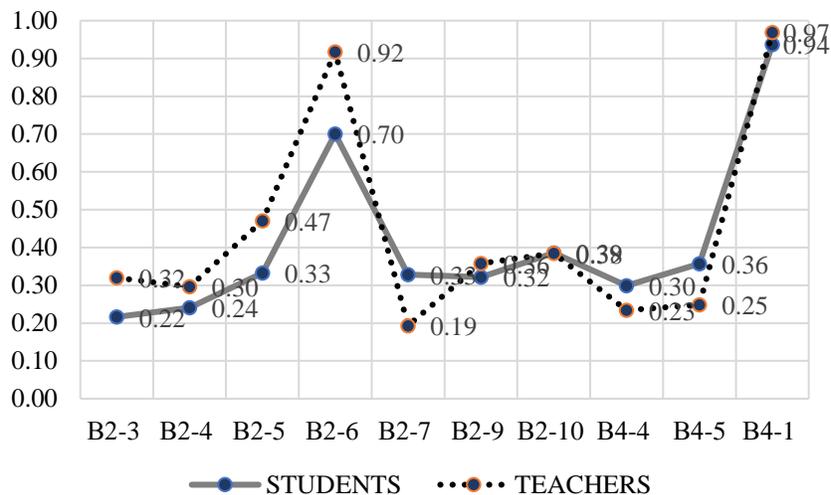
Figure 1: Means of agreement (0= disagree/strongly disagree, 1= agree/strongly agree)

The comparison of means between students and lecturers showed statistically significant differences (t-test, $p<0.05$) in "agreement" for distance communication, with higher means of agreement for lecturers in the sentences:

B2-3: Distance communication has a positive effect on the teacher-student relationship

B2-5: Distance communication has a positive effect on the monitoring of the progress of student work (individual or group) by the teacher

B2-6: Maintaining the teacher-student relationship requires more time on the part of the student in distance education, Comparison of means between students and instructors showed statistically significant differences (t-test, $p<0.05$) of "agreement" for distance communication, with greater mean agreement among students in the statements:

B2-7: Distance communication did not affect the quality of the pedagogical process

B4-5: Distance learning offers opportunities for freedom.

b. Learning strategy

Table 4 shows the percentages of agreement between students and university teachers on four proposed "learning strategies". Here the views of students and academic teachers seem to coincide.

In particular, 81.2% of students and 72.8% of academic teachersagree with the sentence "B3-2: Distance communication is not sufficient to ensure the monitoring of student progress and therefore does not ensure a fair assessment of student knowledge".

Similarly, high percentages, three out of four, appear in the sentence "B3-3: Distance communication does not allow for the monitoring that would be necessary to assess the acquisition of competences" of both students and lecturers.

48.9% of students agree with the sentence "B3-4: Distance communication tools (Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, eClass, etc.) are effective in ensuring the distance assessment of students", while the percentage of university teachers falls to 39.6%.

Finally, slightly more than half of the students and half of the university teachers agree with the sentence "B3-5: Distance communication tools (Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, eClass, etc.) ensure preparation for distance assessment".

Table 4: Rates of agreement between students and academic teachers

|		B3-2	B3-3	B3-4	B3-5
STUDENTS	Strongly disagree /disagree	18.8	25.1	51.1	44.3
	Agree/ Strongly agree	81.2	74.9	48.9	55.7
TEACHERS	Strongly disagree /disagree	27.2	25.2	60.4	44.1
	Agree/ Strongly agree	72.8	74.8	39.6	55.9

B3-2: Distance communication is not sufficient to ensure the monitoring of the student's progress and therefore does not ensure the fair assessment of the student's knowledge

B3-3: Distance communication does not allow for the monitoring that would be necessary for the assessment of competence acquisition

B3-4: Distance communication tools (Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, eClass, etc.) are effective in ensuring the distance assessment of students

B3-5: Distance communication tools (Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, eClass, etc.) ensure preparation for distance assessment

Figure 2 shows the averages and reveals where the responses of students and university teachers regarding the 4 learning strategies proposals coincide.
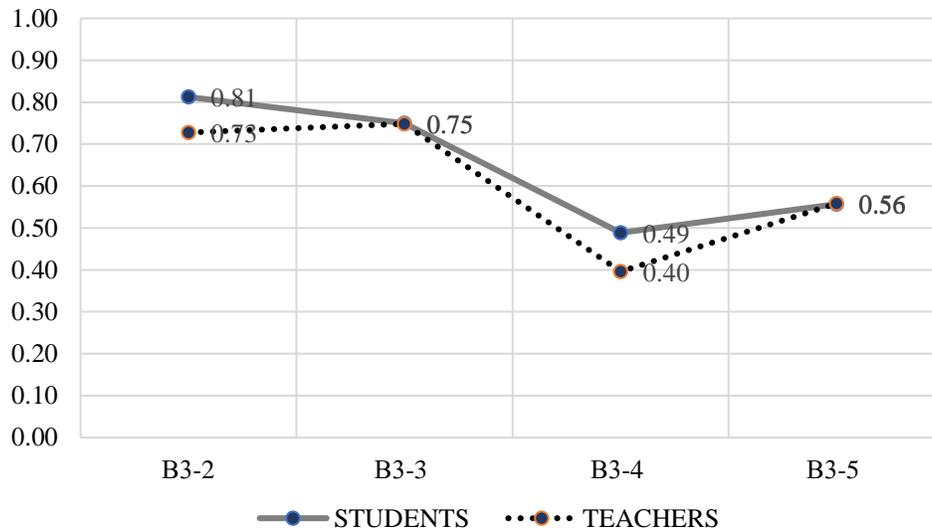
Figure 2: Means of agreement (0= disagree/strongly disagree, 1= agree/strongly agree)

2.3.2.3 Face-to-face teaching

Figure 3 shows the percentages of agreement between students and universityteachers on four propositions (filters) concerning face-to-face teaching.

Almost all students and academic teachers (over 90%) agree on "B3-1: University life, on campus, helps students perform better", "B4-2: Communication within a classroom allows for better monitoring of student participation during the course" and "B4-3: The presence of teachers and students in classrooms constitutes a better opportunity for the development of human communication in individuals and groups".

Lastly, more than three out of four students (75.7%) agree with the statement "B3-6: Face-to-face assessment is necessary even if it is assisted by distance communication", while the percentage among university teachers rises to 86.1%.
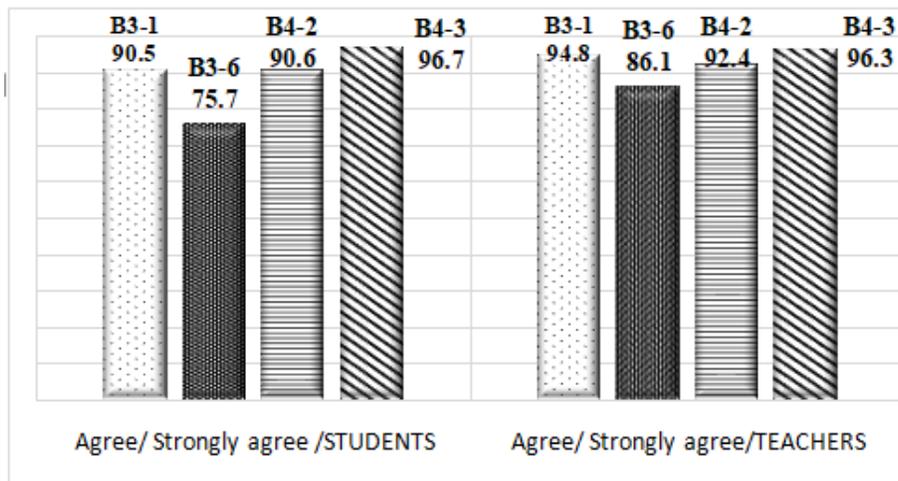
B3-1: University life, on campus, helps students perform better
B3-6: Face-to-face assessment is necessary even if assisted by distance communication
B4-2: Communication in a classroom allows for better monitoring of student participation during the course
B4-3: The presence of teachers and students in classrooms constitutes a better opportunity for the development of human communication in individuals and groups

Figure 3: Rates of agreement and disagreement between students and academic teachers

3. Conclusion

The specialized bibliography defined the pedagogical relationship as: a) communication, and b) learning strategies. The pedagogical relationship is considered important. For students,"communication" is most important in the pedagogical relationship. Moreover, the pedagogical relationship has been influenced by the massification and diversification of the student population.

From our analysis, it seems that for all participants (100%), both university teachers and students, the pedagogical relationship is important.

Distance education has an impact on the pedagogical relationship. The majority of participants stated that this impact was negative. More specifically, distance education affects: a) the atmosphere of cooperation, b) the learning strategy, c) the monitoring of learning progress, d) the quality of the educational process.

However, our analysis shows some discrepancies between teachers' and students' responses regarding the impact of distance education on communication, establishing and monitoring links and reflective practices (the implementation of the learning strategy) and thus the very core of the educational relationship.

Face-to-face education is seen as positive in relation to: a) performance, b) communication (including body language) and participation, c) quality of the educational process. Overall, in face-to-face education, the student feels more comfortable and has more opportunities to develop the pedagogical relationship.

So, is distance education completely useless? Probably not. A number of participants believe that it can enrich the educational process in an auxiliary way. Existing software is adequate (not optimal). It can provide a great deal of useful flexibility for teachers and students. However, this usefulness is not absolute. Thus, we find there is a reservation about the evaluation process and a clear opposition to research, internship or laboratory activities.

What can we keep? Mass distance education has entered university life abruptly. It is not attractive, and it disturbs both the pedagogical relationship and the educational process. Despite this reservation, at least for a minority of teachers and students, it retains some positive aspects in view of the flexibility it offers. However, this flexibility only concerns a part of the curriculum (the courses) and therefore remains approximate. In the future, the use of distance education will enrich the education offered but not replace it, especially in terms of relationships. However, what is evident is the need for further research into specific aspects of distance education and the pedagogical relationship.

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