

# MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN THE DISRUPTIVE TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF PARTICIPATIVE APPROACH IN DISTANCE LEARNING

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**Abstract:** *This paper is focused on various possibilities of effective management education at universities during the world pandemic of Covid-19. In more detail, there is examined one specific case of distance learning at the Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, University of Žilina, Slovakia. This paper highlights the importance of active interaction between educators and students, and building relationships among students by teamwork. The substantial outcome of this research paper is endorsing the importance of participative attitude at the seminars of Management. One of the key factors in students' motivation is the attitude of teachers, who, in this process, act as colleagues. Thus, the lecturers form a direct part of the educational process, rather than just the controlling part. In this research, the students' satisfaction with the way of teaching this subject was measured. It was proven that the participative attitude of teachers is linked to increased motivation of students. Some of them would even welcome this type of leading and learning in other lectures, too. This approach was confirmed as effective mostly during distance learning since students might feel more stressed and overwhelmed and their motivation tends to decrease. It is crucial to include such elements into the education process which strengthen the students' motivation. Teaching based on practical examples from a business environment in which the students work with real data and information may be the right way.*

**Keywords:** *Management, Education, Distance learning, Management education, Student motivation.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of Covid-19 in the year 2020 brought a lot of challenges for society. Education at the universities needed to be moved to the online environment. This meant a lot of changes in the education processes such as implementing technologies, using new systems, methods and even bringing a new approach to the students. In this paper, education possibilities and approaches are discussed, mostly the participative approach and its usage in higher education. For the students not to lose motivation, it is needed to implement interesting approaches and establish a vivid environment at the university courses. Since social contact has been severely limited, communication has gained its importance also in education. The discussions may be the right tool to be used in university lectures and seminars. In the analytic part of this paper, a case study from the Faculty of Management Science and Informatics, University of Žilina, is being discussed. The authors choose one particular case of teaching – the subject Management 1 where the basics of management are taught, mainly for freshmen. At the end of this course, the students had a chance to express their opinion on the chosen approach of the teachers in the questionnaire. The results of this questionnaire are discussed in the last part of the paper.

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Higher Education and Its Changes

Nowadays, education is facing several changes. For a more sustainable future, even education should be sustainable. Burbules with co-authors (2020) gave a set of changes needed for sustainable education in the future. Those are *changes in aims and objectives, changes in educational ecologies, changes in conceptions of teaching and learning, changes that specifically affect teachers* and *changes in governance*. For the needs of this paper, the most important are changes in conceptions of teaching and learning.

According to Burbules (2020), it is important to slowly shift from 'curriculum-based' to 'problem-based' learning. Thus, the students need to feel motivated and driven by practical questions and purpose. This is also an attribute of a participative approach when the students are encouraged to discuss real problems. Students are accessing the information they need right on time when they use it as well. On the other hand, effective teaching is the responsibility of the teachers and educational institution itself. The teachers are no longer only sources of authority as persons who tell the students what they need to know, but also facilitators of learning, giving the students the right directions in their path of self-learning.

Employers nowadays search for students and university graduates that are creative and able to adapt to a constantly changing professional environment (Atabekova, 2015). As the author states, the students welcomed later at the labour market need to know how to use information and communication technologies well, need to have strongly developed critical thinking, problem-solving, and high creativity skills. Thus, teaching for the practice is essential. This may be achieved by non-formal educating, where the students are involved in systematized, structured, and organized activities based on the real world.

Education differs also by the used strategy. According to Tudor (2013), there are three basic education strategies:

- *Formal education*, typical for a set structure, given curriculum, classical formal relationship teacher-student,
- *Non-formal education*, as the opposite for the formal education, using games, improvisations, discussions, and practical problems through which the students are learning,
- *Informal education*, where learning is not intentional, and the students often do not even know they are being taught.

The purpose of non-formal and informal education is to prepare students for real-life and business problems. However, the universities need to maintain a certain level of quality even when using non-formal methods for teaching the students (Vilcea, 2014). Every educational act influences the behaviour of students, therefore the teachers' approach may reflect on the students' action and motivation. Graduates act as the main output of the educational process and they should be able to work in a real context and real environment.

Kovacova and Vackova (2015) stated that *e-learning* is an efficient way to get in touch with students and give them valuable information in a shorter time and at greater distances. During distance learning, e-learning systems are used as a primary tool for communication between teachers and students. Self-studying is encouraged since e-learning systems contain all needed

information, data, documents, and even recordings of lectures or seminars. Such systems gain even higher interest and importance during distance learning, just like during the Covid-19 pandemic when the university scholars are taught online.

## 2.2. Participative Approach in Education

As Romanova and Lyshenko (2012) stated, when it comes to pedagogical communication there are three basic types: *monologue*, *dialogue*, and *discussion*. A monologue is very popular in lectures, though only fifty per cent of the information can be perceived by the students. In a dialogue, the interaction is stronger, and the students are more likely to perceive and memorize given information. The discussion may be the most effective style for the seminars since the students are strongly involved and can directly contribute to the learning process. Besides the types of communication, there are six main communication styles based on their classification, as seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Teacher communication styles

Communication style	Characteristics
<b>Autocratic</b>	Total control and supervision of a teacher, a set of strict rules and regulations, no possibility of students' dialogue with a teacher.
<b>Authoritarian</b>	Rules and regulations, students can share their opinions and points of view, a teacher holds the decisions.
<b>Democratic</b>	An active dialogue between the teacher and the students, the teacher understands and persuades the students.
<b>Ignoring</b>	The persona of the teacher is autonomous with a rather formal approach to teaching, the teacher is not directly involved in the process and the students' environment.
<b>Permissive</b>	The teacher is only slightly involved in the process, the students take their own decisions.
<b>Illogical</b>	The teacher does not follow one style but a combination, this can lead to disorganisation and even conflicts in the group.

**Source:** Romanova and Lyshenko (2012)

A participative approach is based on the democratic style of communication. A vivid dialogue is very important in this teaching approach as an element of creating a friendly environment for the students. In the educational system, a participative approach is a practice-oriented tactic where the students take part on an equal basis. The participative approach has the following attributes (Romanova, Lyshenko, 2012):

- One's opinion in doing tasks and assignments is welcomed and appreciated,
- The agreement between the teacher and students, counselling and advising,
- The communication between the teacher and the students is based on parity, tolerance, and voluntary participation.

It is necessary to include this communication approach in the teaching process systematically. If used occasionally, the participation may be perceived as a game and something not as usual. The teacher's role is not to act autocratically but to lead the communication democratically, thus delegating the decision making to the students. Also, the teacher acts as a moderator of the discussion, being (Romanova, Lyshenko, 2012):

- Hard-working, self-motivated, and self-confident,
- Able to concentrate, memorize, and deal with a large amount of information in a short time,
- Friendly, sociable, and an effective listener with good listening skills.

The participative approach leads to higher motivation of the students. It can also be combined with other strategies in order to achieve the best results in the level of motivation. These strategies can also strengthen responsibility and creativity among students. The strategies are (Blašková, 2014):

- Natural influence of the teacher's charisma – to have a friendly approach, to challenge in discussions, to appreciate the thoughts of students, to give positive feedback,
- Inspirational leadership of students – to engage students in creative processes, to enhance clear visions of students, to have trust in students' abilities and creativity,
- Demonstrating the individualised consideration towards students – to get to know students well soon, to make students feel engaged in faculty's life,
- Training and stimulating the students' intellect - to solve real life problems with the students, to inspire students to have their own opinions and solutions, to enhance innovativeness in students.

### 2.3. Management Education

According to Brook and Pedler (2020), teaching management should be not only about practice but also for practice. Practical-oriented learning may also be named *action learning*. This is an opposite approach to the classical didactic traditions of the university.

*Learning based on experience* is strongly connected to the real-world problems that are solved by the students. In such a way of learning, critical thinking is enhanced, and the students are challenged to find solutions and bring their ideas into the problem. For the teachers, it is important to well manage various activities during the lesson and act as a facilitator for the working groups and teams. Project-based learning is different from the traditional way of teaching also by the number of various steps leading to the final evaluation. Students not only take exams but also need to be active, take part in workshops, do researches and assessments given by the teacher. This way, cognitive skills are evaluated with emotional and social skills as well. (Efstratia, 2014)

According to Soviar, Varmus and Kubina (2015), the *students' cooperation* at the university courses seems to be a very effective tool. These authors also stated that working on a real problem is crucial for the students to understand the problematics well. Discussions in the seminars are also strongly advised by these authors.

Another approach to management teaching is by using *design thinking* (Figueiredo, 2020). The popularity of this teaching method has risen over the last two decades. Although design thinking is significant mostly for areas like architecture, urban planning, or various forms of arts, it can be used in management, as well. According to Figueiredo (2020), the practice of design can be understood as finding concrete ways to solve complex abstract problems. In management, design thinking means approaching management problems in the way that designers approach the design problems. It may be mostly used when dealing with innovations, products, and strategic planning. Using this kind of critical design thinking may fill the gap between theory and practice in management.

## 3. CASE STUDY BACKGROUND

An example of teaching the subject Management 1 at the Faculty of Management and Informatics UNIZA was chosen as a case study for the solved problem. Management 1 is an obligatory subject for the students of the first year in the Management studying program. For other

programs at the faculty (for example Informatics) this subject is optional. This subject may be an ideal example for using a *participative approach* in teaching because management is not absolutely an exact science and therefore it is necessary to hear all opinions on the problem. This way of teaching enables (mostly first-year) students to actively participate in the teaching process, to present their opinions and thus to overcome the difference between the method of teaching at secondary schools and universities.

The teachers of this subject chose a set structure for the theoretical lectures as well as for the practical seminars. The lectures consisted of two basic parts - repeating the previous lecture and taking over the new curriculum, while even during the lectures, students were involved in the event and any opinion on the topic was welcome. Active participation was evaluated with the bonus points. The practical seminars consisted of multiple parts:

- Repeating the latest lecture,
- Presentations of the team homework and discussions,
- Taking over the new curriculum,
- Practical examples,
- Student activities with icebreakers and energizers,
- Assignment of team homework for the next seminar,
- Discussion, questions, and answers.

The students worked on a semester work in their teams during the whole semester. The results they came up with were presented in the middle and the end of the semester. This work and partial assignments were focused on analysing a real business organisation and in the works, the students needed to show their own opinions on situations in those organisations. The students had to use critical thinking when designing the best proposals on how they would solve the management and development of the chosen company and what benefit they would expect from their solutions. At the seminars, students received feedback from students and detailed feedback on each assignment was received from the teacher by e-mail. Thanks to this double feedback, students gained several perspectives on the issues in their work and thus had the opportunity to adjust their processing to the final evaluated semester work.

The subject Management 1 is designed to give the students the bases in management and administration. The semester is divided into 13 weeks among which the following topics are distributed (listed according to the weeks of the semester):

- Basic information about the teachers, the subject itself, icebreakers, and energizers,
- Vision, purpose, and philosophy of an organisation,
- Three-stage product analysis, mind map, and process map,
- SWOT analysis and controlling,
- Analysis of organisation's internal environment (production resources, financial resources, human resources, information resources, marketing communication),
- Teamwork mid-semester presentations,
- STEEP analysis,
- Analysis of competitors, Porter's model of five forces,
- SMART methodology for setting goals,
- The long-term direction of the company,
- Final repetition of the curriculum,
- Final teamwork presentations,
- Consultations and feedback collection.

However, a proactive approach to teaching was not only required of students but also taught by the teachers themselves. To help students who were at the university for only a few days to adapt to the rules of work at university, teachers prepared several workshops and aids that showed students how to process academic assignments. Such activities include, for example:

- Online workshop on formatting in MS Word,
- A little guidebook on how to list citations and references according to the faculty rules,
- A little guidebook on how to use figures, graphs, and tables in the assignments,
- Various occasional tools for finding and verifying information in available sources.

All the activities and documents were prepared by the teachers in their spare time and were dedicated to showing the students the right and correct approach to write academic assignments since Management 1 was the first subject for the students to meet such assignments and teamwork. The purpose of these activities was that the students did not feel 'lost' anymore in the new environment and they are more motivated in working and continuing in their university studies.

One of the main goals for the students during the seminars was to actively join in the discussions, give feedback to their classmates, present their ideas and thoughts, and later discuss them. The teachers were acting more like facilitators or moderators in the discussions, giving some additional questions or answering the questions. The students were rewarded with points for the activity (as a part of the subject evaluation).

The purpose of this method of teaching and communication within the subject was to encourage students to discuss and exchange views to learn how to present their views and at the same time accept, tolerate, and possibly incorporate feedback from others. Each of the opinions was welcomed and appreciated, as the teachers tried to achieve the highest possible level of motivation of students to participate in discussions and active approach by students.

#### **4. RESULTS**

In the last week of the semester, students were given the task of filling out an anonymous questionnaire, which provided teachers with feedback on several important areas of teaching. Examined areas include students' view of teachers, their satisfaction with the level of explanation of the curriculum, evaluation of the current concept of exercises, examination of students' motivation for active participation in practical exercises, use of support activities and free discussion. The questionnaire was filled by 101 students that attended this subject. The approach to all students was very similar since the practical seminars of the subject Management 1 were led by both authors of this paper. Thus, the result of the final survey could not be affected by any other teacher.

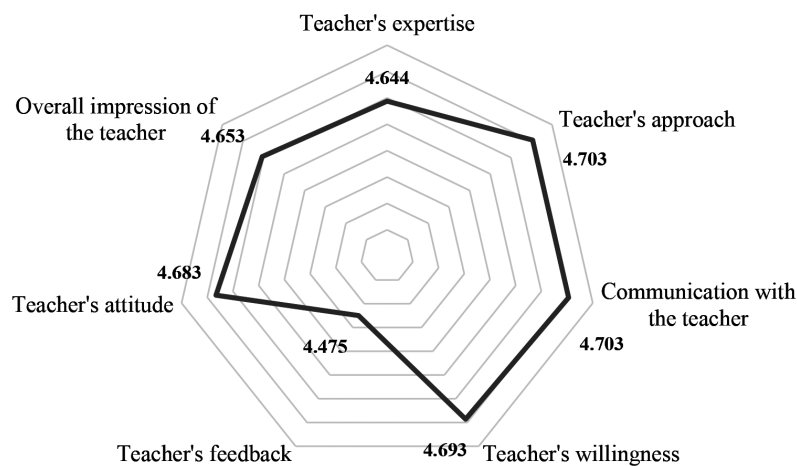
One of the important was the question where students evaluated the current concept of the seminars. 89.1% of students stated that this concept suits them fully and nothing needs to be changed. The other 10.1% were partially satisfied and would change some little things as less homework or less theoretical curriculum repetition.

The next two questions dealt with the motivation of students - motivation for collecting points for activity and motivation for active participation in discussions. The vast majority of students stated that they had no problem getting involved and were highly motivated because it was possible to collect points for the activity. Other responses included options such as students being ashamed to express themselves in front of others, disliking public speaking, or not being

comfortable with the way they communicated (video call due to distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic).

Another area of the questionnaire was focused on the use and evaluation of auxiliary activities (workshops and other aids) by students. 79.2% of students stated that they often used these aids and were very helpful to them in other subjects as well. They considered them very helpful, some students even said that they would appreciate the equally helpful approach in other subjects. Although 15.9% of students looked at these aids, they decided not to use them in their work. Other students did not work with these helpful materials.

In one of the questions, the students had to evaluate several important factors about the teachers, such as teacher's expertise, teacher's approach (responsibility, punctuality, equal approach), communication with the teacher, teacher's willingness (consultations, help), level of feedback from the teacher, teacher's attitude and overall impression. The students could evaluate the teachers on a scale from 1 to 5 where 1 was minimum and 5 was maximum. The resulting values are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Students' evaluation of the teachers' approach

Source: Authors research

At the end of the questionnaire, the students had a chance to say anything. A lot of them used this opportunity and stated their opinions, most of which consisted of positive words. The most common answers included:

- Praises on the teachers' willingness in the seminars and outside them (consultations),
- Positive view on friendly-professional (non-formal) teachers' approach,
- Appreciation of the open communication in the practical seminars,
- Appreciation of the equal approach of the teachers to the students,
- Appreciation of the willingness and effort of the teachers to help when in need,
- Positive view on the practical examples and problems,
- Positive view on the nice and friendly atmosphere in the seminars.

There were only a few negative thoughts as well:

- The work on the semester assignments was more time-consuming than expected for some students,
- Some students did not like the concept of teamwork,
- Some foreign students did not understand the purpose of the assignments well. (The course was taught in the Slovak language)

Overall, the outcome from the questionnaire proved that students find a participative approach in the teaching of the subject Management 1 very beneficial and satisfying. The students compared the way of teaching to other subjects taught at the faculty and they stated they would appreciate more of this approach in their studies. They also pointed to the risen motivation thanks to the friendly participative approach from the teachers.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The stated case study shows a real problem that the participative approach to teaching is one of the very effective ways how to achieve a higher level of students' motivation for the studies and the discussions at the practical seminars. Yet, it is important to say that it is not possible to use this way of teaching with every subject. The authors of this paper see the greatest potential of a participative way of teaching in more humanistic subjects and in subjects where it is possible to use discussion as a teaching tool. In many technical subjects, such a way of teaching can be considerably limited, as it is often necessary to work with exact facts and there is not so much room for discussion.

When choosing the method of teaching the subject, it is necessary to think about the limitations of the chosen method of teaching for the teacher. Participative teaching is very effective and to a large extent more attractive for the students themselves, but it is much more demanding for the teacher than the classic teaching methods - time, knowledge, but also argument oriented. Preparing for practical seminars conducted in this way will take a lot of time, as the teacher must be prepared for various alternatives to develop a discussion and should always be able to respond to questions and discussion contributions from the students.

However, regarding the development of education, it is possible to assume that the participative approach and other modern methods of teaching will be used more and more in colleges and universities, as well as in secondary and primary schools. The reasons may be, for example, the development of imagination, discussion skills, thinking 'outside of the box', critical thinking of students at the youngest possible age.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The theoretical part of this paper showed that education nowadays needs to adapt to difficult situations and new ways of approaching students need to be established. The analysis of literature pointed that one of the effective methods is using the participative approach. Various authors agreed that the traditional teaching approach may no longer be effective and motivational for the students and that the teacher should act not only as an authoritative person but also as a facilitator with friendly communication. Non-formal and informal education strategies are also rising in popularity and the students can learn even more than just by formal education.

The teaching of management has its specifics. According to some authors, cooperation between students is the key to success since students learn how to work in a team and therefore they are better prepared for the real business environment. This technique alongside real business problem solving may be the right way to prepare students well for their later jobs.

The case study in this paper discussed the way of teaching the subject Management 1 at the Faculty of Management and Informatics, University of Žilina, during the winter semester of the academic year 2020/2021, when education worldwide had to adapt to new anti-pandemic measures due to



Covid-19. For this reason, the teaching of subjects took place in electronic form (via MS Teams). Overall, distance learning did not suit several students (compared to the classic full-time form of teaching) and for this reason, it was necessary to approach a form of teaching that would keep students motivated, which, as the output of the questionnaire proves, was successful. Students found the approach of the teachers very friendly and helpful. They felt more comfortable at the seminars and wanted to join or even initiate the discussions. Overall, the students felt more motivated and by their words, they would welcome a similar approach in a different subject, as well.

The participative approach turned out to be an effective way how to link the right communication with the actual process of teaching the students at the university. The authors think this approach may be used in those types of courses and subjects where discussions and own opinions of the students can play a significant role. Plus, the critical thinking of the students is provoked which can have even more advantages in their later studies.

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