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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Characteristics, behaviors, and teaching tools that promoted online learning among university students during COVID-19

Características, conductas y herramientas docentes que promovieron el aprendizaje en línea en estudiantes universitarios durante la COVID-19

Características, comportamentos e ferramentas de ensino que promoveram a aprendizagem online entre estudantes universitários durante COVID-19

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KEYWORDS

COVID-19, online learning, college students, human resources.

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this research was to identify the characteristics, behaviors, and teaching tools that, according to the students of a degree in human resources from western Mexico, promoted learning during online classes due to COVID-19. The research was qualitative, non-experimental, exploratory, and cross-sectional. An open-ended questionnaire was applied to 109 participants (78% women and 22% men; average age 22.6 years). As a result, the teaching staff that promotes learning is characterized by being explanatory, understanding, patient, dynamic and empathetic; In behavioral terms, he explains the topics, schedules practical activities, gives constant feedback, sets flexible tasks, and is available to the student when required. In addition, the most effective teaching tools were videos, slides, video calls, virtual classrooms, and digital repositories

PALABRAS CLAVE

COVID-19, aprendizaje en línea, estudiantes universitarios, recursos humanos.

RESUMEN. El objetivo de la presente investigación fue identificar las características, conductas y herramientas docentes que, según el estudiantado de una licenciatura en recursos humanos del occidente de México, promovieron el aprendizaje durante las clases en línea durante la COVID-19. La investigación fue cualitativa, no experimental, exploratoria y transversal. Se aplicó un cuestionario de respuestas abiertas, a 109 participantes (78% mujeres y 22% hombres; 22.6 años en promedio). Como resultado se tiene que el profesorado que promueve el aprendizaje se caracteriza por ser explicativo, comprensivo, paciente, dinámico y empático; en términos conductuales explica los temas, programa actividades prácticas, da constantemente retroalimentación, establece tareas flexibles y está disponible para el alumnado cuando se requiere.

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Además, se obtuvo que las herramientas docentes más eficaces fueron los videos, diapositivas, videollamadas, aulas virtuales y repositorios digitales.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

COVID-19, aprendizado online, estudantes universitários, recursos humanos.

RESUMO. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi identificar as características, comportamentos e ferramentas de ensino que, segundo os alunos de uma licenciatura em recursos humanos no oeste do México, promoveram a aprendizagem durante as aulas online durante o COVID-19. A pesquisa foi qualitativa, não experimental, exploratória e transversal. Um questionário aberto foi aplicado a 109 participantes (78% mulheres e 22% homens; idade média de 22,6 anos). Como resultado, o corpo docente que promove a aprendizagem caracteriza-se por ser explicativo, compreensivo, paciente, dinâmico e empático; em termos comportamentais, ele explica os tópicos, programa atividades práticas, dá feedback constante, define tarefas flexíveis e está à disposição dos alunos quando necessário. Além disso, verificou-se que as ferramentas de ensino mais eficazes foram vídeos, slides, videochamadas, salas de aula virtuais e repositórios digitais.

1. INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the suspension of face-to-face classes in universities due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) required teachers to teach their subjects online, often without experience, training, or sufficient resources for this modality (Carranza & Zamora, 2020; Cruz & Benítez, 2020; García-de-Paz & Santana, 2021; Lovón & Cisneros, 2020; Naciones Unidas, 2020). Therefore, it is relevant to identify and record the individual characteristics, behaviors, and tools they implemented and favored the learning of their students in pandemic conditions. The foregoing will make it possible to perfect or rethink these actions (Bravo & Quezada, 2021; Estrada, 2020; Ramos & García, 2020; Schmelkes, 2020; Vialart, 2020). The research was carried out in the context of a bachelor's degree in human resources due to the scarce literature on undergraduate degrees in the discipline despite the fact that their graduates manage the human talent in organizations and, therefore, in the community (González, 2020; Liquidano , 2006).

In this sense, identifying the individual characteristics of teachers is important since it has been observed that they influence the educational process in times of COVID-19, for example, teachers contributed to the learning and stress management of their students by showing flexibility, understanding, empathy, motivation, psychological support and; adaptability, planning and parsimony in the face of the challenges posed by the pandemic (Dietrich, 2020; García & Taberna, 2020; Garrido, 2020; George, 2020; Lovón & Cisneros, 2020; Pérez et al., 2021; Romero & Matamoros, 2020; Rosario et al., 2020). Communication and emotional bonding were also timely, as well as motivating students by listening to their aspirations, concerns through honest, and free dialogues, in organized and dynamic environments (Alqurshi, 2020; Colorado, 2020; Fernandez, 2020). Even showing interest in the students' families and a playful style during classes helped to mitigate the negative effects of confinement in education (Ramírez, 2021).

Regarding learning-promoting teaching behaviors, these were classifying, editing, and sharing information, managing personal data, and solving pedagogical problems in virtual environments (García & Taberna, 2020; Martínez & Garcés, 2020; Miguel, 2020; Salaverría et al., 2020; Vergara de la Rosa et al., 2020). It was also essential to master the management of institutional digital platforms (Moodle, Google Classroom), WhatsApp, Facebook, and email to communicate virtually with the students (Hernández et al., 2021).

Other efficient teaching actions and behaviors during the pandemic were to emphasize the objectives and expectations of each course, adapt the dynamics of traditional classes to digital ones (considering their differences), and simplify the presentation of teaching materials, exams, tasks, and activities. Additionally, there were positive effects on learning when students were encouraged to study the introductory notions independently and, subsequently, reinforce concepts, discuss ideas, work collaboratively and request advice in the virtual classroom (Esteban et al., 2020). It also worked to establish pedagogical dialogues with concrete instructions and to develop flexible, contextualized, and updated study programs with emerging topics related to the pandemic (Cifuentes, 2020; Garrido, 2020). In the curricular aspect, it was convenient to rethink the subjects in modules (Fernández, 2020).

About distance tutoring, the relevance of establishing at least three stages was noted: planning (identifying means, activities, and knowledge diagnosis), implementation (guiding tasks, providing feedback, uploading learning materials to the web) and evaluation (formatively assess tasks) (Díaz, Iglesias & Valdés, 2020). On the other hand, Dietrich (2020) listed a series of points for online educational work in a pandemic context: ethical, realistic, and useful evaluations; flexibility with students, playful learning, and freedom for teachers to select their teaching tools.

Other efficient actions were observed such as problem-based learning, community work (with appropriate preventive measures for students), as well as structuring and organizing asynchronous communication between students and teachers. Formative evaluation and objective feedback on progress were more useful than providing only summative evaluation (Amaya et al., 2021; García & Taberna, 2020).

In relation to teaching tools, students reported favored by the abundance of virtual resources such as professionally designed textbooks for courses; simulations, individualized digital platforms and interactive lectures (Cisneros et al., 2020; George, 2020; Moreno, 2020). Asynchronous activities required digital classrooms and repositories, and synchronous work required the management of video call software and webpage programming (Delgado & Martínez, 2020; Expósito & Marsollier, 2020; Melchor et al., 2020).

It should be noted that most of the studies mentioned were based on the perspective of teachers and managers, not on that of students, although they turn out to be the protagonists and users of the educational system (Castellano et al., 2021; García, 2021; Zúñiga & Cáceres, 2021). In addition, there are not enough documents that record the teaching promotion strategies into administrative economic area in the context of COVID-19. Due to the above, it was considered relevant to carry out the present study.

In this regard, the Bachelor of Human Resources from the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, graduates professionals in the design and implementation of policies and strategies for the development about personnel in Western Mexican organizations. The undergraduate curriculum includes subjects in areas such as labor law, social security, organizational psychology, conflict resolution, health programs, administration, training, and scientific research in human resources, among others. The duration in semesters of the degree depends on the credits that the student adds from the subjects he chooses, until covering with those required to obtain the degree.

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

Type of study

A qualitative study was conducted in which the perspectives of those who participated were analyzed. It was exploratory because there was not enough background on the subject in the context of COVID-19 in human resources, the method was nonexperimental (there was no manipulation of variables), descriptive (seeking to describe students' views on the topic) and crosscutting (information obtained within a short period) (Salkind, 1999).

Participants

They were students of the Degree in Human Resources of the University Center of Administrative Economic Sciences of the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, with an average age of 22.4 years. Specifically, six subject groups (see Table 1) of the author of this study were invited to participate. It should be noted that, after the first year of undergraduate studies, students from any semester coincide in the groups due to the flexibility of the university's credit system.

Table 1.
Gender distribution of invited subject groups.

Group/ subject	w		m		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
1. Human Resources II	29	16.5	10	5.7	39	22.1
2. Psychometry of Selection A	21	11.9	9	5.1	30	17.1
3. Psychometry of Selection B	24	13.6	6	3.4	30	17.1
4. Training and Staff Development	24	13.6	16	9.1	40	22.7
5. Application, Qualification and Interpretation of Test and Psychometric Batteries	18	10.2	1	0.6	19	10.8
6. Profiles and Psychological Assessment Tests	14	7.95	4	2.27	18	10.2
Total	130	73.9	46	26.1	176	100.0

Note: f = frequency, % = percentage, w = woman, m = man. Source: Own elaboration.

As in other studies on COVID-19 and the university, the selection of participants was non-probabilistic for convenience. (Delgado & Martínez, 2020; Expósito & Marsollier, 2020; Melchor et al., 2020; Salkind, 1999).

Assessment instrument

A questionnaire with two sections was designed. The first section was closed and served to obtain general data (informed consent, gender, semester, age, and employment status) of the participants, and the second was open-ended and consisted of five questions with the aim of identifying the characteristics, behaviors, and teaching tools that, from the students' perspective, promoted learning during virtual classes in the context of COVID-19.

The validity of content was carried out through the validation technique by judges (Escofet et al., 2016): three experts (Phd. in sciences and undergraduate university professors), agreed that the questions in the questionnaire were relevant to meeting the objectives of the investigation. The above based on the following criteria in a rubric: clarity in the topic addressed, use of common words, avoid leading questions, avoid generalizations, and take care of the writing and spelling (Villavicencio et al., 2016). In addition, before the application, the questionnaire was tested with five students (from Human Resources II), who indicated that there was no difficulty in understanding the instructions and in writing the questions. The maximum resolution time of the questionnaire (being 10 minutes) was also measured. The students showed readiness and responded immediately and as requested, suggesting that the topic was of interest to them.

Process

The questionnaire was transcribed into a digital template of Google Forms and subsequently distributed by WhatsApp and institutional e-mail to the six subject groups, to whom it was specified that the purpose was to know their perceptions and experiences on the virtual classes during the COVID-19, that the participation was voluntary, and the data collected would be confidential, anonymous and for research purposes and; without influence on their grades. Informed consent was then presented to them. The application took place between December 08 and 15, 2020, during Phase 3 of the COVID-19 in Mexico.

Response analysis

For the first section of the questionnaire, response frequencies were obtained. For the second section, response categories were obtained for each item based on the textual similarity of the terms used and, subsequently, the frequency of each response category was counted. Finally, the information of both sections was arranged in tables, in descending order. This was supported by Word and Excel computer programs.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

61.9% of the students who received the invitation answered the questionnaire, leaving 109 participants with an average age of 22.6 years. The response frequencies for each question in the first section, corresponding to general data, are presented below.

Table 2.
General data of participants (n= 109).

Question	Answer	f	%
Gender	Female	85	78.0
	Male	24	22.0
	Total	109	100.0
Semester	4º, 5º y 6º	61	55.9

	7º, 8º, 9º y 10º	48	44.1
	Total	109	100.0
Are you currently working?	Yes, in the human resources area	20	18.3
	Yes, but not in the human resources area	54	49.5
	No, I just study	35	32.1
	Total	109	100.0

Note: f = frequency, % = percentage. Source: Own elaboration.

As can be seen from the general data, the highest proportion of participants in the bachelor's degree in Human Resources is female. This suggests that there are a greater number of women studying the program, which coincides with the fact that 73% of professionals in human resource departments in companies (at least in the United States) are women (Mora, 2018). The foregoing has interesting implications at the scientific level.

For example, due to the lack of information and connections in this regard, it is necessary to verify the predominance of women in bachelor's degrees and jobs in human resources in Mexico and Latin America. If the data is validated, the factors that influence this phenomenon would have to be analyzed and taken as a case of success in the insertion of women in higher education.

In addition, it would be relevant to analyses other gender issues such as labor parity (equal pay, benefits and opportunities between women and men) and the glass ceiling (Set of socio-cultural obstacles that women face to reach positions of command) because they are problems whose resolution depends largely on the human resources departments (Mora, 2018).

Another salient fact is that most of the participants have employment, even if it is not in their degree. This influences their perceptions of the educational process. For example, it has been observed that students who work are more critical of the content of subjects and actions of their teachers because, in part, to the fact they have additional learning opportunities in their workplaces, such as one-on-one teaching (expert-apprentice), trial and error, observation of processes, training in the company, decision-making events, direct treatment with service users, resolution of real problems, among others. In addition, work experience induces them to exercise cognitive processes such as explanation of routines, understanding of processes and analysis of alternatives. They also develop procedural skills through the application of tools, problem solving, and job content development. Finally, they train attitudes such as development, empathy, attention and service, and constancy. This justifies that, as will be seen later, the expectations of most of the participants in this study regarding the actions of their teachers were raised and focused on practice (Cuevas-de- la-Garza & De-Ibarrola, 2013).

For the second section of the questionnaire, five open-ended questions were established. The first question was "For you, what is learning?" and aimed to determine the ways in which participants conceive of the act of learning, to have greater clarity regarding their other responses. The results are shown below:

Table 3.
Conceptions about "learning".

Conception	F	%

Acquire theoretical knowledge.	48	44.0
Acquire theoretical and practical knowledge.	46	42.3
Know through experience.	13	11.9
Personal development.	2	01.8
Total	109	100.0

Note: f = frequency % = percentage. Source: Own elaboration.

The above results suggest that the teaching actions considered as learning promoters by students are those that serve to acquire both theoretical and practical knowledge. This coincides with the applied professional profile of students in economic-administrative sciences in the region (Domínguez et al., 2015).

It should be noted that it is important to maintain this approach, as conceiving education only in a utilitarian and practice-focused way could generate impulsive, thoughtless, and incorrect labor actions, due to the lack of knowledge of the fundamentals in human resources (Flores, 2008). For example, in selection psychometrics classes it is of the utmost importance that students understand and distinguish psychological constructs such as intelligence, personality and attitudes to apply, interpret and rationally qualify the tests. Therefore, it is important to emphasize and encourage the need to know the theory for professional performance.

Students were then asked how they determine whether they had learned in a subject by asking the question "How do you determine if you have learned in a subject?" The results are presented below.

Table 4.
Determinants of learning among students.

Determinants	f	%
I can apply the knowledge.	50	45.9
I can explain the revised.	16	14.7
The subject program is fulfilled.	15	13.8
I have new knowledge.	11	10.1
I remember the content.	10	09.2
I can relate the revised to everyday life.	3	02.7
Skills development.	2	01.8
Because the teacher teaches well.	2	01.8
Total	109	100.0

Note: f = frequency, % = percentage. Source: Own elaboration.

In Table 4, it is observed that the students, again, considered that they obtain learning when they can apply the acquired knowledge. It is noteworthy that the possibility of explaining verbally what was studied is a relevant aspect to determine whether they learned during the semester, which is a contribution of this study to the research line. Other studies on this topic are suggested to clarify how students determine their own learning.

To know the teaching characteristics that promoted learning during virtual classes, students were asked "In general, what are the characteristics of the teachers who promoted your learning during the virtual classes of the semester that ends (2020-B)? Mention as many as you want" (Table 5). The total number of responses is 196 because some participants provided more than one feature (i.e., more than one response), in accordance with what was requested in the question.

Table 5 shows that the characteristics of the teaching staff promoting learning are varied and dispersed, resulting in a combination of specific attributes of the profession (for example, explanatory, dynamic, clear, specific, expert, etc.) with other socio-affective attributes (understanding, patient, empathetic, kind, optimistic). Therefore, according to the students, teachers during the pandemic require qualities additional to those merely professional, As indicated by other studies in this regard that indicate that the soft skills of teachers are determinants in the learning of their students (Dietrich, 2020; García & Taberna, 2020; Garrido, 2020; George, 2020; Mena et al., 2009). It is important to establish among the university community that, as well as professional attributes are trainable, so are socio-affective attributes and it is pertinent that they be included in training and teaching programs, both for teachers and students (Guerra, 2019).

Table 5.
Characteristics of the teachers that promote learning during virtual classes.

Characteristics	F	%
Explanatory	18	09.0
Understanding	17	08.6
Patients	16	08.2
Dynamic	15	07.8
Empathic	13	06.8
Clear	10	05.1
Polite	9	04.7
Responsible	9	04.7
Available	9	04.7
Flexible	7	03.7
Demanding	7	03.7
Adaptable	6	03.0
Kind	6	03.0
Dedicated	6	03.0
Practical	6	03.0
Punctual	6	03.0
Experts	6	03.0
Proactive	4	02.0
Passionate	3	01.5
Nice	3	01.5
Optimistic	3	01.5
Trained	3	01.5
Analytics	2	01.0
Considered	2	01.0
Constants	2	01.0
Smart	2	01.0
Professionals	2	01.0
Respectful	2	01.0
Motivators	2	01.0
Total	196	100.0

Note: f = frequency % = percentage. Source: Own elaboration.

However, it is noteworthy that the teaching quality of being expositive (exposing topics rather than students) is well valued by students since experts consider the strategy to be obsolete and ineffective. Teachers have even received criticism from the educational community for supporting this method of instruction and, in general, are

urged to generate a more interactive, collaborative, and participatory working environment in groups (Cañedo & Figueroa, 2013). Nevertheless, it seems that in the context of the pandemic students prefer the teaching exhibition, which could have two readings: there is a preference for this strategy in a circumstantial way, due to the digital format in which it is carried out and that prevents face-to-face interaction (although other types of interactions can be carried out without any problem), another possibility is that, in effect, experts assume without sufficient empirical evidence that the student body does not require such a strategy.

Subsequently, it was asked about the behaviors of the teachers that favored learning through the item "What behaviors of your teachers and professors facilitated your learning during the virtual classes of the semester that ends (2020-B)? Mention as many as you want". The results were set out in Table 6. The total number of responses is 128 because some participants provided more than one conduct (i.e., more than one response), as requested in the question.

Table 6.
Teaching behaviors that promoted learning during virtual classes.

Behaviors	f	%
Explain the topics	19	13.9
Schedule hands-on activities	16	11.7
Give constant feedback	15	10.9
Flexibility in tasks	15	10.9
Be available	13	09.5
Be concise	10	07.3
Make dynamic classes	8	05.8
Generate interaction	8	05.8
Motivate learning	7	05.1
Provide enough examples	6	04.3
Be aware of needs	5	03.7
Mastering the topics	5	03.7
Be open to opinions	4	02.9
Congruence between topics and tasks	2	01.5
Design teaching materials	2	01.5
Evaluate periodically	2	01.5
Total	128	100.0

Note: f = frequency % = percentage. Source: Own elaboration.

The results were like the previous questions, as the students indicate that they receive support when the teachers explain the topics (instead of the subject group exposing, as is typical), also when they plan practical activities, give constant feedback and are flexible regarding the preparation and delivery date of the tasks. The programming of practices, feedback and flexibility coincide with what was found in other studies (Amaya et al., 2021; Dietrich, 2020; García & Taberna, 2020), but not the teaching exhibition of topics.

Subsequently, the didactic tools that promoted learning were surveyed through the question "What didactic materials used by your professors facilitated your learning during the virtual classes of the semester that ends (2020-B)? Mention all you want". The total number of responses is 213 because some participants provided more than one training material (i.e., more than one response), as requested in the question. The answers are shown below.

In table 7 above, it can be seen that videos, presentations, video calls and virtual classrooms were the main promoters of learning, as other studies point out (Martínez & Garcés, 2020). However, it is striking that among the participants, WhatsApp has not been relevant, which contradicts the literature that refers to this instant messaging as an indispensable tool during classes in a pandemic (Vergara et al., 2020).

Table 7.
Didactic materials that promoted learning during virtual classes.

Didactic material	f	%
Videos	55	25.8
Presentations	50	23.6
Video calls	31	14.5
Virtual classrooms	25	11.7
Repositories	9	04.3
Books	9	04.3
Survey	6	02.9
Articles	5	02.4
Instant messaging	4	01.9
Readings	3	01.4
Documentaries	2	00.9
Excel	2	00.9
Guides	2	00.9
Games	2	00.9
Applications	2	00.9
Interviews	2	00.9
Films	2	00.9
Websites	2	00.9
	213	100.0

Note: f = frequency, % = percentage. Source: Own elaboration.

Here it should be noted that virtual tools could work both negatively and positively since, on the one hand, they can serve as functional tools for communication but, on the other hand, they can be distractors (García & Silva, 2019). It would even be important to design institutional regulations in the use of these tools to delimit their relevant use and not to interrupt the working, study and personal life of both students and teachers. Finally, the following table presents a summary of the results in this study.

Table 8.
Characteristics, behaviors, and teaching tools that promote online learning during COVID-19.

Characteristics	behaviors	Teaching tools
1. Explanatory	Explain the topics	1. Videos
2. Understanding	2. Schedule practical activities	2. Presentations
3. Patient	3. Give constant feedback	3. Video calls

4. Dynamic	4. Make tasks more flexible	4. Virtual classrooms
5. Empathic	5. Be available for questions	5. Repositories

Source: Own elaboration.

It should be noted that the limitations of the present work were that, as it was an initial survey, it was done using open questions. Nonetheless, the results based on the frequency analysis can contribute to the design of standardized instruments to delve into the subject. What has been found can also serve to inform students that the dynamics of virtual classes is different from face-to-face classes and that their expectations should be the same.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The results found show that to promote online learning during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, university teachers require both hard (specific to their profession) and soft qualities (focused on socio-affective treatment with the student body).

In this sense, the teaching sequence that the students expect is that the teachers explain the subject, schedule practical activities with their respective feedback and establish flexible tasks, with constant monitoring to solve their doubts. Since it is convenient for teachers to use digital tools such as videos, presentations, video calls, virtual classrooms, and repositories.

Soft skills come into play when it comes to understanding and empathizing with the different rhythms and difficulties in the students' learning process, demonstrating patience.

It is important to emphasize that, even if the pandemic subsides, university institutions must consider in their future educational measures available in the event of outbreaks. It is even possible that COVID-19 has advanced changes that were seen coming in universities, such as the implementation of hybrid learning models. Therefore, rather than being taken as a record of a passing situation in history, studies like the present could lay the foundations for future evolutions in academia.

Based on the research findings, it is suggested to delve into the soft skills required by teachers during online classes in the context of COVID-19. Continue with the design and validation of specific teacher evaluation instruments for the pandemic because the educational dynamics differs from the classroom. In addition, it is suggested to deepen the beliefs of the students regarding their own learning process during the online classes, for the pertinent programming of activities.

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