Rescheduling Senior University for a blended teaching-learning model

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Abstract- This article explains how Senior University at the University of A Coruna (NW Spain) was adapted to the blended learning model in the 2020/2021 academic year, as a result of the emergency situation brought about by COVID-19. The reorganization had to take into account the needs of both teaching staff and participants. The students had to overcome obstacles to embrace new technologies and follow what was being taught. The results of the surveys handed out to teachers and students at the start of the year are summarized here. A brief description of the new Specific Training Program "Current Events, Science, Health and Life" is also provided, as well as the outcomes of the study carried out to know to what extent the key players -teaching staff, students and Senior University management team- felt satisfied with the new program. All in all, both teachers and students replied that they were very satisfied with the blended learning model, which will continue running into the following academic years as a complement to face-to-face teaching.

Keywords: Senior University, blended learning, digital skills, active aging

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization, active aging is a way of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and safety and thus improving quality of life for those growing older (Cambero & Díaz, 2019; OMS, 2002). One of the fundamental pillars of active aging is lifelong learning; university programs for the elderly owe their existence to this endeavour (Consejo de Universidades, 2010; Ortiz-Colón, 2015). For over twenty years, Senior University at the University of A Coruna (UDC) has run a program for those over 50 with the aim of offering this client group both education and a social network. In the emergency health situation caused by COVID-19, senior university programs had to consider suspending their activity or finding an alternative to face-to-face provision. At the UDC, we did not want to neglect our Senior University students during such a complex situation. A solution was urgently sougth. However, reorganizing the teaching program would not only rely on staff support, the lynchpin of the teaching-learning process, but also on the students. They needed the tools, as well as the digital competences, to go from a face-to-face model to a distance learning model (Agudo-Prado et al., 2012; García & Martínez, 2017; Meneses et al., 2017). This paper will describe in detail how the transition to blended learning was made.

2. CONTEXT

Before the pandemic, the UDC program for students over 50 ran as a four-year course. Face-to-face classes were held at the Senior University Headquarters in both campuses, Coruña and Ferrol. Compulsory and optional subjects were offered with seminars and workshops related to the Health Sciences, Science and Technology and Social Sciences, to a total of 987 students. When the COVID-19 crisis broke out, the Senior University team members were faced with the challenge of how to maintain the teaching-learning process in the 2020/2021 academic year. On the one hand, it was a client group reliant on the face-to-face model, but, on the other, also a risk group within the university community.

The first question that had to be addressed was the extent to which our students would be willing to stay on and, if so, if they would have the tools and skills to work towards blended learning (Agudo-Prado et al., 2012; Martín, 2017; Martínez-Heredia, 2020; Meneses et al., 2017; Pino et al., 2015). Along similar lines, we wondered if teaching staff would also accept this transition, especially as they were probably overwhelmed with the last-minute changes taking place in their degree and post-graduate work. This was our starting point for organizing the 2020/2021 academic year, which led to the Specific Training Program "Current Events, Science, Health and Life".

3. DESCRIPTION

In June, with an eye on redesigning the program for 2020/2021, the first task was to send a survey to the teachers about the possibility of embracing blended learning. The first point was whether they were willing to forsake face-to-face teaching (Question A). If this were the case, we wanted to know if their contents could be adapted to on-line platforms (Moodle, Teams). Again, if this were the case, would they transform their face-to-face material so that it was suitable for self-access and, thus, self-explanatory? Moreover, would that material be provided to the students in a digital format suited to their profile and available in the wide variety of technical media they might use (Question B)?

On the other hand, teachers were asked if they would employ simple resources (PDF files, PowerPoint, Youtube videos, blog links or web pages). The aim was to avoid saturating the university's videoconferencing service and

dodging connectivity and reception issues that might arise (Question C). Staff members were also asked if they would keep open, as far as possible, lines of communication with the students (tutoring on-line) (Question D). The last point was, if in the case of being able to return to the classroom throughout the academic year- which never happened- would they be willing to attend both on-line and face-to-face classrooms (Question E)? Figure 1 shows the percentage of teachers who responded positively to all items.

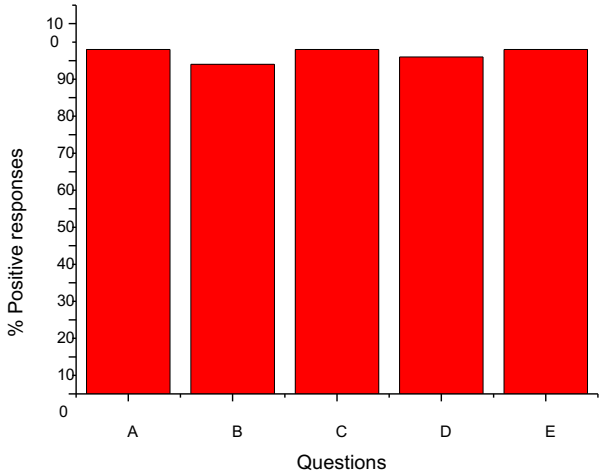

Figure 1: Percentage of positive responses from the teachers

Once it could be seen how many teachers responded favourably to the proposals (over 85% for all items), the next step would be to carry out a survey among the students. We wanted to see if they would be willing to stay with the Senior program under the new circumstances and which tools they would have at their disposal. They were asked if they were indeed willing to continue studying through blended learning during the pandemic; which devices -such as a laptop, tablet or tabletop computer- they could use to go on-line; whether they had sufficient connectivity to follow on-line classes; which operating system they used (Windows, Apple or shareware); and, finally, if they wanted to take part in training to acquire the competences needed to follow this kind of teaching.

74% of students claimed they were willing to participate in the blended program. Of these, 63% had a laptop with Windows, 36% had a tablet and only 1% had no more than a mobile phone to follow the program. In terms of operating systems, 75% relied on Windows. One point did stand out over others in the survey: 95% of the students expressed an interest in doing some kind of training that would allow them to acquire the competences they needed to handle the Virtual Campus and Teams and, therefore, keep up with their learning.

As for their connection to Internet, Figure 2 reveals that 86% of the students who responded had no problems connecting and around 12% had limited data.

Figure 2*:* Pie chart: student response to question: "Can you connect to Internet?"

Given the response of both teachers and students was so positive, the decision was made to reorganize the Senior University teaching and to create a new Specific Training Program, "Current Events, Science, Health and Life", combining on-line subjects from Monday to Wednesday with face-to-face lectures on Thursday and Friday. The latter would help ensure that social contact could be maintained, but attendance numbers were kept low according to health and safety regulations. Table 1 provides the subjects taught through Teams in each term.

So that the students could overcome any technological obstacles and keep up with classwork, Information Technology (IT) staff were encouraged to run workshops for small groups in July and September 2020. Thus, students learned how to read emails, connect trough Teams and access the materials on the Virtual Campus.

Table 1. *On-line subjects*

CORUÑA CAMPUS

FIRST TERM	SECOND TERM
Cities of knowledge	Studying crime in a global world
Economics before, during and after the pandemic	Psychological strategies for dealing with stress and having a better quality of life
Challenges for contemporary society	Human relations: a philosophical perspective
Modern science	Health education

FERROL CAMPUS

FIRST TERM	SECOND TERM
Aesthetics and engineering	Health education
Literature through texts, art, cinema and music	Classics on political thought: a modern take
Current events and law	Introduction to navigation. Nautical charts
Social psychology	Nature and society

A series of infographics and video tutorials were prepared by the Senior University team. The students who faced the greatest difficulties received private tutorials throughout the year. Table 2 provides an overview of all the tools and measures designed to support the students as they adapted to the on-line mode.

Putting paid to any stereotypes about the older population being tech shy, by late October 2020, these students were able to follow on-line teaching, participate in the debates proposed by the teachers on Teams and consult materials on the Virtual Campus. To put it more clearly, they had obtained the basic digital competences needed to follow Senior University on-line teaching; these will be explained in the results section. As mentioned earlier, the on-line content was complemented with face-to-face lectures for a limited audience. These lectures were organized in such a way that all students could attend a lecture at least once a month. Those who were less concerned about being in an enclosed space could still maintain the social contact at the Senior University. For their classmates who did not want to take the infection risk, two spaces were provided on the Virtual Campus: called Conferencias USénior in Spanish, one for each campus, Coruña and Ferrol. Recordings of the lectures were uploaded into those spaces so that any enrolled student could enjoy them. Figure 3 shows a screenshot of the organization of the lectures in the Virtual Campus.

4. Results

At the end of the academic year, a survey was carried out on the students in which they were asked about the teaching of each of the staff members who had taken part in the blended learning project. Among other points, they were asked about the on-line sessions, the materials, their interest in the subject and the methodology used.

Table 2. *Tools and measures to support students*

MEASURES	OBJECTIVE
Group training (July and September)	Handling email Connecting up and using Teams (turning on camera, microphone, raising hand, using chat) Consulting materials on Virtual Campus
Individual tutorials (until late October or even all year)	Reaching the students with most difficulties
Video tutorials	Applying what was learnt in IT (Teams, Virtual Campus, etc.)
Infographics	Consulting main websites: UDC, Senior University… Handling Teams Accessing email Enrolling

Figure 4 provides the results related to how satisfied students were with the teaching work in one of the two campuses, Ferrol. 61 students replied. It is possible to see that, in global terms, both the teachers and the blended learning model were favorably assessed.

In the survey, the students made it clear which difficulties they found at the beginning with on-line classes:

- Getting hold of and setting up the hardware (computer, tablet, …). In this sense, family members played a crucial role, as did the IT staff, who, at times, gave advice on what to buy. As mentioned earlier, there were very few students without resources.

Figure 3*:* Example of lectures on the Virtual Campus

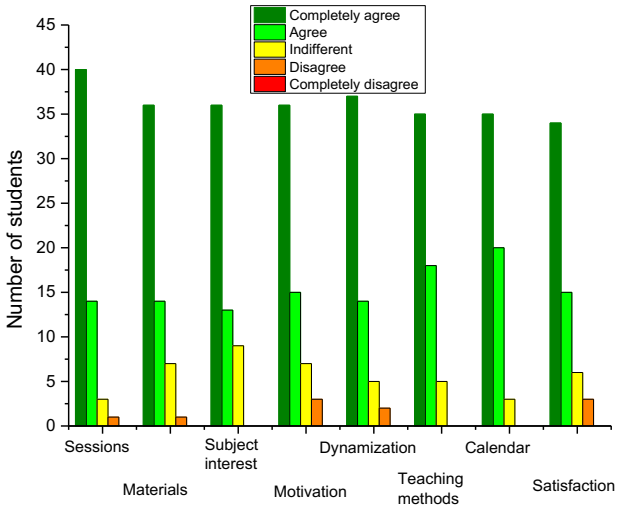

Figure 4*:* Results on satisfaction with teaching

- Installing and activating the necessary software (operating systems or applications and so on). Here, it was clear how the initial training and IT classes played a key role in supporting the students.
- Getting to grips with Teams. At first, they had difficulty getting into the class from both the calendar and the link. Carrying out basic functions within the application, like switching the camera and microphone

on and off proved problematic. Again, thanks to the initial training and individualized ongoing tutorials in October, almost all of the students could work unfettered.

- ➢ Contacting teachers and classmates during the class perhaps caused the greatest difficulty. It took time for them to get used to raising their hand to intervene, as well as to keeping microphones and cameras switched off. Habits only came with practice; at first, everyone wanted to intervene at the same time.

The survey also asked the students about any technical and learning issues they would be interested in during the following year (Figure 5). Out of the 147 respondents from both Coruña and Ferrol campuses, only a few specified a technical point. In particular, 45 wanted support with accessing Virtual Campus materials. However, it is important to add here that what certain students thought was their inexperience in using that platform, was in fact the result of a teacher forgetting to upload the videos for classes on the Virtual Campus.

Other concerns had to do with using software, handling Teams and accessing mail. A relatively low number of students (between 15 and 20) requested support for the next academic year; the rest did not mention having difficulties.

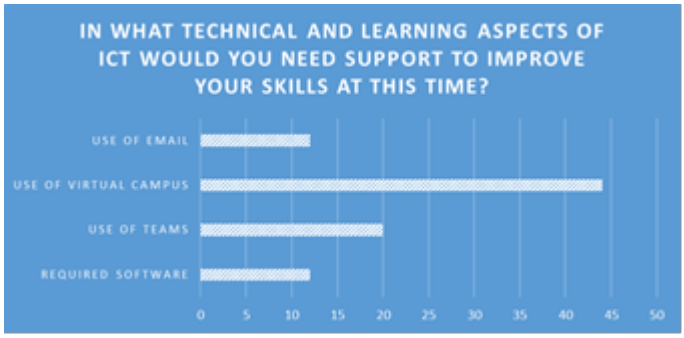

Figure 5*:* Need for improvement identified by students for 2021/2022 academic year

Further feedback came from the teachers who carried out observations and the comments made by the students themselves on the surveys. This helped identify the following digital competences acquired by the participants in Senior University:

- Being able to source and organize digital information for the various subjects, and to determine if it is relevant and useful.
- Being able to communicate, interact, participate and collaborate with other learners and staff on digital platforms and with related tools.

What becomes obvious is that being digitally competent entails developing other bodies of knowledge, skills and attitudes that still lie outside of their reach, such as the creation of digital contents or the cybersecurity (personal safety, data protection, and safeguarding their identity). Another ability is to make decisions about and choose digital tools they need to use. These digital competences will be honed in the IT workshop the next academic year so that the Senior University students become even more competent users of digital resources.

Meetings were held among the teaching staff and the Senior University team. These confirmed that both sides were satisfied with the results obtained over the academic year. A great effort had been made by the teachers, in adapting their materials to an on-line format, and by the management team, in organizing the blended learning infrastructure. Nevertheless, both sides feel that it was worth it due to the fact that the students had acquired digital competences so that the teaching-learning process could continue. Moreover, the two agents could go along with the learners in this emergency health situation. An effort had also been made by the IT teachers in providing training sessions and on-line tutorials, but they also positively recognized the capacity of the students to adapt in this transition to blended learning.

5. Conclusions

From this experience of providing blended learning during the 2020/2021 academic year to the Senior University students at the University of A Coruna, one can draw positive conclusions. And this, despite the fact that both teachers and students had initially faced difficulties and the learners found it challenging to acquire the necessary digital competences

The students felt they were not left unaccompanied and inactive during such a complicated academic year. Moreover, the pandemic offered an excellent opportunity for them to take the leap towards the new technologies and incorporate them into their daily lives. For them, the computer offered a window onto the world of culture, knowledge and social relations; a window that might have been kept closed in other circumstances.

If this situation had not occurred, the students may not have made this transition. Even though they had IT classes covering Word, Excel or web pages, they may not have felt compelled to receive training on such useful on-line communication tools to keep in touch with family members who live in other places, to access cultural information or go on virtual visits to museums and concert halls, closed in their hometown. The pandemic was a cloud with a silver lining.

Moreover, the experience challenged many of the stereotypes associated with this cohort. Not only had they adapted to new technologies, they had done so surprisingly quickly.

Although the following academic year will see a return to face-to-face provision, an on-line program will also run for those who do not wish to go back to the lecture hall or who wish to stay on-line. IT classes will be offered to those who want to continue improving their digital competences. What is certain is that the digital competences acquired in the previous academic year will be invaluable to our students, not only in the teaching-learning process, but in their lives in general.

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