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FACILITATING ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

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FACILITATING ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

COVID-19 PANDEMİSİ SIRASINDA UZAKTAN EĞİTİMİ KOLAYLAŞTIRMAK: ZORLUKLAR & FIRSATLAR

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ÖZET

Global Covid-19 pandemisi sebebiyle, izolasyon süresi boyunca uzaktan eğitim sistemine geçilmesi hem eğitimciler hem de öğrenciler üzerine çeşitli olumsuzluklar bıraktı. Bu süreçte fiziksel eğitim metotlarının uzaktan eğitime adapte edilememesi, uzaktan eğitime yönelik yeni öğrenme süreçlerinin hazırlanamaması özellikle öğrenciler üzerinde öğrenme deneyimine yönelik bir baskı ve tansiyon yarattı. Bu çalışmada, uzaktan eğitimde verimli ve sürdürülebilir sistemlerin ve deneyimlerin tasarlanabilmesi için kolaylaştırıcı ve eğitmen rolleri incelenerek, dijital deneyimlerde faydalanılabilecek önemli yetkinliklerin önerilmesi amaçlandı.

Kolaylaştırıcılığın gücüne inanan bir 21.yüzyıl yaratıcı hizmetler organizasyonu olan ATÖLYE bünyesinde, pandemi dönemiyle birlikte ortaya çıkan yeni iş modeli ATÖLYE Akademi'ye ait "Kolaylaştırıcılık Buluşmaları" etkinlik serisi, niyeti ve süreç tasarım şekli göz önünde bulundurularak vaka çalışması olarak seçildi. Kolaylaştırıcılık Buluşmaları katılımcıları ile derinlemesine mülakatlar ve etkinlik sırasında gözlemler gerçekleştirilerek en sürdürülebilir uzaktan öğrenme deneyimi üzerine analizler gerçekleştirildi. Kolaylaştırıcılık Buluşmaları ile ilgili açıklamalar ve detaylı kapsam "Introducing the Case Study" kısmında kapsandı.

"Findings & Analysis" kısmında hem derinlemesine mülakatlardan hem de "Kolaylaştırıcılık Buluşmaları" gözlemlerinden elde edilen, uzaktan eğitimde olumlu ve olumsuz etkilere sebebiyet veren deneyimleri kapsayan veriler analiz edildi. Uzaktan eğitimde, eğitmen rolünün kolaylaştırıcılık yetkinlikleri kazanması aracılığıyla tasarlanabilecek sürdürülebilir deneyimler önerildi.

Anahtar kelimeler: Uzaktan eğitim, Kolaylaştırıcılık, Eğitimci rolü, Öğrenme tasarımı

ABSTRACT

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to "distance learning" during the isolation period, has had various negative impacts on both educators and students alike. In this process, the inability to adapt physical education methods to distance education, and the inability to prepare new learning processes for distance education, has led to pressure and tension being exerted on the learning experience; this rings especially true for students. This study has aimed to examine the roles of facilitators and instructors in designing efficient and sustainable systems as well as experiences, for distance education, and to suggest important competencies that can be used in digital experiences.

The event series named "Facilitation Meetups", organized by ATÖLYE, has been selected as a case study; its intention and process design have been considered throughout. ATÖLYE is a community-powered creative services organization that places an Academy and a Strategic Design Studio within a vibrant Creative Hub, defining itself as "a 21st century creative services organization that believes in the power of facilitation." For the sake of this article, I will focus on primarily ATÖLYE Academy, which I am a part of. ATÖLYE Academy offers learning programs that equip individuals and teams with skills in creative leadership, radical collaboration and systemic design. In-depth interviews with the participants of the Facilitation Meetups were carried out, and observations during the events were noted in order to analyze the most sustainable distance learning experience. Explanations and detailed coverage of the Facilitation Meetups are covered in the "Introducing the Case Study" section.

In the "Findings & Analysis" section, the data obtained from both in-depth interviews and participatory observations during "Facilitation Meetups", including experiences that cause both positive and negative effects in distance education, were analyzed. Possible sustainable experiences in distance education are proposed, stating that these can be designed through the instructor role gaining facilitation competencies.

Keywords: Online Education, Facilitation, Role of Instructor, Learning Design

INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, the COVID-19 global pandemic hit our world, and left an indelible impression. In Turkey, the first cases were recognized in March 2020; this was then followed by a critical isolation period in which everyone was placed under strict quarantine rules. Only five days after the first case showed up in the country, the Ministry of Education decided to suspend face to face education, and migrated towards remote education systems—which they alternatively created and called "EBATV", as if it were a television broadcasting channel. However, the Council of Higher Education, in quite an opposing move, denoted on March 12, that universities would need to keep the face-to-face system as they did not have the necessary power to make decisions on this matter. On the 16th of March, higher education was suspended for 3 weeks.

Consecutively, multiple countries evolved their emergency strategies to suppress the spreading of the Covid-19 virus, mainly around avoiding large gatherings including during school hours too. National closures of educational institutions caused the learning process to stall for millions of people. This upheaval around the globe, caught many of us unprepared and delayed a smooth transition to a new system; this in turn, caused several bottlenecks for many experiences. Online shopping experiences of supermarkets failed many times, and supply chains crashed. Several prestigious companies could not find a way of working remotely during the initial period of the coronavirus, and many suffered serious resource losses. The education sector moved into a depression interval for both "kindergarten to 12th grade" (K12), and postsecondary education. Employees of remote working companies spent hours on video call screens for very small issues that could probably be solved in 30 second conversations, if they took place in a physical working space.

After the initial period, due to both urgency and necessity, nearly all business sectors, that have previously thought it impossible to work remotely, adapted (and are still adapting) to remote

working systems—with the help and use of practical digital tools and systems. Rigid mindsets have been changed with the development of innovative solutions. New experiences have shown us that the result of working remotely and effectively with digital tools can be very surprising and exactly the opposite of what we might have foreseen. The education sector, is also one of those sectors that was abundantly based on a physical space as a learning environment before the pandemic.

Of course, it is important to note that in the last few years there has been a rise in digital courses that have been growing in popularity; yet, most of them are asynchronous training sessions with pre-prepared topics. From March 2020 onwards, during the experiential period of remote education, as a learning designer I took on the roles of instructor, facilitator and team coach in different projects surrounding the digital learning processes, alongside my colleagues at ATÖLYE Academy.

The methods that we had put in practice through physical programs and workshops for years, were not going to be applicable for online scenarios. ATÖLYE tried to come up with different alternatives for engagement with clients, partners and stakeholders. It was clear that ATÖLYE Academy, that set a clear intention to move beyond engagement, started to create value and impact from day one onwards. As a result of that intention and aim, we have designed different learning approaches and have progressed for very different and specific personas.

In line with ATÖLYE Academy's Business Model, the concept of "facilitation", and the role of "facilitator" was always placed at the core for everything we did. Client meetings, inner gatherings, workshops, events, programs, experiences etc., were all structured on the foundation of facilitation, which we have become expert in, as an organization. In the following months, more inclusive and concentrated modules were implemented by the Academy Team. We started to organize "Facilitation Meetups" as an event series which occurred twice every month; and we founded ATÖLYE Academy's Learning Community, which began with over 470 members from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The most common feedback we received from participants that took part in the experiences that we created was to do with the impact that the facilitator created, and how comfortable and effective the sessions were with facilitators present. Thereby, the key question for my study emerged:

"How did the transformation of the digital experience during Covid-19 isolation affect pedagogical approaches to education?"

This thesis uses qualitative methods and ethnography as a methodology. For the former, in depth interviews were conducted with instructors, facilitators and participants from K12 and postsecondary education. The ethnographic aspect of this thesis will be based on observations conducted during the aforementioned ATÖLYE's "Facilitation Meetups".

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study has been conducted through digital libraries, resources and academic search engines. As the research involves the roles of online education instructors during the period of the pandemic, both technological and pedagogical techniques have been investigated. For gathering knowledge about remote learning in higher education, a chronological approach is applied to understand the evolution of the approaches and methodologies through different era's of remote learning in the world. Following distance education methods, with new opportunities provided through digitalization, MOOC and LMS systems are evaluated through studies that concentrate on global and local examples. Remote Learning in Turkish Higher Education is evaluated through two milestones—the period before and during the Covid-19 pandemic—in order to provide a wide perspective for comparison purposes, and to understand the bottlenecks within the system. Data for the second phase of the Turkish Remote Higher Education in this literature review, which concentrates on the Covid-19 period, has been collected from academic papers and journals published by The Council of Higher Education and Universities. The literature review ends with an analysis of the term "facilitation" as well as the pedagogical approaches that the facilitator role brings to the learning process.

1.1 Remote learning in global higher education

In February 1922, New Zealand made a historical move towards the accessibility of education by declaring that they had opened correspondence classes for 107 children officially under an institute, the New Zealand Correspondence School (Bewly, 1996). One of the first steps they took included sending lectures on phonograph records to distance learners. In the same year, Pennsylvania State University was the first university to broadcast courses over the radio. Yet,

long before that period, the first encounter with distance learning is accepted to be the efforts of Charles Toussaint and Gustav Langenscheidt, to teach language by correspondence in 1856 (Demiray, 1995). This effort was made on the European continent and was based in Berlin, Germany. Although this first sparkle of light was found in Europe, further developments in terms of distance learning were starting to be highly seen in Canada, Australia, and the United States. England was one of those countries that tried to implement correspondence studies, but because of World War I and World War II, it had been in some serious trouble in terms of other critical agendas; thus, postal services and radio stations were not allowed time to present educational or intellectual content. After World War II, the television and the radio became a notable part of correspondence education, alongside printed material. When the World Wide Web was established, and the first search engine became available for public use, another layer of remote education came to light. Through those years, the remote education system was broadly based on one way communication, from source to the receiver, as an information transmission. After the World Wide Web and the common use of digital conferencing, both as audio conferences and video conferences, the system evolved into two-way communication. Some universities in the United States had state-wide teleconferencing networks that connected students with a two-way communication from different cities during the late 90's (Demiray, 1995).

After the early 2000's, computers with internet connections began to make their way to people's homes. And this was not only the case for adults and businesses, but for students and the education sector too. A few education institutions trialed face to face education with e-learning modules through "blended learning". Universities invested in online learning modules and began establishing their own learning management systems. With the advantages and disadvantages it brought, the blended learning method was accepted and applied by many institutions. According to Lopez - Perez et al. "A high degree of utility, motivation and satisfaction is perceived from blended learning, which could lead students to have a positive attitude towards learning. Moreover, this conclusion indicates that blended learning reinforces students' understanding of the subject in question, enhancing and supporting the learning process (Lopez - Perez, 2010, p.23)."

On the other hand, with the Open Educational Resources movement that emerged with MIT's Open Courses, the independent initiative of the lifelong learning phenomena became an alternative to academic courses in many ways. With the increasing trend of online learning with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), most people who have access to the internet are now able to learn a variety of skills without any dependence on any institution. That advantage has increased the amount of learning opportunities for both soft and hard skills (Bozkurt, 2015). Coursera, edX and Udemy, with their accessible prices and scalable business models, have observed a need in this area, and have thus, dominated the online independent course field with their certification options. Also, some more advanced learning programs have also been designed in time for online learning, such as IDEO U courses that have made learning a process with practical assignments and exercises, more than many other content-based information imposing courses.

Yuan & Powell have stated that "Different ideologies have driven MOOCs in two distinct pedagogical directions as 'the connectivist MOOCs' (cMOOC) and 'the content-based MOOCs' (xMOOC)"'. While cMOOC stands for more collaborative, radical systems that are located beyond traditional classroom habits and focus mainly on the process of learning within a group, xMOOCs are content driven; they are the more traditional and instructional side of MOOCs and are supported with video presentations, short quizzes and tests. According to Yuan & Powell,

> "*xMOOCs have been criticized for adopting a knowledge transmission model; in essence, they are considered to be technology-enriched traditional teacher-centered instruction (Larry, 2012). Such systems offer an individualized experience in that they allow students to take alternative routes through material and offer automated feedback. However, they do not provide a social learning experience or one of being dealt with personally...*
>
> *By contrast, cMOOCs provide great opportunities for non-traditional forms of teaching approaches and learner-centered pedagogy where students learn from one another. For example, institutions, like MIT and Edinburgh University are using MOOCs as an experimental venture to participate in emerging pedagogical models, exploiting peer support and using peer assessment techniques." (Yuan & Powell, 2013, p.11)*

Besides, MOOCs have been an alternative learning medium to face to face training with the availability of reaching the content asynchronously, for not only in universities but also for corporate companies that care for the development of their employees. The MOOC providers like LinkedIn Learning, Coursera and Udacity have also realised the demand in that area, and have created enterprise options and corporate LMS alternatives for companies that wish to provide training to their employees in a scalable and manageable way.

1.2 Remote learning in Turkish higher education before COVID

The evaluation of the distance learning system in Turkey will direct us back to 1956, when Ankara University decided to apply distance learning with printed material in the Faculty of Law. Following Ankara University, in 1961 the Ministry of National Education established a Distance Learning Center in the organization, which sent its learning materials via the mail service as letters. 20 years later, as the first distance higher education initiative in Turkey, Eskişehir Anadolu University has established its Distance Education Faculty with a variety of different major departments. The same year, the Turkish Radio and Television Association began its supportive broadcasts for distance education departments. With the World Wide Web, and the private universities regulation in Turkey, some of these foundation universities started using online education as a way to share content with students, and moved some classes online, by sharing asynchronous content as text or video. For more than 10 years, the online content has kept its slow pace as being presented as low credit courses in those universities. Generally, students pick those lectures to complete additional credits or to join the exams such as Turkish Language or History of Turkish Revolution, which are open to all faculties. The main systems that exist at most universities and departments, all still exist as synchronous, physical education systems—like most other countries.

In Turkey, the first local MOOC came up with E-Üniversite in 2013, which creates content in the Turkish language and provides higher education diplomas via online learning opportunities. That was an asynchronous learning method that allowed students to follow the content on devices such as mobile phones, tablets or computers without any time restriction. Also, Eskişehir Anadolu University also started to provide MOOCs for everyone with the infrastructure of OpenEdX platform. Subsequently, Atatürk University in 2014 announced AtademiX as a MOOC interface, beginning with 4 lectures. Anadolu University continued its digitization efforts, and in 2015 released their new project Akadema, as an online learning

platform that provides MOOCs for everyone and allows academicians to create content and share with open videos and libraries (Erguney, 2015).

Compared with most of the other countries in Europe, Turkey has developed a variety of content focused especially on local and traditional materials. The content for the pre-recorded videos, are usually prepared by lecturers of the same content. So, the content itself did not differ much from the content provided in a physical classroom environment. On the other hand, in European countries and the USA, content creation involved using animations, simulations or game design. Turkey based MOOCs are targeted at local, smaller groups of people. For that reason, the content for videos prepared with low effort; similar to simple recordings of physical classes in lectures. Unfortunately, this approach has decreased the level of efficiency for learners on the screen (Yürük, Karaman, Yılmaz, 2020).

1.3 Remote learning in Turkish higher education after COVID

Data from the Council of Higher Education in Turkey suggests that 123 Turkish higher education institutions have Distance Learning departments. These institutions have initially started adaptation to remote learning systems after the announcement of the isolation period as an alternative to formal education. 64% of universities in Turkey decided to apply remote education for the current semester on March 23, and 21% followed them, announcing the shift to remote education on March 30. İstanbul Technical University, on the other hand decided to apply a blended education programme, that prioritizes remote friendly lectures and postpones lectures that are not able to be adapted online, to a future date in which it would be safer for students.

Those universities have independent learning management systems that allow students to reach lecture content and notes, as well as receive and give feedback. After the Covid-19 isolation announcement, some universities were able to migrate the current system into learning management systems for remote education applications. One of the most commonly used is Blackboard Learn which is a world-wide known learning management system (LMS). Boğaziçi, MEF, İstanbul Bilgi University, Koç University and Middle East Technical University are some of the pioneer institutions that were already using the Blackboard system. Another commonly used LMS is ALMS, which is a local initiative in Turkey. Distinctively, Istanbul Technical University, chose Ninova for remote learning, which is an internally developed system. Moreover, there are tentative systems for some universities such as Fırat University, as they use Blackboard and ALMS together (Dikmen, Bahçeci, 2020).

Furthermore, the Council of Higher Education states that they have opened a free remote education platform for students and institutions that are not able to setup a LMS in a short period of time, with the name of "YÖK Dersleri Platformu" with the collaboration of Istanbul University, Atatürk University and Anadolu University. Yet, as Can (2020) states in his study,

> *"when the YÖK courses platform is examined, as of March 31, 2020, there are more than one textbook on some courses, while there are no resources for many departments. In addition, one of the most striking points is that the number of materials related to departments in open education faculties is higher. It has been determined that most of the course materials consist of common courses with other departments. The fact that all of the materials accessible to access consist of printed materials confirms the need for interactive or alternative learning resources. These numbers show that the course contents are not sufficient. This result shows that distance education centers, especially at the higher education level, do not have sufficient preparation in many aspects, especially in course content, synchronous education and infrastructure."*

The study of Altuntaş et al. shows that, in Turkish higher education, instructors mostly chose to make the lectures synchronously on a video conference tool rather than sharing asynchronous content and supportive materials. The same study indicated that 61,66 percent of interviewed students take lectures on Zoom and only 29,77 percent of students get their online lectures on their institutions' LMS (Altuntaş, 2020).

While the age interval of people who are taking classes in higher education—which we can describe as millennials—is highly suitable for those who can adapt to technology and online solutions, the system that has been in place for many years, face to face education, has blunted possible applications in online education. Factors such as instructor's habits, techniques and processes, as well as many other methods that are not able to be adapted quickly into digital systems have had an impact. It has been argued that there are several factors that cause online learning to be less effective. These include the following points:

- The transition to the digital learning experience is very difficult and complex, at a scale, even in the best circumstances.
- Student achievement factors and pedagogical concerns are not on the same level for learners and instructors.

- Facilities: Not everyone has the same conditions in terms of internet connection, device sufficiency and a learning environment, compared to face-to-face education.
- Instructors' competency to provide content for online systems.
- Assignment and feedback systems are not similar with the physical experience. (Ali, 2020)

The education sector is being forced to face the aforementioned factors, and the challenges that have come up are also not limited to technical issues, but also pedagogical and sociological aspects too. The only change in the education system is not how the information is transmitted to learners, the learning process cannot be narrowed down into the supplying data. There are critical learning arches for different disciplines and different perspectives. As intellectual beings, we not only learn from notes and pre-recorded video content, but we also learn from interactions, reflections and experiences. It is clear that moving all content onto online systems directly, continuing education with Zoom meetings as if they are normal classes, or providing asynchronous supportive materials is simply not enough. Independent statistical studies that have been participated by higher education students, by UniAr and YetGen showed that 71% of those students were not satisfied by the remote education that they got. Also 88% of those participants stated they are taking extra remote courses too (Erkut, 2020).

1.4 Facilitating as an Auxiliary Aid to Online Education

The word "facilitate" originates from the latin word "*facilis*", which means "easy to do". The definition of facilitator can briefly summarized, but not limited to, a member of a group that takes on the responsibility to help the group work on something together as a team, and learn from that experience (Barnhart, 1988). The facilitator also cares for, and makes use of environmental factors, diversity and background of participants, psychologies and moods, and other opportunities to boost processes in a positive manner. Facilitators also help the group to achieve their goals without being hierarchical, without leading the group, but merely guiding it, with minimal amounts of intervention; they are a part of the group itself. Rather than holding an attitude of being an instructor, a facilitator allows the participants to progress towards dialogue so that they may discover and work together to reach their goals. In educational scenarios, a facilitator allows learners to interact, learn by themselves, whilst clarifying and guiding from inside the group. While a traditional instructor, holding a position of higher authority, generally provides content to students, as an expert on the topic, the facilitator is not necessarily an expert on the topic at hand. The mastery of content is usually impractical for the

facilitator, because the facilitator joins in with a group, and both learns and guides together with them. Teräs (2016) states that adopting teachers' approaches to the facilitation of collaborative online learning "requires changes in perceptions of educators, not merely learning new techniques" (Teräs, 2016). More than a role of a traditional instructor, a facilitator allows participants to engage with each other and be responsible with creating the environment of sharing—learning through the empowerment of the individuals. Thus, in a way, they through facilitating, they "ease" the processes for every party involved.

In their research, Baran and Correia (2009) worked with the same sample group of students and evaluated three experimental cases of facilitation. They have defined the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator as such:

- *Set the agenda for the discussion: objectives, guiding questions, or scenarios.*
- *Clarify the purpose: what is the expected outcome of the discussion?*
- *Encourage participation: create a trustful atmosphere.*
- *Guide the discussion by asking leading questions rather than speaking for students.*
- *Ensure that some participants do not dominate the conversation by inviting less participative members to enter into the discussion.*
- *Keep the discussion focused on the topics related with the readings.*
- *Encourage multiple views of the same issue.*
- *Bring the discussion to an end by summarizing the highlights* (*short posting*).

As facilitation can be applied in nearly any field that consists of human relations and interactions, it has already been experienced for years; with or without the actual intention of facilitating the group. There are some important studies underlining the importance of facilitation for educational purposes. Yet, facilitation is not a very common approach within the Turkish Higher Education system itself.

1.5 Facilitator or Instructor?

With every new generation, the behavior of individuals change, as needs change too. The complex scale of today's challenges requires us to take agile and simple actions to solve issues. The role of the facilitator becomes more important than ever due to the current need for

simplicity and efficiency. The roles of traditional instructor and facilitator, therefore, have some serious differences. While the traditional instructor role is responsible for teaching information with one way transmission, and giving feedback on assignments, the facilitator comes into the circle with pedagogical and social skills to provide a student-centered learning environment. Instructors usually provide pre-lecture reads, post-lecture assignments, and present content in lecture hours. That way, they try to transmit the content by repetitive resources that direct students to visit the content again and again. Whereas the facilitator allows students to express themselves in how individuals can learn best; they guide them to explore different methods to see what works best. Facilitators encourage peer learning and a continuous learning process. While liberating the class environment, facilitators also read the room and support students with possible learning challenges.

Similar to the instructor role, the facilitation role can be either performed in a face-to-face environment or online, yet, it needs special requirements to be fulfilled for online lectures to be facilitated successfully.

> *A critical part of online collaborative learning is peer discourse, which provides the platform for students and facilitators to interact in a social environment without the boundaries of time and distance, promoting critical thinking and reflection on their ideas* (*Baran et al., 2013*).

As stated by Baran and many others previously, online learning environments with peer discourse, have been a transformative experience for students. Rather than an instructor role, students are looking for more open communication, horizontal hierarchical systems, and a sharing of a space where everyone's voices can be heard and listened to. When that trust is established in the circle, the facilitator's role can even be distributed among the students for specific sequences. One of the most vital differences between facilitating and instructing is with regards to adaptability; the facilitator is ready to change colors like a chameleon when they spot a certain need. Any action and reaction can be interpreted by facilitators, and according to the conditions and context, interventions can be carried out, or other times, the facilitator can let the conversation continue and recalibrate itself again.

1.6 Facilitating as a Pedagogical Process

While referring to the preparation side of facilitation, the importance of designing content should not be underestimated. Despite the importance of being adaptive and being in a state of reciprocity with participants of a workshop etc., it is also incredibly important to prepare, design and create clear instructions for the group a facilitator will be working with. When the interventions of the facilitator are minimized, this enables a safe space to grow and broaden further. When this space is more democratized and liberated, the facilitator can hand over the responsibility of facilitating to students and let them peer-facilitate. The most valuable gains of discussions are provided by liberated groups on a concentrated subject and the space of sharing. According to Baran & Correia (2009), as a result of that responsibility circulation, active participation and meaningful student dialogue increases and positively affects the learning process with thriving motivation and divergent thinking.

The two fundamental ingredients of an influential online learning environment, have been stated by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) to be: teaching presence and social presence. Social presence is shaped by emotive based actions, such as level of interaction and the potency of the online learning environment. Reasonably, growing a social presence in a remote group includes creating an equal environment that encourages participation, allows participants to feel courage whilst participating in dialogue, and allow collaborative interactions to take place organically. On the other hand, teaching presence takes on the responsibility of creating valuable experiences with regards to the information shared, and learning methods utilized (Thomas, Thorpe, 2019).

For face-to-face working groups, a combination of those two presences can create an ideal learning environment in which people feel comfortable enough to take risks, ask questions, and participate in lectures to learn effectively. By reading the room and observing the participants, the facilitator can truly set the entire tone of the learning experience and ensure that people feel at ease. Even starting online workshops with a bit of music can change the atmosphere from the moment that people enter the online “room”. It is true that online environments make it difficult to read class dynamics and harder to connect with the group on an emotional level. Online environments also make it more difficult for students to follow lecture materials. As an experience, that is nearly impossible to understand and clarify the feelings and attention from virtual representations, from cameras and screens. It can be even more challenging when the cameras of participants are closed, when they stay muted, and resist active participation. We

must respect one another, as everyone's working/studying environment at home is different. So, we cannot force people to keep their cameras open. But what we can do is still encourage active participation. At this point integrative and collaborative approaches of facilitators are essential.

It is important to use a "vulnerability" approach in an online environment, which enables a teacher to understand and discover each learner's needs both intellectually and emotionally (Crawford, 2016. p.17). When a teacher's presence and authenticity bring that attitude of normalizing vulnerability whilst preparing the learning environment, students' confidence and engagement in the environment increases and the group becomes more participatory and willing to speak up. To show up with a "human touch", being reflective and showing your own vulnerabilities as a facilitator, establishes empathy and comfort in the group.

Once the trust and confidence have been established inside the classroom, the students will not fear being attacked, ignored or abandoned. In this way, the vulnerabilities and needs of the students can arise without hesitation, and facilitators can help them handle those situations with guidance. Those steps avoid psychological barriers mentioned in cognitive vulnerability theory and also prepares students for an experiential learning approach. Facilitators in the group, again play a key role to mirror the group back to itself, and improve the participant awareness of others through necessary interventions and questions/thoughts that arise from the group.

1.7 Is Facilitating a Form of Virtual Work?

As defined by Huws, virtual work is "labor, whether paid or unpaid, that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunications technologies and/or produces content for digital media' (Huws 2012: 3). Online facilitation is a labor that requires both physical and digital effort for preparation and application according to the definition by Huws. Not only higher education or the education sector benefit from the "facilitation" phenomena. During the pandemic, the importance of facilitation emerged for virtual meetings, working sessions and events. A few very critical evidences of that need for facilitation in an online environment could be counted as time management and cost, efficiency of the communication between meeting participants or coworkers in working sessions. One of the certain ways to get that precious productivity on online gatherings and processes is having a facilitator that helps the group thrive. A facilitator in a virtual environment can increase the impact of online events remarkably. There are few actions a facilitator can take for virtual efficiency:

- Providing pre-session information to the participatory group: Sharing pre-prepared resources can save time and allow that all participants are on the same page before they attend.
- Providing clear and explicit objectives, desired outcomes, and intentions for the session: This will clarify the common goals for all of the participants, and make them take part meaningfully.
- Being the leader, and defining as well as distributing roles: If there is a need for supportive roles to complete the session successfully, the facilitator could define assistance agents from within the group.
- Picking the right communication and collaboration tools: This is the most underestimated element of facilitation. Yet, it plays a very crucial role in order to put on a successfully facilitated event. Facilitators need to analyze the needs of the session, and pick the right tools accordingly. Sometimes these could be digital tools such as Mural or Miro for the team to collaborate on, or sometimes this could be a method or an exercise to boost the creativity of the participants for brainstorming.

Despite all the effort that facilitation costs in terms of labor, it is not exactly possible to say that facilitators are getting recognized or paid fairly for their roles. Even though the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) has had the mission to spread facilitation and provide certification for it since 1994, there are not any institutions that provide a diploma program for facilitator candidates. This deficiency of an accreditation, allows any person to try facilitation and own the facilitator tag. At that point any related employee could be manipulated into facilitating workshops or events when their job definition does not include that role. Because of the considerable work load and effort, it brought with, the facilitation process could be a burden for practitioners in terms of labor exploitations. Essentially, facilitation is considered more of a soft skill rather than a profession itself.

On the other hand, facilitation has other handicaps as well. Especially in Turkey, “facilitation” is not considered as a well-accepted field, due to some language and cultural barriers. The translation of “facilitation” has been construed as “kolaylaştırıcılık”, hence suggesting that facilitating is something related to easing a process. In my opinion, this translation changes and downgrades the notion of facilitating. The wording in Turkish, affects “the receiver” negatively in the first encounter. Participants in facilitated environments, hearing the word “kolaylaştırıcılık”, might have prejudgment about the facilitator, with the resistance against a

“pseud”. According to the experience that participants have been through with the facilitator, a total disengagement can occur, or the adoption process can begin. At that point there are unclear lines for moderation, instruction, guidance and other leading roles of the group that could be distracting and questionable for participants. If the framing will not be successfully delivered by the facilitator, what the roles and responsibilities of facilitator are, that could pull apart the existing interaction opportunities.

Even though there are several foundations who prepare “facilitation” courses and provide certification, this practice is essentially based on interacting with groups and individuals. As the many hours spent facilitating, makes the facilitator more experienced—which is not quite possible through theoretical knowledge. Every facilitator creates their own, unique facilitator identity by facilitating over and over again.

They learn by practicing, from interacting with different personas, exploring different participant approaches and by facing different challenges. Overcoming challenges as they come up, and making sense of context, is a vital skill for a facilitator. This part of the expertise shows similarities with a music performance and being on stage as an orchestra. No matter how good you may know music theory, you still have to rehearse with the band and experience playing together in order to become a better band member —or conductor.

In brief, facilitation is a contemporary way of creating learning environments, but there are groups or topics that still need traditional instruments and roles such as didactic approaches and informative expressions. It is really important to engage participants or students with the content both emotionally and intellectually, however, it’s not applicable to design a calculus course with a pure facilitation approach without instructions and information. Also, independently from the subject of learning environments, sometimes group dynamics may not be feasible for facilitation approaches that a facilitator has planned beforehand. Under those circumstances, facilitators may not be accepted by the group. Thereby, a facilitator should design the learning environment according to the desired outcomes and the frequency of the group. To clarify, this learning design effort will cost much more time than an instructor spends to create informative lecture content.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After a few months of lockdown, the ongoing pandemic and growing remote collaboration experience, it seems like remote education will probably have an undeniable space in the education system for years to come. With current approaches to learning environments and lecture contents, the efficiency and effectiveness of higher education is imperil to decrease in terms of classroom climate, peer interaction, student focus and other critical learning factors.

Instructional methods which are commonly used in the Turkish Higher Education do not allow students to interact via asking questions, sharing opinions or iterating further on the topic. Very few instructors let students participate and discuss through lecture subjects. Generally, the instructors are the source of information, and they share the content they have through lectures with a hierarchical tone, leading to a deprivation of liberty for students to learn extensively via a query-based approach. Building those walls in those times of remote education necessity, also harms the needs of students psychologically and emotionally. Due to the change from physical classes and interactions to online classes, students need—more than before—to feel that they are being heard and cared for. Students lose concentration and willingness to listen to lectures when they encounter didactical approaches from instructors. They tend to turn their camera and microphone off, pay attention to their phone or other distractors. When they feel they have a voice in the classroom, and can actively participate, they are more than likely to join the discussion and focus their attention on the topic at hand. From the window of Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning, which defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 1984, p.41) students are learning through hands-on experiences and discussions. When the learner becomes an active participant in the learning process rather than a disengaged bystander, they can take their own responsibility to learn on reflections on different experiences. "*The four-stage learning model depicts two polar opposite dimensions of grasping experience – concrete experience and abstract conceptualization, and two polar opposite dimensions of transforming experience – reflective observation and active experimentation. Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning abilities. The learner must continually choose which set of learning abilities to use in a specific learning situation."* (McCarthy, 2016 p.132*)* If the instructors keep preparing informative presentations and use one-way communication in teacher-centered environments, the quality of the learning process is unfortunately kept tentative. Students can find most of that information themselves by researching on the internet. However, what they need fundamentally comes from the

interactions they have with their instructor and peers. Interactions and iterations together, with an inquiry-based approach, transforms a student from a passive receiver into an active participant in the learning process. With the interaction of students, the four stages of learning from Kolb's model gets triggered: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting.

Facilitation, with the skills and approaches it brings to the table, can activate emergent learning experiences. Higher education students especially are in need of those points of view which accept the importance of their opinions and voices in learning environments. For some highly analytical lectures which are based on theory (such as physics and chemistry), it might be challenging to use the dialog enabler - catalyzer side of facilitation as a holistic experience. In those fields, learning design initiates shaping the experience of students to engage with analytical courses with preparation materials, digital tools and collaborative learning approaches. Those relatively passive methods can be classified as low-key facilitation. One potential way to overcome some of the challenges associated with online learning would be through the introduction of facilitators into the education system.

I propose the following hypothesis: "If higher education instructors gain facilitator skills, then the remote learning experiences of adults will be more fulfilling." To analyze that hypothesis, research will be structured around the pedagogical techniques and strategies that the facilitator and instructor roles use to create learning environments. The research questions that lead the study are:

1. What are the pedagogical techniques and strategies used by facilitators in remote higher education?
2. How are they received by participants?
3. How does their reception differ from the pedagogical techniques and strategies used by instructors?

3. METHODOLOGY

To understand human behavior, social scientists generally use qualitative methods in their research. More than numerical data, “quality” and “nature” of experiences, understanding the behaviors of humans are considered important and studied. As this study concentrates on learning experiences, which is a universally shared experience, the methodology focuses on qualitative research and methods as opposed to quantitative data.

3.1 Virtual Ethnography

A challenge for social researchers is to inspect and evaluate social interactions in virtual environments. While ethnographic researches have been around for hundreds of years, virtual ethnographies emerged radically with the global usage of the internet which provided lots of different alternative mediums for researchers.

“The label "virtual ethnography" includes a broad range of methodological approaches aimed at answering the complexities of the object of research and the different ways in which this object has been constructed.” (Dominguez, 2007).

While researchers are able to collect data and make observations through forums, social media platforms, broadcasts and webinars and other digital based mediums, the most complicated part of the research is to interpret the relationship between the data and insights.

For my case study, the event series “Facilitation Meet-ups” organized by ATÖLYE Academy was selected. As the host of the series, who was responsible with the design, operation and execution of the series, I had the adequate conditions and access to be able to apply participant observation virtually. During the period of data collection for the Facilitation Meetups, not only events, but also the preparation sessions of the series were extremely valuable as they are also held by the volunteer participants' attendance. 12 virtual events and 12 co-design sessions related to those events have been inspected for changes in terms of facilitator candidates. With this accessibility to participants, and by joining all of the events, I have found the opportunity to investigate participant engagement and transformation within every episode. After episode three, I realized that there was an enthusiasm among some participants towards participating and engaging as a “learning community”. Those participants attended all events and they were also interacting with me regularly to make the Facilitation Meetups series better through their

contribution on the operational side. Indeed, they put a considerable amount of valuable effort into the series, and made this experience more fluid by revising regularly the needs and requests of participants.

3.2 Online In Depth Interviews (Semi-Structured)

Interviewing as a data collection method is a communication-based approach which can be conducted in four different types according to Alshenqeeti (2014): unstructured, semi-structured, structured and focus group.

The semi-structured interview, allows the researcher to expand the interviewee's responses and provide more flexibility through subject. Usually, there are checklists for researchers to guide the interviewee with some attributions and questions, but those are customizable according to the interviewee, and for every interview those can be vocalized differently by researcher. The researcher frames the focus of the interview with his guidance and covers all relevant areas, and avoids any divagation (Alshenqeeti, 2014).

Before the dissemination of the internet, qualitative researchers had been using phone interviews and mail interviews as alternative methods to face-to-face interviews. With the video conference tools which have allowed online, easy, safe spaces for people to meet, virtual face-to-face experiences and interviews also became possible. Compared with physical experiences, it is critical for researchers to build a relationship of trust with the interviewees in virtual environments if they have not had a relationship previously (Bertrand, 2010).

For this study, there are few factors that affected the choice of conducting the interviews as semi-structured and online. First of all, the pandemic was the first reason for trying to avoid face-to-face meetings. The safety of participants was crucial, and in addition restaurants and cafes were also banned at the time of the interviews themselves. Another limitation, but at the same time an opportunity for this research, the interview participants were already regular attendants of the Facilitation Meetups. So, because I had already met with all of the participants previously in virtual environments, and we had established a relationship of belonging to the same learning community with them for months, it made sense to interview them online.

As a result, online interviews as a method matched and worked fine with all participants. We also initiated a Slack workspace together, to gather all participants that had attended at least

one event of the Facilitation Meetups series, and tried to keep the interaction alive on digital channels. In this way, I have been able to be reached more easily by participants, eliminating more procedural channels such as e-mail. I believe it was crucial to give the message that "I'm not owning that event series alone, this belongs to us all, and will serve us all." Gratefully, this non-hierarchical relationship between participants and myself allowed us to bond quickly and helped me to gather data easily. Interviews are conducted with those selected participants after 12 meetups, who are willing to participate in and due to their background in the learning field. Those interviews took around 1 hour each and were held on the video conference tool Zoom; they were recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed into text. Qualitative coding method was applied to the interview transcriptions for analysis with the usage of NVivo digital tool.

The interviewees are selected between both the attendants and those who hold the facilitation space as volunteers, among the Facilitation Meetups participants. Some of the participants not only participated, but later on started facilitating themselves. Also, I was aware of the background for each participant I chose to be interviewed. In general, the interviewees of this study consisted of higher education stakeholders who differed between undergraduate and doctoral students. They're picked among the participants of Facilitation Meetups, so they're both a part of higher education institutions and a contemporary learning community around facilitation, which give them the opportunity to compare those experiences and learning processes. Their age interval is between 24 and 42. There are experienced facilitators alongside the beginner practitioners of facilitation within the interviewees.

3.3 Introducing the Case Study

At the beginning of 2020, ATÖLYE founded ATÖLYE Academy as its third business model alongside the already existing Strategic Design Studio and Creative Hub; it was inspired by the design studio practice, learning and organizational design. The emergence of the need for such a business model came about by the feedback of individuals in the network, who had carried out projects with ATÖLYE or joined some business-to-business programmes of the Learning Design department with their organizations. Previously, all resources of the Learning and Organizational. Design department was focused on programmes or workshops designed for

business and corporates. With the Academy, this focus was not solely based on corporates, but mainly on individuals.

Due to the first Covid-19 cases in Turkey, like most of the organizations, ATÖLYE closed its office space, and migrated to working from home. Lucky for ATÖLYE Academy, that domain was more prepared for working with online solutions, and its business model was also applicable on digital channels. While a huge number of companies and clients were slowing down and trying to deal with uncertainty, ATÖLYE Academy took this as an opportunity and focused on working with individual personas with an experimental mindset. The challenge of 2020 for ATÖLYE Academy has been selected as curating a “Learning Community”.

ATÖLYE Academy Learning Community which was prepared around the focus of “Navigating Ambiguity” involves 467 individuals that have been selected amongst four thousand applicants. The experience of being an online community, designed and supported with 5 unique programs through leading names from ATÖLYE’s team and community. As believers in lifelong learning, we have given membership to a wide range of people from different backgrounds and ages, with the requirement of being at least a university student. The relationship and the communication between the members and learning groups are enabled through the “Slack” app, which allows one to create different channels and communicate either with the entire group or smaller circles or with individuals.

On the other hand, as mentioned before, the event series “Facilitation Meetups" was developed independently from the learning community. I was in charge with hosting this series. So far, we have come together with more than 700 unique individuals in 12 different meetups. The structure of those meetups was scheduled as 2 hours for every meeting. The events occurred once every 3 weeks. The content of the meetups alternated each time. The odd numbers of the series (3,5,7) were co-designed with volunteers that were willing to experience the role of facilitator themselves. Each session consisted of 60-minute sessions where volunteer facilitators could present their content; consequently, participants were also sent out to separate break-out rooms where they could discuss the matter at hand. The even number of the series (2,4,6) were facilitated by experienced facilitators from the ATÖLYE Academy network by subjecting specifically on their proficiency space of facilitation. In this way, we were able to present participants with two different formats of a single series, with one focused more on learning and the other on sharing. The two different types of meetup, enabled both theoretical

collaborative learning and praxis space for facilitators and candidates to improve their competencies.

Facilitation Meetups was selected specifically as a case study for this research in order to examine the interactions between participants and their level of engagement with different types of facilitators while joining continuous events. One of the critical reasons for this choice was because the event series holds the intention to open up a space for facilitation and let people engage freely. As there is no pricing for the events—it was totally free for all participants—participants became voluntarily present in this concentrated space. Because of this focused attention and willingness to share within a learning community, events were designed and shaped with volunteer participants every single time; they were also further developed according to the feedback from participants, gathered at the end of every event. This co-design approach would supply a sheltered experiment area for the study to investigate "how facilitated environments affect the experience in terms of adult learning".

As mentioned above, some of the series events were designed and facilitated by volunteers who were completely new to facilitation and who also needed a space for this practice to improve. ATÖLYE Academy's aim here was—and still is—to allow participants to hold that space, create meaningful conversations by working collaboratively, and having an online learning experience together with peers who believe in the transformative power of facilitation. Since the first meetup, we have organized a total of 12 episodes within the space of a year; A total of 730 participants attended these events for over 50 hours. 40 different facilitators held that space in episodes or in breakout sessions. 25 of those facilitators were volunteer practitioners who were simply enthusiastic about experiencing facilitation with a group based on their own curated content within a one-hour interval. The volunteers are totally free to prepare their content on any subject or under any theme they wish. Several of the topics that were covered by that volunteers were incredibly varied; We had "Appreciative Interviews by Liberating Structures", "Philosophy for Communities", "Personal Reflection with Ecocycle", "Compassion Steps with Sirtaki" and many other issues being covered. While volunteer facilitators have had the benefit of practicing and experimenting in order to develop their skills and methods, they have also had the opportunity to observe how their interventions, interactions and methods resonate with different people and how they feel or react to specific circumstances. On the other hand, the episodes facilitated by experienced facilitators provided an opportunity to further delve into an area of knowledge, a tool, method or theory. For

instance, Cihan Koral facilitated a session around “Theory U” by Otto Scharmer, which is a learning and management by change method.

4. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

4.1 Findings

First, to prove the assumptions proposed about learning experiences, interviewees were asked about their higher education experiences (especially negative ones), and specific examples of lectures that they found were hard to learn and retain information. Most of the interviewees remembered several negative experiences very clearly, even if numerous years had passed. The answers showed significant similarities and patterns which will be explored further below.

4.1.1 Didactic lectures, passive learners

The common aspects of the negative experiences that students faced were with regards to monologue type, informative, didactic education approaches. Those experiences are usually structured in “one to many” formats; the instructor shares previously prepared content and information to the students, and students are expected to receive the information and learn passively. Interviewees who thought about those moments in their personal experiences stated that didactic lectures have always been a trouble for them and have often been a cause for stress.

“If there was a dialogue, it mostly occurred between one student and the instructor.” (Interviewee B, personal communication, December 17, 2020) said an interviewee, stating that during her university years, interactive applications in the class environment only really occurred with the instructor picking a student and routing questions. Other students may be present, but most never really interacted with the content or question, and were passive (either by choice or as a result of the method at hand). As a result of this, the transmission of knowledge from instructor to student with via way communication streams amplifies the hierarchical barriers in the learning environment. Students stay passive as bystanders in lectures, especially in ones held in crowded lecture halls. It may also be easier for students to stay passive in a hierarchical environment, as feeling unseen they are allowed to stay in their comfort zone. This bias of safety prevents students from learning the content while keeping them in their comfort zone.

"During my lectures in university, instructors were not even asking questions, their intention was mostly structured around giving the information. We were trying to take notes and complete given assignments which included the questions and content from previous lectures. I wish instructors provided reading or researching assignments for next lectures and I could attend the lecture with preparation to bring value by participating in the discussions." (Interviewee B, personal communication, December 17, 2020).

Another interviewee clarified the negative traces of didactic lectures as: *"I could frame my lectures in my MA now as pragmatic, one-way theoretical information flowing from instructor to students and this makes me feel I'm actually learning a content from a specialist of the field. When several days pass after lecture, I realize that most of the content the instructor told in lecture is flown in my mind and only 5-10 percent of interesting material I can remember. On the contrary, in experiences I've been facilitated through, I'm having questions like: 'Am I really learning something right now? What have we accomplished?' But in the debrief which usually occurs in the last part, the enlightening happens and after a long time I'm still able to remember the content that we've learned there. The knowledge sticks with the experience like an adhesive." (Interviewee D, personal communication, December 18, 2020).*

Online lectures that have been made through video conferencing tools, also maintain the same traditions of didactic content sharing methods, yet, the experience can become even worse online with the same approach. And now in the digital world, students are totally ready to cut their relation with the classroom environment by just turning off their camera and microphones whilst browsing through social media or anything else. Interviews showed that students are losing their attention in 20 minutes at most when receiving information via one-way communication methods. They feel and think that, if a subject includes that much information it could be learnt from the internet any time:

"What happens now is, once I turn off my camera, look at the screen passively sometimes, browse Instagram, take some screenshots if I think something on presentation of the instructor is important. Afterwards I'm searching and learning that content from the internet to complete my assignment for next week. I'm getting easily distracted by environmental factors. If the interaction would be encouraged by the instructors, maybe I could turn on my camera. I would feel like I have to say something. I can't chat with my flat mate or I don't write a SMS during a lecture under an interactive setup. I would listen and participate in the lesson with focus and attention. By the way, all of the lessons are the lessons that I am interested in and I willingly

take. But somehow, I get distracted. The setup is a more passive process of giving and receiving now." (Interviewee D, personal communication, December 18, 2020).

4.1.2 Experiences and emotions are permanent

On the other hand, interviewees also have positive memories of their higher education too. Most of those feelings are shaped completely around feelings and experiences. Instructors who pay attention and make students feel that they actually care, creates a huge difference in increased student attention in the classroom. Additionally, in the best described experiences there is a mentor role more than an instructor role present, who guides the path to knowledge by allowing students to ask true questions of their own. They create an open space for the student and let them represent themselves as individuals. One interviewee highlighted the process as following:

"It strengthens the communication among the students, because when the instructor opens up space for you, you have questions and thoughts in your mind, as you are not an expert on the subject. It also strengthens the communication link between the student and the academician. Increases my personal faith for me, because I want to be worthy of it when my instructor tries to provide space for me to find my answers. You don't ask or interact with the traditional type of instructor because you feel like he doesn't care." (Interviewee H, personal communication, December 22, 2020).

These experiences become stuck with students as they relate to the emotions felt during those moments; these are also connected with sensory nerves which are able to catalyze memories. Not only limited with learning experiences, but with every single experience, people tend to remember experiences when they are combined with powerful emotions. It's really hard to forget a powerful moment if we felt extremely happy, successful, terrible or careless. Those powerful emotions can be used as enablers of learning through facilitated experiences. Being aware of those feelings, making them emerge by reflections are only one technique that facilitators use. A facilitator explained in the in-depth interview that:

"I saw that the physicality of emotion is very important. That's why we call it a "holding space" of facilitation. Holding that space is a very physical act. There is a sense of being a little brave for me in that physicality. What we call vulnerability is that fragility. The feeling that I can make mistakes, trusting that moment, being in the moment. Because there is a vulnerability to dance with whatever comes out at that moment, to do something with it. It's an area where you

didn't say 'I've studied on this and prepared for that before. So, I'm going to say these specific sentences. So, there is an improvisation and spontaneity, there is releasing control and anxiety. Because everything can get out of control. There is a bit of fun in my facilitation. Funniness, jokes, laughing, laughing, keeping people's energy high but also being able to lower them. There are many emotions when you say that. There is no such thing as good or bad emotion anyway. Any emotion can be experienced and it's very natural." (Interviewee B, personal communication, December 17, 2020).

Allowing emotions and feelings to emerge, and providing participants a space to voice them, or express themselves, is an effective way to humanize the learning environment. Students should be able to make mistakes, ask questions, search for answers without any hesitation and fear of being judged. Even though some of the interviewees were completely new to facilitation and others were experienced practitioners, both the topics of experiences and emotions emerged in most conversations as a critical touchpoint, and a catalyst for the learning process.

One of the most striking moments of the research occurred during the interview of my colleague, a learning designer and a PhD student. She stated that they have been studying lots of learning theories during her Learning Sciences PhD. She mentioned that reflection writing as well as giving and receiving feedback both play critical roles in some of the theories. Yet, she further stated, that even in the Learning Sciences PhD program, instructors did not allow space for such methods to be used and that there was hardly any room for emotions in the lectures she attended.

4.1.3 Non-hierarchical environments increase quality of learning

Hierarchical systems are another factor that can change the classroom environment and learning process; some of interviewees assume that one as a cultural mechanism that we have in family structure, school or business. In every section of our lives, there is an authority figure: this can have both its pros and cons. While at times being with an authority figure in the same environment can allow one to feel safe in terms of responsibilities and decisions to ask for. On the other hand, that authority can often create distances in relationships. Authority can also be non-democratic, restrictive and oppressive in such atmospheres where in reality, more interaction and participation are needed: this can lead many individuals from being silenced or remaining silent. Especially in higher education, which is related to adult learning as a classification, that authority centered processes can reveal further problems.

"A teaching style that the student receives and has to take, therefore learns to obey, learns to take and follow the orders, gets used to defining knowledge as something more didactic and rigid, and enables the instructor to draw the boundaries of knowledge, experience and learning very sharply." (Interviewee A, personal communication, December 16, 2020).

Interviewee, further elaborates on her experiences by stating: *"For example, one of my instructors was a well-known, valuable person in the Psychological Counselling and Guidance field. Everything was determined with very strict limits for her as "you want to be a psychological counselor; you should follow this path". However, there are different psychological approaches in psychological counseling and everyone adopts a different approach. So, it is not a solid field at all. Because there are different theories and over time, you can develop your own methods. You could find a method by trying it yourself, combining it and extracting it. Therefore, it is not possible to say that 'you will listen to Freud' or 'follow this, like existentialists. But it was possible, according to her. She advocated Gestalt Therapy, believed that everyone should do Gestalt, imposed it, and did not teach anything else. When we did ask questions, she got angry and yelled at us every time. Never really listened or cared to us. Exactly, she represents the authority figure we are used to in primary school. Untouchable, inaccessible, you have to respect, you have to obey, has strict rules." (Interviewee A, personal communication, December 16, 2020).*

These experiences that have come about as a result of overbearing, repelling, dictating attitudes of authority, could do serious harm for students in terms of being allowed to feel and express emotions as well as feel motivated and enthusiastic to learn. Liberated learning environments, by providing every student with an opportunity to speak up and express themselves, allows a rich perspective to be born through the diversity of voices. Everyone has a chance to feel included. This can allow individuals to truly learn to respect others' opinions even if they do not necessarily believe it; one can learn something through different perspectives and opinions. Being in a facilitated circle, provides that space to participants; it encourages them to declare their thoughts using different methods, and this allows them to interact with others to discuss and join in the discussion.

4.1.4 Same methods and content for different mediums: Importance of redesign

The online learning experience has been suffering drastically over the last few months. As the world was caught by surprise and was very unprepared for the pandemic and lockdowns, the content of and design of lectures were not really easily adaptable for online learning environments. For technical and pedagogical reasons, most of the interviewees feel letdown by the online learning experiences they have been a part of. One higher education student enlightens this situation further by stating the following:

"I had online lessons before the pandemic. And with the pandemic, all my lessons went online. But it goes bad because sitting against the screen for hours is very tiring. Also, instructors didn't adapt into that online system in terms of content and methods. They're keeping the same didactic approach. I am sure that last semester an instructor read whole lectures on paper, it was a difficult experience for me. He reads for an hour and a half in one tone, and this is a master lecture. Apart from that, everyone turns off their cameras during the lecture. A few people turn on, but they also close it after a short time with pressure, because everyone has turned their cameras off. Having all the cameras turned off is definitely something that reduces efficiency. That's why the efficiency of my online classes at MA is very low, not satisfactory. They do nothing to improve this, which is purely because they don't wear the facilitator hats, I think." (Interviewee D, personal communication, December 18, 2020).

One of the challenges of designing online lectures is that you cannot literally reach (or reach out to) people in online classes. In physical environments, interventions by instructors are easier; they can simply ask a student to help if anything goes wrong in that moment. In online experiences, this is something tough to overcome. When cameras are off and interactions are limited, there are no ways to be sure if everything is going well, or students are benefiting from the lectures or not. While cameras are turned off and microphones are muted, the experience can become toxic both for students and for the instructors. Instructors can feel like they are talking to empty walls; furthermore, the feeling of being alone in the "classroom" can be felt even more. In physical classrooms there are students that instructors can address the information even if they're passive. On the other hand, some students state that they feel they need to turn on their cameras to be present or feel they are a part of the lecture. One student state the following:

"If I'm not turning on the camera, I'm usually not there at that time and when I turn on the camera I'm actually there. The fact that everyone can see me on the screen makes me present

there. Now that I see myself on this screen, it actually means "I am with my classmates, I am talking to them." That physical appearance is reflected in that way remotely. I cannot be present otherwise, no matter how interesting the content is." (Interviewee H, personal communication, December 22, 2020).

An important question here is, how can we ensure students turn on their cameras when everyone's home environment is different? On or off, teachers must find ways to create interactions to ensure everyone is participating. It is true that the interaction between students is also another challenge when it comes to the online learning process. To overcome those challenges, instructors should try to gain some knowledge and experience with digital tools. There are several highly beneficial features of digital tools (which are increasing by the day) to support online learning environments, participatory processes and online collaboration. Improving those technical skills and capabilities, and accordingly designing the content for online experiences, could create a remarkable difference in the system.

"...your voice is at a more or less normalized level, you are in more or less the same place as a stain, you are constantly in a sitting position, even when you stand up, it is not very interesting to see you on the screen. You are in a completely different field than physical education. When we completely exclude the facilitator role, it turns into a bad repetition of watching Udemy videos. Because at least in the Udemy video there is animation, sound effect, music. I have nothing, I am someone who gives monotonous information. That's why it's important to get people involved in the discussion and conduct interactive lessons." (Interviewee F, personal communication, December 22, 2020).

As a facilitation practitioner, I have designed and experienced such lectures in ATÖLYE Academy's events and learning community programs. The process with digital tools and features allows participants (students) to engage with the content at hand collaboratively, and produce ideas together. The tools we used received great feedback from participants in terms of creating that shared experience online. Using the breakout rooms function of the video conferencing tool Zoom, and engaging participants on digital collaboration boards via Mural or Miro, allow them to work together in a digital environment—as they were together in physical space—and improves the quality of the learning experience.

4.1.5 How did Facilitation Meetups empower learners with a new approach?

ATÖLYE Academy's Facilitation Meetups were designed to be an experiment area for this experiential learning practice, with the aim of creating a learning community around "facilitation" as a subject. To discover best practices of facilitation, we're designing that tailored experience together with participants according to their needs and interests with coming together before the main events, in preparation sessions. With those sessions, intentions and desired outcomes are gathered from participants, how could we best construct the learning experience in that events are discussed and designed together. By this way, an inclusive learning experience is activated. Also, allowing participants to hold the space of facilitation provides them an opportunity to discover, prototype and improve their unique way of facilitation there.

The output of that experience is described as *"So since Komünite Bodrum is a new community and I am its founder, I always had to try something new in the leading position. But I could not afford to call myself a facilitator. Because I didn't know actually, I was just trying to apply what I know I see, but actually I have neither education nor the back of it very well. However, after participating in the facilitation meetings and the activities we designed together, I started to consider myself worthy of saying 'Okay, now I have started to learn and realize what I am doing.' So, I understood a little what facilitation means and what I am trying to do, what I am aiming for when I try to make a group do something. I seem to get results when I apply it, because the feedback I received was also positive. This process also allowed me to learn how to get and give feedback effectively. I mean, it was positive there as a community, and I got positive feedback on the method I had done by myself. Therefore, after that, I got a little more courageous and I came to a position that I can call myself a facilitator, and I started to step forward more. We're succeeding a lot more now, especially digitally."*

(Interviewee C, personal communication, December 17, 2020).

Getting feedback from those experiences at the end of every session with a digital tool called Mentimeter, and reflecting that feedback transparently to the participants back strengthens the bond there is between the participants and the community feeling. They can see clear revisions after the feedback they gave and how new experiences structured around their needs. They

actively engage with the learning process itself and willingly keep attending the series, without any certification expectations or other benefits more than learning.

"For me, this place actually progresses as an experience where I can apply my thoughts or what I have learned. Also, to establish new connections, get inspired by what someone says, discover and access new resources, I've been attending the series. And the fact that people from different disciplines in a similar field focus on a completely different field of competence, the diversity there, that is, it really turns into wealth. So, the experience here is a little bit more in the area of development and growth for me. There is also a social belonging side. An environment that I feel belonging to, where I can meet my needs. I observe that facilitation in the learning community is given by feeding differently in different workshops. It feels like such a new design of developing competence, rather than using the word facilitation in the field. Therefore, it is as if what I learned in facilitation meetups, what I actually discovered or reinforced there, in a more courageous way, actually provides me with a trial area. I know I'm able to try new things there without any judgement." (Interviewee J, personal communication, December 22, 2020).

4.2 Analysis

How can facilitation approaches or facilitator techniques help us to overcome the challenges of online learning experiences? To begin with, empathy is at the core of facilitation. Empathy is a skill that can always be developed, to understand the stakeholders of any given process. To design better processes and content, empathy should be the starting point—this is also a very important step in Design Thinking Methodology; one can only come up with solutions if they can understand the situation and experiences of others. Learning design is also to begin with empathy in order to gather the real needs and wishes from the personas (in this case students or "learners"), whom the solution is designed for. To prepare fitting learning processes for those personas, both insights from observations and feedback from those personas, should be used, and even can be co-designed. The challenges that students are facing and their pain points with regards to learning experiences should be considered and listened to.

Most of the students in higher education, as sampled in that research, are not learning effectively from didactic, one-way communications by instructors. There is a clear need to interact with peers within a classroom environment. Learning from open dialogues and jarring opinions are recommended. Of course, there is definitely a need for informative parts and skills

of course, but allowing and encouraging students to actively participate, share their opinions around that information is a good way to make students retain that information. According to the Community of Inquiry framework practitioner Anderson: “The notion of ‘direct instruction’ within teaching presence has caused some controversy in the research (see for example van Oostveen, DiGiuseppe, Barber, Blayone, & Childs, (2016)). Diehard constructivists decry any amount of teacher telling, while direct instruction advocates argue for the efficiency of students being directly instructed in the “correct knowledge”. We concluded that a formal COI is not a social club or debating society, but rather can and does benefit from appropriate amounts of interjections through direct instruction, so as to maximize development of cognitive presence without reducing opportunities for knowledge construction by students.”(Anderson, T. , 2017: p.7)

Especially for adult psychology, removing the walls that limits communication between stakeholders, increases the quality of output nearly in every field. Allowing students to interact with each other and with instructors in lectures around the subject at hand, strengthens the process around the common intentions of having a genuine learning environment.

Otherwise, learning processes will continue in the same unidirectional, conservative, exclusionary manner. Learning experiences that allow inclusive and divergent environments to thrive, triggers new ideas and thoughts and provides space for peer learning as well. Emergent scenarios with different points of view, distinct thoughts, and multicultural approaches lead to an increase in awareness that is much needed.

According to the model developed by Ryan and Markova (2006), learning can occur in the stretch zone. That stretch zone can be defined as “the mental field where you explore your boundaries”. In this zone, experiences feel awkward for practitioners. As they are usually unfamiliar with those experiences, they can only learn and feel comfortable over time. With interaction and collaboration, which may seem like a risk, you can move in and out into the stretch zone and in this way, learning can take place. Those movements into the stretch zone expands the comfort zone with new learnings and enables confidence. Without that interaction and active participation in lectures, students are getting lost in content, lose their focus and attention, and with the feeling of being camouflaged in crowded environments, they can become distracted easily by their mobile phones, thoughts or anything else. In online experiences, the reflection of that behavior shows itself as turning the camera and microphone off, being on the link provided but not present with the attention and intention of learning. If

instructors do not activate the participatory experiences in such environments, students keep being quiescent except a few enthusiastic learners. Nothing more than weekly assignments of lectures or exams is expected from students, and that leads to repetitive and memorization-based success criterias.

In connection with the lecture experience, assignments and exams are generally prepared as memory based, rote learning stimulus, repetitive processes. Students encounter post lecture assignments, where they need to regurgitate the content and learn with consolidation. Therefore, the facilitation approach allows preparation time for students by providing them materials, readings and research so that, if they wish, they can participate willingly and confidently in lecture by preparing beforehand. This approach also makes students feel like adults, as they are and take their own responsibilities of the learning processes. According to the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework, the role of active facilitation derives best practices for positive and activating learning experience by providing students enough space in the learning environment. Anderson (2017, p.7), states that it is crucial for instructors to model effective problem solving and providing constructive feedback, while offering probing questions and actively facilitating lectures. As a result, the "teacher" approach is changing with the "teaching" mindset, again as mentioned in the COI framework. Students are taking a critical and apparent role in the learning process of themselves as well as their peers when the instructors provide room for, and encourage them to do so.

As facilitation brings a feeling of collaboration and effectiveness to experiences, it can be argued that it completely embraces ethical and humanitarian methods. As a facilitator involved in an environment actively facilitating, it can be observed that dominant, inhibitive and authoritarian approaches naturally dissolve in the room. Experienced facilitators are able to use vulnerability as a tool and build on that powerful phenomena. Best practice involves bringing vulnerability to the table. Through being vulnerable, and allowing others to be vulnerable, participants tend to avoid judgements, destructive mannerisms; this can also obscure possible injustices from occurring. As Brene Brown famously has said (in her famous TED talk "The Power of Vulnerability"), "Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome."

It is thus the facilitators job to allow participants to feel courageous enough to share their own thought, idea or feeling without the fear of being judged. It is the facilitators job to provide a space where people approach differences of opinion with compassion. It is unfortunate that

most instructors do not prefer to show their own emotions and vulnerability; they see it as a weakness or human defect. Brene continues with her quote and says: “Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage.” Showing and feeling that human touch, and using vulnerability as a tool, opens up lots of opportunities such as liberation in the classroom environment, breaking of hierarchical restrictions and structures, a feeling of equality and diversity, and much more. Those opportunities let participants feel comfortable in the environment they are in and allow them to feel more courageous to engage with the experience by interactions, open discussions and reflective processes.

Another challenge that online facilitation faces is with regards to an inability to read a room compared to a physical environment. Body language can be hard to interpret—impossible if cameras are turned off. As online meetings happen on video conference tools, the facilitators should create confidence and comfort in the environment and try to encourage participants to turn their camera on. In this way, using the gallery view feature of video-conferencing tools, facilitators are able to see everyone’s faces, and at least have some idea with regards to the reactions of the participants. If there’s a presentation to be given by the facilitator, it is encouraged that they use a secondary screen if possible, to avoid losing the gallery view whilst presenting.

In online experiences it is also important and challenging to guide and moderate the discussions properly. Methods or tools could be applied by the facilitator to avoid participants talking at the same time and resulting in possible conflicts. For instance, a commonly used tool by facilitators is a virtual ball. When the speaking participant finishes their turn, they can pass the ball to someone else by saying their name and then muting themselves. In this way, the facilitator remains passive, and observes everyone talking one by one. The facilitator has a role to guide the group. In other words, the facilitator hears everyone's voices, but has a unifying, extracting role. Moreover, creating the structure of online experiences is also incredibly important. Starting with a check-in, sharing the unified purpose of the meetup, creating space for interactive and fun experiences, using energizers where necessary and checking out, are all equally important for everyone to feel aligned and in sync. Although it seems so easy and non-necessary as a method, the infrastructure it provides can be a compass for facilitators to revise the agenda or methods that will be used in session.

The same goes for the content of the lecture. Most of the instructors that were mentioned in the conducted interviews, were said to have tried to use the same techniques in online

environments that they had previously used in physical classes. Using the same techniques are not sustainable in online learning. Due to the different challenges faced, and the pedagogical approaches that online environments bring about, the online learning experiences should be designed from scratch based on previous knowledge and feedback regarding the content. When it is designed with applicable digital tools that correspond to the need, when the methods applied are prepared for lecture-specific, when activation of the interaction in the environments, provided and supported with sufficient questions and guidance, then the online learning process can become a convenient and inclusive experience that is acknowledged by students.

Debriefs and synthesis sessions are also important in facilitated environments. When students are included in an experiential practice, there are several different discussions, ideations, thoughts that are presented and numerous valuable content that flows in the air. This is truly one of the beneficial sides of the activated interaction in the group. The "wisdom of crowd" approach encourages and liberates the thoughts of group members by providing the space equally for everyone and empowering them. As an enabler of the experience, the critical role of the facilitator there is to gather together the shared knowledge and make the reflection together with the group to clarify and stabilize the learnings from the session. Without debriefs, the learnings from experience or session would not be recorded, and this includes the danger of having those thoughts and knowledge disappearing across several minds without leading to a connection point of meaningfulness.

The online learning experience created during the Facilitation Meet-ups organized by ATÖLYE Academy and the learning community mentioned above, showed similar applications and implementation in the other digital communities in which participants are leading or joining. The fact that it has grown to such a degree, provides hope for the future in terms of liberated learning experiences.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is evident that online learning experiences are not completely new within higher education systems; however, it is also true that they have reached a new milestone over the past few months with the spreading pandemic and consequent lockdowns. It has been the only way to reach students effectively, quickly and sustainably. Yet, research shows that these experiences have not been satisfactory for most students. To overcome the challenges and obstacles that the current online learning process has brought about, this paper suggests that instructors must be equipped with facilitation skills in order to create powerful and inclusive learning environments for lectures.

With facilitation skills, instructors can engage students in active participation and interactions enabling peer learning in online environments; this is what is needed for most of the students to effectively internalize the topics at hand. Experiences and feelings are what allow us to learn effectively. Facilitators can use the power of vulnerability to encourage students to share without fear, listen with compassion, remove judgements whilst allowing them to make mistakes. By creating a sense of community, by creating that "learning community", the facilitator allows individuals to trust one another more, allowing them to feel freer to share their own opinions. Creating this liberating environment empowers everyone involved. The feeling of equality and liberation is not very familiar with students who are used to hierarchical experiences and structures, which is also the case in the classroom environment. Removing that barrier between learners and instructors, and handling these relationships with a new approach could bring into a significant difference in the learning process.

Online classroom experiences should not be considered to be the same as physical classroom experiences, emotionally and instructionally. Even in times of a global pandemic, emotions and feelings cannot be (and should not be) separated from any process, including learning. Methods and tools used, should let participants express themselves, how they feel and how they are doing psychologically; a caring environment that includes everyone in the group can help with self-awareness, and awareness for others.

On the content side of things, different processes, approaches and methods are also clearly needed when it comes to creating and sharing content online. The practice of Learning Design focuses on content-creation but more importantly, helps create experiences for participants and students through best practices so that students can create their own learning process. There could be an opportunity here for universities and instructors to collaborate with learning

designers in order to redesign online learning content together, with the needs and requirements taken into consideration. In this way, students may be able to engage better with lectures. Every lecture needs its own requirements, in terms of content and methodologies used, and there could be a transition period while instructors are acquiring facilitation skills; they could also receive help from experienced facilitators to design this experience together.

The learning community of 700 people that came about due to ATÖLYE Academy's Facilitation Meetups, co-designed together a learning environment through the use of experiential learning methods, is a prime example of what can be achieved when the principles of transparency, diversity, equity and inclusivity are taken into account. Furthermore, "human-centered" design can lead to constantly self-evolving sustainable learning community methods; with empathy at the core of facilitation, it is only through listening, asking questions, and discussing with one another can we create the ideal environment for learning online when most physical interactions are lacking. This case study aims to showcase that adults can take on their own responsibilities in learning environments and can moreover, co-design the content and experiences for learning together.

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