

In-person Learning vs.
Virtual Learning:
The Experience of AUA Communities

by

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Table of contents

Abstract		<u>3</u> Introduction	Deleted: 3
		4	
Key terms and definitions		5	
Literature Review		5	
Research Questions		10	
Methodology		10	
Participation and attendance			
Group work			
Asynchronous learning			
Pros and Cons			
Impact of the virtual classes			
Conclusion		27	
Appendices		30	
Appendix A: The generic Actual Consent Forms		30	
Appendix B: Questionnaire		<u>29</u>	Deleted: 3

Abstract

After the skyrocketing cases of COVID-19, the overall educational process underwent through major adjustments. Virtual classrooms caused significant changes, such as replacing in-person classes or real-life group work. This capstone project looks at those shifts in general, and particularly at the experiences and practices at the American University of Armenia (AUA). Based on qualitative and quantitative research, I trace the positive and negative sides of the two learning styles and analyze the experience of the AUA community with virtual learning.

Introduction

In March of 2020, the first COVID-19 case was reported in Armenia. It led to the augmentation of the number of infected people, which caused the government to adopt new rules, switching from traditional learning to online classes. On March 16, American University of Armenia (AUA) operations and classes had transitioned to online platforms with the introduction of Zoom. The students' routines changed utterly. The traditional learning classroom switched to a virtual one with online discussions and debates. The quizzes and tests were done through Moodle. During the adaption process many students were demotivated to study and desperate about their student life. Nonetheless, some students quickly adapted to the new changes and even liked the new way of studying, because of lack of time restrictions.

However, it was not only the students who had issues with the adaption to the new format, but many professors were unfamiliar with some of the new technological tools. Many of them did not have access to Zoom's "Premium" version and did not know how to reconnect to the class after forty minutes. Some instructors also had problems with various features of Zoom like starting the meetings, unmuting microphones, reducing the background noise, solving the internet issues, and dividing into breakout rooms.

In contrast, some professors adapted to online teaching very quickly. For the purposes of keeping the class engaging, they even changed their background images, created engaging visuals and presentations.

In June 2020, after finishing the first semester, opinions were divided at AUA about e-learning. Some students complained and hoped to get back to traditional learning in September. Some even thought about taking a gap year just because of the virus. In contrast, others did not mind digital life and were quite tolerant about it.

Now, students are quite used to the new tools. Most of them know how to participate during classes through options like “raising a hand.” Professors are aware of how to mute/unmute their audio/video, and how to use breakout rooms. However, the question of whether the AUA community had a good experience with e-learning remains debatable.

For my capstone project, I compare virtual learning with in-person learning, looking at positive and negative aspects of both learning styles to explore the experiences of the AUA community with virtual learning.

Key terms and definitions

Virtual learning: The overall studying process via virtual classes done through platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc..

In-person learning: The overall learning process done via classes that are held on-campus.

Break-out rooms: sessions that are separated from the main Zoom meeting. They allow the participants to meet in smaller groups, and are completely isolated in terms of audio and video from the main session.

Literature Review

I scrutinized articles and book chapters where the authors explain and draw parallels between virtual and in-person learning styles. I examined all the gathered materials and divided them into four subtopics. As a first subtopic, I analyzed the positive aspects of virtual learning. I looked through several articles that included in-depth interviews or questionnaires shared with students who studied in virtual classes. In one article, the scholars collected answers from four different sections in order to compare and contrast the various opinions. As a second subtopic, I analyzed the negative aspects of virtual learning. The articles and book chapters cover questionnaires shared with students, and the scholars draw conclusions based on the students'

results. The next subtopic tackles the positive sides of in-person classes. I probed the various articles that include questionnaires about the virtual group work students' participation, and attendance. The last topic pinpoints the negative sides of classes done on-campus, where the authors deeply analyze the already existing research about on-site classes.

Positive aspects of virtual learning

Some scholars argue that virtual learning boosts students' participation and motivation during classes. Based on the questionnaires and in-depth interviews done at the University of China with 59 students, Lin et al. (2017) claim that virtual learning facilitates higher-level and more efficient learning. Fei et al. also consider that virtual learning influences students' innovative and critical thinking (2014).

Another important advantage of virtual learning is asynchronous learning. Even though O'Donoghue, Singh & Green (2004) think that asynchronous learning restricts participation between students and instructors, for shy and inhibited students this is a significant advantage. These students are often scared to participate in the conventional classroom environment and seldom ask questions. However, the interaction methods in online environments, such as student chat rooms and forums, can raise these individuals' confidence and make the environment less intimidating (O'Donoghue, Singh & Green, 2004). Evans and Fan (2002) also pinpoint the fact that online courses with synchronous and asynchronous interaction methods within texts, graphics, audio, and visual messages positively affect students' performances. The classes are quite more vivid and interesting via virtual classes as they involve sound, video, and graphics that help make the learning process better (Evans and Fan, 2002).

Another crucial benefit tackled by researchers is the flexibility of virtual classes. Based on the questionnaires gathered from four classes (116 students), during the virtual classes students can decide their learning time rather than studying on a specific day at a particular time. Students also have the benefit of choose their place of study (Lin et al, 2017).

Though many researchers argue that the students' feel isolated because of the lack of communication with their peers, based on the students' evaluations from distance learning programs at the University of Maryland, students received support from their professors through e-mails. They avoided a sense of isolation and were always in-touch with the instructors (Barreau, 2000).

Another crucial advantage is that students develop additional skills via virtual learning. Researchers claim virtual classes students develop their technological skills, which will also benefit the students in the future; that many job opportunities, like podcasting, digital photography, video blogging, require the candidates to be multimedia literate (O'Donoghue, Singh & Green, 2004).

Negative aspects of virtual learning

Researchers carried out different studies to find out the downsides of virtual learning. Most scholars mentioned the lack of interaction being the significant disadvantage of virtual classes. A study done by the University of Plymouth (2001) shows that online courses often restrict interaction activities such as teamwork. The study implies that it is not just the student/instructor communication that is reduced by e-learning, but also communication with their peers, leading to loneliness and isolation. Researchers consider that isolation also directly influences students' motivation levels. They state that when students are sitting alone in front of a computer, they are more likely to be distracted if the online courses are tedious (O'Donoghue, Singh & Green, 2004).

Another vital issue remarked by instructors is correlated with technical problems. Virtual learning requires a computer, a modem, a stable connection, and technological skills. Studies carried out by researchers concluded that many online students displayed concerns about the technical obstacles that they had encountered, which as a result, had affected their work—for example, not being able to finish tasks because of the web or technical malfunction (O'Donoghue, Singh & Green, 2004).

Warschauer (2007) claims that the digital learning may be beneficial only when it is used correctly. The learning process requires constant guidance and control from the instructors.

Positive aspects of in-person learning

One of the major benefits of in-person learning is connected with active participation and interaction. In the classroom, students have the opportunity to debate, communicate, or discuss questions with each other. Cooperation, conflict, debates are also essential ways of constructing knowledge (Sultan et al., 2011).

Another crucial component refers to in-person teamwork, which is a huge advantage of traditional learning. Students solve specific problems together, discuss interesting topics. While studying online, students miss out on particular communication mechanisms that are often taken for granted in the conventional classroom, such as body language and peer-to-peer learning (O'Donoghue, Singh & Green, 2004).

Li et al. explain two terms, “learner-centered classes” and “teacher centered classes. ” During the learner-centered classes students have to participate in the discussions. They have more opportunities to answer and ask questions, work in teams, perform public speeches. Those learning patterns are proven to be more effective for students' learning outcomes (2014).

Researchers also state that the learning environment has a crucial role in students' motivation to study. The learning process has suffered a lot because of virtual learning, as while studying online, students procrastinate and do not focus on the classes. In contrast, the university creates the motivating atmosphere for the students to learn (Sultan et al, 2011).

Negative aspects of in-person learning

Through interviews and questionnaires, some researchers have shown the negative sides of in-person learning. They argue that there are “traditional classrooms” or “Teacher-centered classrooms” where the professors have the primary roles. The class consists of long lectures, without students participating in it. Neither discussions nor debates are present in those classes, which is a huge drawback (Li et al, 2014).

Research Questions

In my capstone project I analyze and understand the positive and negative sides of virtual learning, and also the advantages and disadvantages of in-person learning based on the already existing research. The adaptation to a new learning style was a major change in the life of the AUA community, so I want to have a grasp on both the instructors' and my peers' thoughts about both learning styles. Therefore, at the core of this capstone are the following research questions:

1. What are AUA students' experiences in virtual learning vs. in-person learning?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning?
3. What are the positive and negative sides of in-person classes?

Methodology

I have carried out qualitative research for my capstone project. I have determined my main method for conducting in-depth interviews to be online via the Zoom platform, taking into

consideration the ongoing situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the beginning, I intended to share a survey and to assemble additional information from AUA students. Realizing that the AUA Office of Institutional Research and Assessment has already carried out a large survey in April 2020 with 951 undergraduate and graduate students about the adaption process, I decided to examine those survey results instead.

The in-depth interviews were conducted online through Zoom, given the pandemic. During most of the discussions, both my and the participants' videos were turned on. Most of the questions that I came up with were based on the research that I have done on my topic. The questions addressed to both professors and students included the influence of virtual learning on students' attendance/participation, the practical usage of asynchronous learning, the facility of online group work, the other latent pros and cons of virtual learning, and finally, the impact of virtual learning on both faculty and students, and its value on the educational system. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

The abrupt switch to virtual learning was a new and challenging experience for the students and the professors. For the interviews, I selected students from different departments and different years. Meanwhile, the selected professors were from various departments as well, with some teaching only upperclasses, while others only first-year students. I also considered it vital to have the English & Communications program chair, the Dean of General Education, and the advisor of General Education among the participants to have more precise information about the other viable challenges/benefits of the students and other faculty members.

first step of the research process was to carry out the interviews after getting the participants' consent for participation and record them. All of the interviews were conducted in English. The second step of the process was transcribing all the interviews. The third step included

analysis and comparison of the students' and participants' answers, then separation of the five major themes that the participants discussed. After analyzing all the themes, I drew my conclusions regarding the topic.

Research findings and analysis

The primary goal of my qualitative research is to compare and understand the positive and negative sides of virtual and in-person learning styles and comprehend the experiences of the AUA community with virtual learning. In order to have a grasp on the AUA faculty's and students' experiences with virtual learning, I carried out in-depth interviews with five students and five professors. I interviewed students from different departments and from different years: freshmen, seniors. The in-depth interviews with professors included people from different departments teaching either freshmen or students from different years. All the interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Five significant themes stood out from the collected data: students' participation and attendance, specifically, whether the virtual classes reflected on students' attendance and engagement in the classes; virtual group work; asynchronous learning, specifically to what extent the faculty have used it and the students have benefited from it; the pros and cons of virtual classes, aside from the factors already mentioned above; and finally the impact virtual classes will have on both the students and the faculty. I have used pseudonyms for some of the interviewees' names, based on their wishes to conceal their names.

Participation and attendance

To the question of how students' participation changed in virtual classes, all faculty members mentioned that the students' contribution to the classes entirely depended on students

and the way the classes are designed. In the previous spring, the American Literature class held by Dr. Mica Hilson, entirely in a written format, worked really well. Some of the students who rarely spoke up in the physical classrooms were typing up a storm and were involved in the conversations. Dr. Mica Hilson remarked, “Students did not face any problems with the pace of the class, because in the physical classrooms it is hard to keep up with thirty students, while in the chat, all of them can contribute to the class” (M. Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021).

Faculty members consider that virtual classes contributed to students’ participation and attendance. Dr. Raffi Antonyan thinks that participation might be even better than in on-site classes if the class is designed in a proper way. “There are some students that never participate, and it is hard to keep track of that in virtual classes. While, in the classroom, professors see the students, and can ask questions and engage them in the class” (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Mr. Eric Grigorian considers that the attendance in virtual classes is better as no one is late because of the traffic or long-distance issues. Even though the excuses are legitimate, it disrupts the pace of the class. However, Mr. Grigorian mentioned it is tough to understand if the students are present when their videos are turned off; even though there can be issues like technical problems or an uncomfortable background to show to the whole class. He considers that it is not a legitimate excuse for everyone, as even he can find a little corner or white wall at home. Consequently, it is challenging to distinguish whether students are listening to the class or are busy doing other stuff (E. Grigorian, interview, March 17, 2021). Sometimes, when the professor called out students during the Zoom sessions, it took a couple of minutes for them to answer, or maybe to get back in front of a computer, which pinpoints that they may have been busy with other stuff rather than classes (E. Grigorian, interview, March 17, 2021).

The answers also suggest that the students' personality contributes to participation. However, Dr. Mica Hilson explained that some extroverted students that participated a lot in on-site classes did not adapt to the virtual classes and couldn't keep up with the pace. Some of the students complained that it takes too much time for them to answer (M. Hilson, personal communication, March 29, 2021).

For some professors, the participation and motivation in virtual classes are merely the same. Ms. Suzanne Daghlian explained that there are the same four or five people who always want to participate during the virtual classes, and she has to call on certain students. As an advisor, she is aware that some instructors have had a hard time with students who are not engaged, but she has not experienced that at all, maybe because all her students are freshman, and the classes are very interactive. "I think it is harder for the juniors or seniors as they know what they are missing, like hanging out in the cafeteria or the backyard or the park," added Ms. Suzanne Daghlian (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). Dr. Sharistan Melkonian also remarked that "It is a little bit easier for the freshmen as they did not have the experience of being on campus yet, so they almost do not know what they are missing" (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021).

For Mr. Eric Grigorian, the participation is also the same. Initially, the professor taught that students would participate more during virtual classes because of the comfortable environment. However, just like every typical semester online or offline, there are 3-4 students who like to contribute, and the rest just stay quiet. The professor did not like to call out people and push them to speak, so there are no significant changes; however, the timid students contributed more in the online sessions (E. Grigorian, interview, March 17, 2021). While for Yulia, who is a senior student, the participation was different in the sense that it was not spontaneous. When the professors raise questions, students have time for thinking and giving an answer. Whereas on campus, students

would spontaneously answer, and their reaction would be much different (Y. Vekilyan, interview, April 29, 2021).

All of the professors mentioned that if the students want to devote time and learn, they are going to benefit from the virtual classes. Milena, who is a freshman, remarked that she keeps herself inspired; she constantly reminds herself of her goals. Although it is sometimes a little bit boring to sit all day in front of the computer, she just takes a break for a couple of hours, regains her energy and motivation back, and continues to study (M. Khechoyan, interview, Feb 11, 2021). Ani, a freshman student, also considers that even though it seems a little harsh to concentrate during virtual classes, she had to do it because of her aims and future achievements (A. Hayruni, interview, Feb 11, 2021). In contrast, Yulia was more motivated when she was studying on campus. She had the opportunity to go to the library and study with a group of people, which was more efficient (Y. Vekilyan, interview, April 29, 2021). Meri, a senior, also was not motivated enough to participate during virtual classes (M. Asatryan, interview, March 17, 2021).

Group work

The answers demonstrate that group work efficiency depends on the subject of the class and the utilized platform; however, the faculty members prefer virtual groups as they are more accessible and more beneficial. The break-out rooms in Zoom are very convenient for group work. Dr. Mica Hilson has used Google hangouts for one class, which was not conducive to collaborative work at all. However, when he switched to Zoom, it was easier for him to jump in/out of various break-out rooms, silently listen to the discussion room for about a minute, and move on to the next room. While, in an actual classroom, it may feel physically weird and a little bit uncomfortable to stare at people. It is also easier for Dr. Mica Hilson to determine how much time is needed for wrapping up the class (M. Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021).

Ms. Suzanne Daghlian also considers virtual group work more advantageous for students. “It is quite more difficult on-site because of the overall process, students have to move chairs, talk to each other and it’s very noisy” (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). Ms. Daghlian remarks that people sit next to their friends in the classroom and formulate the same groups all the time, while in virtual classes, students get to know and work with other people (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). Dr. Raffi Antonyan considers that some tasks such as data collection are not feasible during on-campus classes. While, during virtual classes, the overall process of collecting data is convenient, experiential, and motivating for students (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021).

Dr. Sharistan Melkonian however, finds one issue with the group work. “I join each group, listen and answer the questions, and sometimes, it is a little bit challenging for me to use the virtual tools, while on campus I could just walk around and give feedback to students” (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021).

On the other hand, it is interesting to observe that all the students consider group work online inefficient. Milena explains that it was hard to gather group members and divide the tasks. “If it is a face to face meeting, the tasks are divided, everyone knows what to do, but in virtual classes, there are people who don’t participate in the discussions and do not do anything” (M. Khechoyan, interview, Feb 11, 2021). Rebekah, who is a junior student, also remarks that group work is not as productive as it was on campus. Some groupmates usually find excuses and refuse to participate in the project while on campus deciding the time is easier for all members (R. Hovsepyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Ani stated that she separated the tasks with group mates during one group work by just chatting, but they did not know each other, and some of them did not do anything at all. She also added that “If my group mates are familiar people, the work process

can be very interactive and interesting” (A. Hayruni, interview, Feb 11, 2021). Yulia also explained that group work on campus is far more effective, as it was easier to meet up for a short period of time at the university (Y. Vekilyan, interview, April 29, 2021). Moreover, Meri remarked that she does not like the general idea of group work, but virtual group work was worse. Sometimes, her group mates were chosen randomly by the professor, and it was challenging to find those members, and second, it was tough to reach them (M. Asatryan, interview, March 17, 2021).

Overall, it is evident that students prefer the group work done on campus, as there is more direct communication with familiar students. When they sit next to their friends, the probability of working with familiar people is quite high.

Asynchronous learning

Based on the responses gathered, professors consider that asynchronous learning depends on the subject; while some are quite satisfied with that, others argue if it even works. For example, last spring Dr. Hilson had his class in a written format, so students were able to write their answers and have an interactive conversation (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021)..

However, there are professors for whom the asynchronous learning didn't work at all. “If it is a dry subject like Market research, it simply doesn't work” (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Even though Dr. Antonyan used various methods like sharing links with students for watching videos and discussing later in the forum, he emphasized that if he did not give a warning that the task would be counted as participation, no one would watch it (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021).

Based on the answers whether the faculty records the classes, all the members do that if the students ask them to Dr. Antonyan stated that he records the classes per need, but he honestly

thinks that nobody watches those classes after, as they either are long or there is no need to rewatch them. He also remarked that it is hard to upload recorded classes as they may be heavy files and can take quite a while to be uploaded (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021).

On the other hand, all the students considered that asynchronous learning is suitable only for shy people or those who have time management issues. Ani believes asynchronous learning is not efficient at all. When she has a hypothesis to do, she procrastinates and does it at the very last minute. Ani also remarked that it is hard to get acquainted with the professors if they only give hypotheses/forum discussions (A. Hayruni, interview, Feb 11, 2021). While Meri considers that even though it is advantageous for busy or shy students, students who have more time to dedicate to the classes can be easily bored and experience a lack of interaction (M. Asatryan, interview, March 17, 2021).

Pros and Cons

Pros:

All the faculty members considered lack of noise as a significant advantage of virtual classes. Students are muted, and there is no noise, “side conversations,” as they communicate via chat/private messages (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021). Mr. Grigorian explained that he gets easily distracted when the students talk with each other during the lesson or on their phones. It not only disturbs him, but he also loses his train of thought easily (E.Grigorian, interview, March 17, 2021).

Another benefit that all of the faculty members and students mentioned is better finance and time management. People do not spend time and money commuting. Also, there are hidden costs, such as spending time talking with people in the hallways, that are also reduced. Mr. Grigorian explained that teaching from home is very convenient. He teaches only one subject, and there is

no need to go to the campus twice a week for an hour and a half class (E.Grigrorian, interview, March 17, 2021). Dr. Sharistan Melkonian also considers virtual classes to be flexible for the students. For example, there is no need to get up early and leave the house for the 8:30 a.m. class (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021). Milena also considers virtual classes very flexible, as she can travel and study simultaneously (M. Khechoyan, interview, Feb 11, 2021).

The effectiveness of virtual classes also depend on the subject. Mr. Grigrorian considers that having a good projector is crucial for his class, as he usually demonstrates photographs, focusing on the texture on the pictures, the colors, the highlights, and many other components. During the online classes, he shares the photographs, and with the help of a cursor, he can move around and pinpoint all of the mentioned elements (E.Grigrorian, interview, March 17, 2021).

Another big advantage that Ms. Daghlian and Dr. Melkonian mentioned is the virtual classroom itself. An advisor, Ms. Daghlian, explained that this year AUA might have the biggest freshman sections. She is worried over limited classroom numbers and the probability of the disease still being around. Other problems might also occurs as crowded stairs or parking spaces (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). Dr. Melkonian also mentioned that there are not enough classrooms for freshmen this year, which will be very challenging (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021).

Cons:

To the question of listing the downsides of the virtual classes, all the faculty members mentioned the difficulties of adjusting to the new teaching methods. Dr. Mica Hilson explained the faculty were given just a weekend for accommodation, because of the COVID emergency. Dr. Hilson considers that the limited amount of time was not enough to get familiar with the online tools, and it was quite challenging. He utilized various platforms like Google Hangouts for classes, and even Skype, Facebook messenger for one-on-one sessions with the students (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021). Ms. Daghlian also was very worried about the abrupt changes. Even though the students were much more adaptable, it took her a little longer to adjust to the new conditions. However, she added that during the spring and summer, the faculty did a whole series of training workshops to get acquainted with online teaching. The training included readings, lectures, quizzes (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021).

For the faculty, it was challenging to know freshmen students. They weren't aware of how they look because of the turned-off videos. Dr. Hilson remarked that as an introductory class, he always asks students to send a selfie with a description, but it is hard to remember them just seeing the "black boxes". Dr. Hilson also added that some skills are going to be weaker for first-year students. AUA has an immersive environment. Students tend to meet up in the student union, in the cafeteria, in the library and practice their skills; when all those spaces are closed, it really does hurt the students' language skills (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021).

Some of the faculty members have difficulties with specific details connected with their class. Mr. Grigorian teaches a unique class – "Photography," and a lot of technical material is discussed at the beginning of the semester. Usually, he would gather at the "Student Union" on

campus and explain all the new features which are foreign for students. In contrast, it is difficult to comprehend in virtual classes without having the camera to observe it. However, the professor arranged a couple of meetings in an outdoor area and also on campus (E.Grigrorian, interview, March 17, 2021). Dr. Melkonian also teaches a very unique class on film. She used to share DVDs with students during the in-person classes, although it is a challenge now; she is trying to figure it out (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021).

All of the professors and most of the students mentioned the connection issues, which is a massive disadvantage. The students mostly complained about technical issues, which also did not allow them to turn on their videos. While for professors seeing only “black boxes” is a big challenge. Mr. Grigrorian remarked that whenever he speaks ,and all the students have their videos turned off, he questions whether he is just speaking out in a void or there is anyone really listening to him (E.Grigrorian, interview, March 17, 2021). Ms. Daghlian also added that when the students turn off their videos due to the connection issues, or even without any reason, it is strenuous for her to manage the class as she expects to receive feedback, at least in the form of nodding (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). In contrast, Rebekah mentions that some of the professors force students to turn on cameras during the classes, which is challenging as WiFi is not always stable. Her participation also suffered from weak connection (R. Hovsepyan, interview, March 15, 2021). However, Milena never had a problem with the connection and didn’t complain about the technical issues at all (M. Khechoyan, interview, Feb 11, 2021). Meri on the other hand, stated that it is uncomfortable to turn on a camera, especially when it is a morning class. “It is a big problem for me to find a corner without noise” (M. Asatryan, interview, March 17, 2021).

Most of the answers also touched upon the issues of limited interaction between students. Dr. Antonyan explained that face-to-face communication is the safest and the most natural way of

developing trust between each other, while in virtual classes, it is impossible (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Rebekah also states that there is a lack of communication within the peers during the virtual classes; on-campus students meet each other in hallways, in the library, or cafeteria, but it is completely different in the virtual classes (R. Hovsepyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Yulia also remarks that she misses her friends and classmates; the interaction that was present on campus was very unique (Y. Vekilyan, interview, April 29, 2021). In contrast, Ani remarks that online communication is much easier if a student is an extrovert, and other students feel that energy (A. Hayruni, interview, Feb 11, 2021).

Because of the virtual classes, Ani cannot get acquainted with new people as she does not know all of her peers. Even though first-year students organized small gatherings outside of AUA, it was not efficient enough for Ani. Ani also added that initially she wanted to be an active student by joining different clubs, but now there are not many opportunities for the students because of the virtual classes (A. Hayruni, interview, Feb 11, 2021). Meri complained that she had many friends while being on campus, but after switching to virtual classes, she started to communicate less with them, and there is no chance for her to make new friends in the virtual classes (M. Asatryan, interview, March 17, 2021).

Impact of the virtual classes

It is interesting to observe that the faculty found out the impact of virtual classes positive. They discovered valuable tools and techniques from the virtual classes they will definitely use while returning to campus. Dr. Hilson stated that professors usually have meetings/duties abroad and may stop teaching for a certain period, but now, as students are all used to virtual classes, there is no reason to stop teaching (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021).

All of the interviewee participants consider that the office hours or other meetings can be done through Zoom instead of meeting on-site. Dr. Hilson stated that it would be more convenient to use Zoom for office hours if the students can't come to the campus (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021). Dr. Antonyan explained when students come to an office hour as a group some students may not attend the face-to-face meeting because of different reasons, such as having another class at that time. While, during Zoom meetings, students choose a convenient time for all of the members and attend the virtual office hour within the whole group (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Mr. Grigorian explained that online one on one meetings are not only convenient but also quite similar to face-to-face meetings. "If the students have turned on videos, it is similar to face to face communication. When I had virtual meetings with students, nothing was lacking" (E. Grigorian, interview, March 17, 2021). It is worth mentioning that even though Ms. Daghlilian considered virtual office hours very convenient for her and the students, she noticed that on-campus students were coming to her office hours more often (S. Daghlilian, interview, March 31, 2021).

The students also agreed upon the fact that the Zoom office hours are far more convenient, as they can organize their time on their own. Rebekah prefers having the office hours via Zoom, as she can join the meeting when it is convenient for her (R. Hovsepyan, interview, March 15, 2021). For Yulia, the office hours conducted via Zoom resemble the face-to-face meetings when the videos are turned on. She feels no difference (Y. Vekilyan, interview, April 29, 2021).

The students also agreed that the Zoom office hours are far more convenient, as they can organize their time on their own. Rebekah prefers having the office hours via Zoom, as she can join the meeting when it is suitable for her (R. Hovsepyan, interview, March 15, 2021). For Yulia,

the office hours conducted via Zoom resemble the face-to-face meetings when the videos are turned on. She feels no difference.

The faculty members also found out quite useful “tips” and designed beneficial materials that they will use in the future. Dr. Hilson developed materials while teaching online, like PPTs, that will be handy for him when he will be back on campus. Even though he considered teaching only by PowerPoints not the most effective tool, he still needs that for his classes (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021). The virtual classes also affected Ms. Daghlian, as they made her rethink in a new, fresh way, how unimportant it is only a to lecture and how crucial it is to have students interact. Even though she used to show certain videos in class on campus, so they could all watch together and react to it; however, that does not work on Zoom, as students can watch the videos in their own time and then respond to them during the class (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). Dr. Melkonian used to share a lot of the films during the class while teaching on-site. However, she found out that was a waste of time as students can do that on their own (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021).

Meanwhile, in contrast to the professors’ answers, the students’ answers suggest that the virtual classes have only a negative impact on their education process. Meri explained that due to virtual classes, she completely lost her motivation, negatively affecting her educational process. (M. Asatryan, interview, March 17, 2021). Rebekah also remarked that the virtual classes really decreased her motivation to study. During the in-person classes she was studying at the library with her friends, which she considers the most efficient way for her to study (R. Hovsepyan, interview, March 15, 2021).

To the question regarding the role of virtual classes, all of the professors touched upon the topic that globally, other universities can switch to online classes so that different universities can

enlarge demographics and reach out to the students worldwide. However, all of them believe that the best method applied at AUA is in-person learning because of the campus environment, face to face communication with professors and peers. Dr. Hilson explained that in order to engage more students living out of Yerevan, it would be very beneficial to have virtual classes, but that might happen with graduate programs rather than undergraduate ones (M.Hilson, interview, March 29, 2021). Dr. Antonyan remarked that AUA's biggest strength are offline classes, and the transition to only virtual classes is impossible (R. Antonyan, interview, March 15, 2021). Mr. Grigorian considered the possibility of having online classes if the students would need it. For example, if the students are abroad, it is possible for him to teach online; however, he thinks that face-to-face interaction matters the most, and studying on campus is critical (E.Grigorian, interview, March 17, 2021). Ms. Daghlian explains that in order to have online classes, AUA has to get a license, and the faculty may consider it as there are a lot of great instructors who want to teach at AUA and are not in Armenia. Moreover, there are some students want to study online, and that will be a great opportunity for them. If the students are working, it is really easy to work and study at the same time (S. Daghlian, interview, March 31, 2021). Dr. Melkonian remarked that there is a potential for continuing some courses online or in a hybrid form because there are students outside of Yerevan for whom it is a huge additional expense to come to AUA, so it is a great alternative. Dr. Melkonian also explained that it is AUA's mission to have more students in Armenia and outside of Yerevan because it is the American University of Armenia, not the American University of Yerevan (S. Melkonian, interview, April 9, 2021).

Limitations and avenues for future research

There are certain limitations concerning my area of study and research. One of the limitations is the survey. I had initially shared a survey with students, but there was a need to widen the scope

of participants and include both graduates and undergraduate students. The survey done by the university's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment involved 951 undergraduate and graduate students; however, I could not use that survey in my research as it was outdated. With a whole year passed, both the faculty and the student experiences with virtual learning had changed dramatically.

Another limitation that I have noticed is connected with the negative sides of in-person learning. I consider that there is a need to do more in-depth interviews with students, collect more opinions from students majoring in different departments, and present the other latent negative sides of in-person learning.

Conclusion

To conclude, the purpose of this research was aimed to discover, compare and correlate the negative and positive aspects of virtual and in-person learning styles,. The study also meant to grasp the experiences of the AUA community with virtual learning. Due to abrupt changes caused by COVID-19, the in-person classes were replaced by virtual classrooms, which was a challenging experience both for the faculty and the students. However, there are downsides and positive sides to both learning styles. The analysis shows that the studying process depends both on the students and professors. Professors consider that if the classes are managed effectively, and students are motivated to study, the virtual classes will be as effective as in-person classes. The only evident problems are technical issues, like connection problems. However, the virtual classes are less noisy, flexible and conducive for group work. The professors recorded the classes when it was needed, so students wouldn't miss any.

The effectiveness of virtual classes depends on the students' personalities. Some students consider virtual classes ineffective, provided the all advantages mentioned above. Even for some

extroverted students it is hard to study, participate and work in groups. Other students work on themselves to keep motivated to study in this new format. Students who are busy with work may benefit from the virtual classes.

Regarding asynchronous learning, for students who are shy or busy it will be advantageous, however, for some extroverted students it is inefficient and boring.

Overall, AUA students' and professors' experiences with virtual learning are very individual-based. Some professors use vivid graphics and keep the classes engaging. Others consider managing the virtual classes challenging. The same applies to students, as on one hand, there are students who benefited from the virtual classes by participating and keeping themselves engaged, while on the other hand, there are students who suffered a lot by having less concentration, many distractions and were generally demotivated.

The overall education process depends on each individual involved. The faculty can manage the classes in a way that students would stay motivated, while the students, on their own, can find ways to be eager to study.

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Appendices

Appendix A

CONSENT FORM

Consent to participate in a capstone project conducted at the American University of Armenia (AUA). This is to state that I agree to participate in the capstone project conducted by Yeva Militonyan. The capstone director is Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

PURPOSE: I have been informed that the purpose of the project is to compare virtual and in-person learning styles, and present AUA community's experience with virtual learning. Within the bigger context of the project, the interview conducted by Yeva Militonyan is meant to focus on the benefits and drawbacks of the two learning styles, and reflect the AUA community's experience.

PROCEDURES: I understand that the interview will be conducted in participants' homes or another appropriate place, and might be recorded on video. Alternatively, the interview may be conducted on Zoom or another online platform. As a participant, I will be asked to explore personal experiences of pandemic-driven online learning. The interview will last from one to two hours, however, as a participant, I am free to stop at any time, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the project at any given point. I understand that if I wish to extend the focus group for more than two hours, I will be provided that opportunity.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I understand that the interview involves the sharing of my personal views and opinions, which will be treated with the utmost care and consideration. I have been informed that I am free to stop, take a break or discontinue at any time. There are no risks involved in partaking in this interview.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION: As a participant, I will have access to all the recorded material for verification purposes. Throughout the project, if and when the material produced is in Armenian, I will have the opportunity to review and verify the English translations.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

I understand that the data from this project may be published in print or digital format for academic purposes.

In terms of **identification and reproduction** of my participation:

I agree to **disclose my identity**. I understand that my identity may be revealed in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

I agree to the reproduction of sound and images from this interview by any method and in any media for academic purposes (which may include webpages, documentary clips, etc..)

OR

 I understand that my participation in this study is **confidential**. My identity will be concealed. I will be given a pseudonym in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

 I agree that while data from my interview may be published, no sound or images from it may be reproduced.

When photographs, artifacts or documents are scanned or photographed

 I agree to let the student researcher copy family photographs and documents for use in the student project only.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

INTERVIEWEE:

NAME (please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____ DATE _____

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a capstone project participant, please contact Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

Appendix B: Questionnaire

Interview questions for Faculty

1. For the background information. How long have you been teaching? What subjects?
2. To what extent have you used online teaching tools before the pandemic and how comfortable you felt with it?
3. How different is it to communicate with students only through virtual classes?
4. Do you teach freshmen? How is the communication different with Freshmen?
5. Can you specify how virtual learning impacted the students' participation?
6. To what extent do you use asynchronous learning?
7. How has virtual learning impacted group-work? Can you mention how virtual learning is different from on-site learning?
8. How has the virtual classroom impacted students' motivation?
9. Do you record your classes and to what extent are they useful?
10. Overall, can you please list "pros and cons" of virtual learning?
11. What do you expect to happen once we return back to campus? Will the virtual aspect still stay with us in some form?
12. Finally, how do you see the educational scene in say 5 years' time? What role will virtual learning play down the road?

Interview questions for students:

1. Please tell me your name. What is your background? What do you study at AUA and what year is it?
2. Tell me a little about experiences of studying at AUA so far? How many of your classes used virtual classes and to what extent? What were your expectations? Were you ready to study online when the pandemic hit?
3. What was your first experience of online learning about or like?
How comfortable did you feel about it?
4. What challenges did you face? From actual to physical ones (Device, connection, privacy, to other emotional or contextual ones)
5. To what extent have you been satisfied with group works? How did you expect it to be?
6. How do you view participation? To what extent the classes have been interesting for you?
7. To what extent have you communicated with your peers? How different is it for face to face communication?
8. To what extent do you consider asynchronous classes useful? How often do you watch recorded class?
9. Tell me how you communicate with your professors?
10. Tell me about your motivation to study? How has the move to virtual learning impacted it?
11. How do you think this experience in online learning will have an impact on your studying process overall? How do you see the role of virtual learning in the next 5 years?