

Between the Normative and the Interpretive Approach: Student Performance Online Evaluation Challenges in Journalism and Communication Higher Education

Aurelia Ana VASILE¹,
Mădălina BĂLĂȘESCU²

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Communication and Cultural Anthropology, College of Journalism and Communication, University of Bucharest, Romania, aurelia-ana.vasile@fjsc.ro

² Senior Lecturer, College of Journalism and Communication, University of Bucharest, Romania, madalina.balasescu@fjsc.ro

Abstract: In times of pandemic, higher education programmes had to switch quite unexpectedly from educational strategies and techniques that applied within a classical kind of college environment, to the online platforms. In the case of evaluation activities, some difficulties were encountered and, consequently, demanded special concern and conjugated efforts to roll things out through the thick and thin of a period that required a high level of adaptability on the part of higher education leadership and management, as well as on the part of professors and students.

This study aims at revealing the preference of students and professors at the University of Bucharest, College of Journalism and Communication Studies for either a normative or an interpretive approach to student performance evaluation throughout an online educational process within a curriculum that emphasises creativity as a main skill necessary to future journalists, public relations and advertising industry practitioners.

Methodologically, the survey addressed to the students and to the professors, and a semi-structured interview targeting professors, have shown that the majority of those directly involved in the educational process in the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies showed preference for an interpretive paradigm to online evaluation. The main reasons for such preference had to do with ethics and proctoring, on the one hand, and with the need for assessing creativity which can be better approached interpretively, rather than normatively.

These results have proved that the best evaluation strategy is the one that is ideally tailored to all of the characteristics of the educational context.

Keywords: *online student evaluation, normative, interpretive, measurement, appreciation.*

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1. Introduction: Crisis Student Performance Online Evaluation Challenges throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdowns

Evaluation of student performance is key to any kind of educational activity. To some extent, evaluation is about telling something about the value of either a process or a product of a process. And, the passing on of valuable knowledge, and of acquired abilities, skills, attitudes, a.s.o. throughout an educational process is fundamental for the survival of both the individual and of society, and the evaluation of the results of this educational activity is key to the whole process.

Therefore, the evaluation of student performance in higher education that this paper deals with is important in order to provide and to ensure the future of highly specialised activities in society, that is, in our case, of activities in the media (journalism, public relations and advertising being the targeted professions) that our students with tackle after graduation.

Within the curriculum development process, evaluation plays a tremendously important part, be it diagnostic, formative, interim, or summative, as it provides valuable feed-back in terms of both the process and the product-wise quality of education. And grading of students is a major incentive and stake to them, as their ranking at graduation, according to the grades that they obtain, fosters their professional career to a large extent.

The necessary switch of higher education programmes from traditional educational strategies and techniques to the online medium exclusively throughout the lockdown intervals in times of Covid-19 pandemic, has been challenging mostly in terms of the evaluation of student performance. The already acquired distance education programme online experience proved to be quite useful at the higher education level, and Ulloa Cazares & Lopez Martin mentioned such aspects in their study (2018, p. 2054).

However, with student performance assessment (hereby used interchangeably with “evaluation”) both on the part of leadership and management, and on the part of professors and students, efforts were needed in order to cope with a few issues.

Overall, the evaluation strategies to be adopted, whether online or offline, need to be geared also to the characteristics of the field of study, as subjects that refer to the field of arts need to be tackled rather subjectively, whilst science and technology related areas can be approached from a mainly objective assessment angle.

Still, within a rather restrictive evaluation setting throughout a lockdown period when all the educational process is designed and performed exclusively in the online medium, the range of possibilities narrows down to match the online platforms. This restrictive context poses some specific emerging problems that faculty (the staff) has to deal with, besides the characteristics of the field of study that favour a specific approach to evaluation.

First, the majority of the faculty (the staff) preferred normative approaches (focused on measurement) to evaluation, according to Lueg (2014, p. 56) for the grading of students within a proctored environment (which was possible in the traditional offline, “in situ” / face-to-face context) for the sake of a lack of bias and of a rather objective angle to evaluation so as to make sure that students have no reasons to question the evaluation results, as measurement in itself is rather objective, and it also meets the requirements of validity and reliability, as Goodwin referred to the latter (2002, p. 101). And this proctored environment cannot be ensured within an exclusively online educational programme.

Moreover, without the proctored context for normative student evaluation in order to avoid cheating that Hollister & Berenson mentioned as an issue (2009, pp. 271-272), and any kind of flawed grading and ranking of students, the interpretive approach to evaluation (focused on appreciation) juts out as a viable solution. Besides the subjective side of it, and somewhat connected to subjectivity, one other possible drawback of the interpretive approach to evaluation is that of the Lake Wobegon effect tackled by Langbein (2008, p. 425), also called the Lake Wobegon Fallacy that refers to the likeliness of “grade inflation” that, however, was not tackled by research up to date. This Lake Wobegon tendency to overestimate one’s abilities does manifest whenever subjectivity within an interpretive evaluation setting is involved, unless there is clear communication between the teaching staff and the students regarding the standards of assessment.

Besides such “human” trends, along with the emergence of technologies that are used in education as well as in other fields, the traditional approach to education “in situ”, in other words, “face-to-face” has gradually evolved into the use of online methodologies (including methodologies of evaluation), mostly to the benefit of distance education programmes, according to Stewart & Deon,(2009, p. 144) that have been developed for the students who were already employed/involved in another full time activity and that, consequently, could not attend the full time educational programmes designed within the “face-to face” approach.

The development of distance education programmes in higher education placed this area and the higher education faculty at some advantage in times of pandemic in that they were already prepared to cope with the requirements of effective online education. Therefore, passing in no time to online education exclusively did not take them entirely by surprise, though the extent of the process did represent a challenge.

However, a switch to totally online education in times of (covid-19) pandemic needed some efforts even in higher education, at least in terms of enlarging the distance education system capabilities to comprise the traditional education students during the lockdown intervals.

If teaching in the online medium has not been so challenging due to the fact that distance education programmes had already “broken the ice” when it comes to the online medium, evaluation of student performance did pose some issues, mostly ethically. Most of the evaluation for grading was done face-to-face (offline, i.e., “in situ”) even within the distance education programmes, and usually there was a combination between online and offline activities (with emphasis on the online) even with distance education as tackled by Ulloa Cazares & Lopez Martin (2018, p. 2054) before the pandemic lockdown that forced strictly online education in the affected areas.

An important and challenging ethical issue regarding online evaluation is that of the lack of proctoring, that is of supervision of the students so as not to leave any room to cheating. If the face-to-face type of evaluation “in situ” (in an auditorium or in another room in a proctored environment) ensures the setting that is necessary to avoid cheating as Hollister & Berenson state (2009, pp. 271-272), in the online medium there is no way to make sure that the students cannot cheat within an examination that is approached normatively, that is, in terms of measurement, or quantitatively. And, usually educators prefer to resort to measurement, that is to a quantitative, normative approach to evaluation — and Lueg resorts to it (2014, p. 56), mostly in higher education, because it is less amenable to being questioned by students who anyway tend to question quite many issues that exhibit some stakes to them. Thus, the switch to evaluation online throughout the lockdown intervals brought up challenging issues regarding evaluation in higher education, mostly at subjects that deal with applied science, technology, etc, that also pose specific problems, as well.

A way to deal with such ethical (and practical) challenges of evaluation, that many professors resorted to was that of an interpretive, qualitative, descriptive approach to summative evaluation for grading,

combined with a normative approach to formative (progress) evaluation to enhance learning and some sort of gradual measurement focused feed-back.

However, if the normative (measurement centred) approach poses ethical issues due to the lack of proctoring in the online medium, according to some authors, the interpretive (or descriptive) approach to evaluation can also be questioned in its turn, in terms of validity and reliability, on the one hand, and in terms of the Lake Wobegon effect mentioned by Langbein, 2008, p. 425), on the other hand.

In terms of the Lake Wobegon effect, educators may somewhat worry about a possible “grade inflation”. However, this issue has not been tackled by research up to date within the Covid-19 lockdown setting, and therefore, our research breaks the ice with respect to such an important topic.

Despite the above mentioned issues, if we were to recall Jerome S. Bruner’s (1960/2011, p. 90) well-known statement that anything can be taught and learned at any age, provided the right methods were used, professors should and could find suitable ways to assess student performance (the term assess is used interchangeably in this paper), be it online or “in situ”.

However, another reservation that may be expressed with regard to an interpretive approach to assessment of student performance may have to do with validity and reliability.

According to the American Educational Research Association, Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education (1999), validity refers to the degree to which an evaluation tool measures what it is supposed to measure as Goodwin states (2002, p. 101). Some authors attach the term accuracy, to that of validity, when it comes to tackling assessment.

The concept of reliability, involves the idea of measurement in that it triggers the overall consistency of a measure.

In terms of student performance evaluation within the educational system, the concepts of validity and reliability need to face the reality of subjectivity when dealing with human subjects (not objects, not robots). Therefore, the interplay between the normative approach, that focuses on measurement, and that of the interpretive approach to evaluation (that concentrates on appreciation) leaves freer reign to teachers and professors throughout the evaluation process, whilst it also fosters creativity on the part of the students who may then face evaluation that leaves room for subjective manifestation of the students abilities and acquired knowledge.

If all sorts of platforms proved feasible for seminars, in the case of courses of lectures and evaluation activities, some difficulties were encountered and, consequently, demanded special concern and conjugated efforts to roll things out through the thick and thin of a period that required a high level of adaptability on the part of higher education leadership and management, as well as on the part of professors and students.

As mentioned above, the main problem at stake is that of the validity and reliability of the evaluation tools that are used. And two foremost components are involved: the techniques and tools on the one hand, and the content of the evaluation items, on the other hand. As a result, the way both the techniques and the (online) tools firstly, and the content of the items (how they are designed), secondly need to be correlated in order to ensure the desired validity and reliability of the assessment process and product.

2. Research Aims and Objectives

The objectives of this research deal with the context of teaching, learning, and assessment within an educational system that moved totally online, at least throughout the lockdown intervals in times of pandemic.

If all sorts of evaluation tools, content, techniques suited the more flexible and more inclusive face to face educational process, in the exclusively online process, not all of the classical approaches functioned any longer.

Therefore, one main aim of this research has been that of surveying the opinion of both professors and students from the College of Journalism and Communication Studies at the University of Bucharest, regarding the challenges of student performance evaluation exclusively online.

One objective is that of identifying either the preference of professors and of students for measurement or for appreciation or for the mixed approach to formative and to summative evaluation of student performance.

The second one deals with the former or necessary / required training in the use of online platforms for student performance evaluation.

The third topic regards the perceived benefits of online evaluation of student performance.

3. Methodology

A combined methodological tackling of the topic of online student performance evaluation is the right choice in order to get some explanatory feed-back, besides the closed questions that usually appear in a

questionnaire. Therefore, this research endeavour resorted to: 1) two questionnaires (one that targeted professors and another one for students) and 2) a semi-structured interview addressed to 5 professors who teach subjects that are mostly of the applied type.

For the questionnaire, the investigated population is that of the first and second year of study Bachelor's degree undergraduate students (the third year students are busy preparing their graduation exam), and the tenured professors. Taking into account the fact that many students/people do not usually take the time to answer to surveys, convenience sampling is the best choice that has been resorted to. Thus, 89 students (out of the targeted 312) and 16 professors (out of the targeted 38) answered.

Five professors answered to the questions of a semi-structured interview that was meant to investigate the reasons beyond the answers in the questionnaire.

In point of research ethics, all of the participants to the study consented to anonymously answer to the corresponding questionnaire and to the semi-structured interview.

Obviously, a larger sample, if available internationally also, may provide further data that would be relevant as to the best evaluation strategies to be adopted within online higher education programmes.

Due to the research context, to ethical and funding constraints, and to the size of the whole investigated population (that only included students and professors at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies), the sample statistics best represent the circumstances within a serious investigative endeavour. The sample is representative for this specific investigated population. Further studies referring to an international area may offer even more relevant information within future research developments.

Sample statistics

In point of sample statistics, the following data has been collected:

1. gender: *professors*: 87.5% female, 12.5% male; *students*: 85.4% female, 14.6% male;
2. age: *professors*: 50% between 35-45 y.o., 37.5% between 45-55 y.o.; *students*: 49.4% between 18-20 y.o., 47.2% between 20-25 y.o.

4. Research Results and Interpretation

The answers to the questionnaire showed a higher degree of preference for appreciation strategies in evaluation on the part of students (figures 1 and 3) in the case of both progress and cumulative evaluation

(mostly as students find measurement more stressful as it implies the use of testing, according to their comments).

Professors also prefer appreciation (56.3%) over measurement (6.2%) throughout the progress evaluation processes (figure 2), whilst half of the investigated professors prefer to resort to appreciation in summative assessment and the other half to mixed strategies of evaluation that combine appreciation with measurement and none of them opted for measurement only (figure 4). Their motives have to do with the characteristics of the subject matter that they teach and that better lends itself to a combination of appreciation and measurement, and even better to appreciation, as students in journalism and communication are meant to be prepared for careers that require creativity, and creativity is an ability that can better be fathomed and assessed through appreciation, that is within an interpretive approach to evaluation, rather than normatively through measurement.

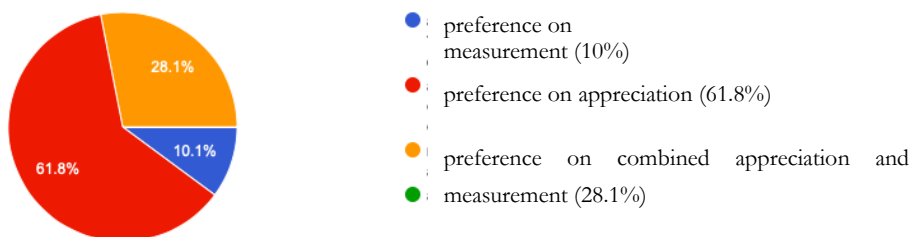


Figure 1. Progress (Formative) Evaluation (students' answers)

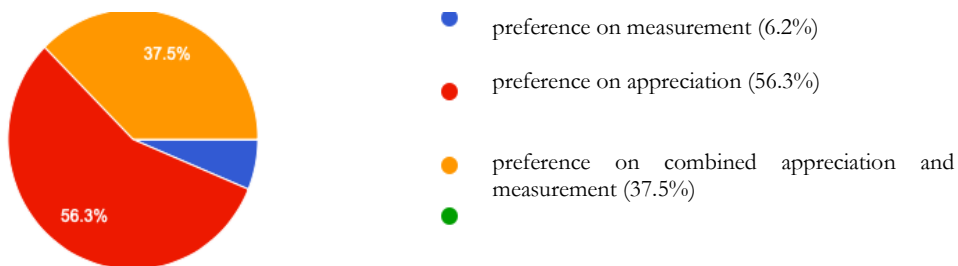


Figure 2. Progress (Formative) Evaluation (professors' answers)

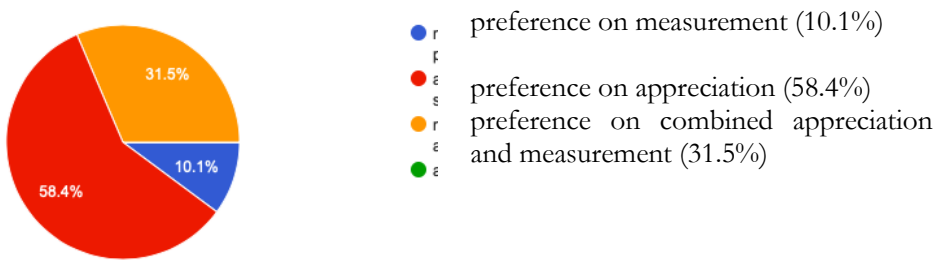


Figure 3. Cumulative (Summative) Evaluation (students' answers)

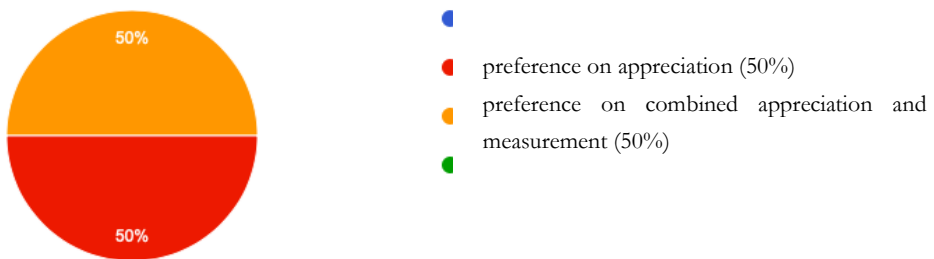


Figure 4. Cumulative (Summative) Evaluation (professors' answers)

With regard to the evaluation challenges in the online medium, the students (figure 5) emphasised the idea that they needed more training in using the online platforms (48.3%) and that there were less options of evaluation strategies online than “face-to-face” (36%).

Professors, on the other hand, showed more concern about the equitability of online evaluation (26.6% — because of the proctoring issues), and noticed to a smaller extent (20%) as compared to students the necessity of special training for the use of online platforms for evaluation (figure 6).

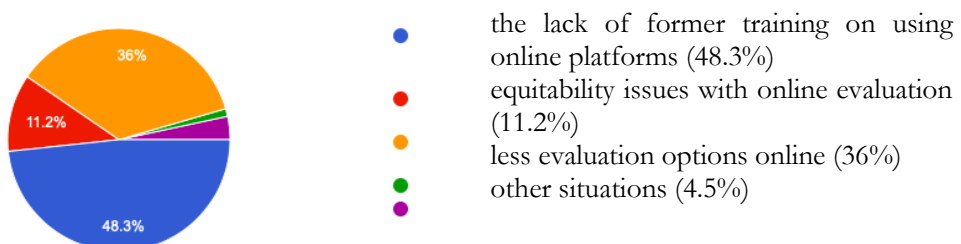


Figure 5. Online Evaluation Challenges (students' answers)

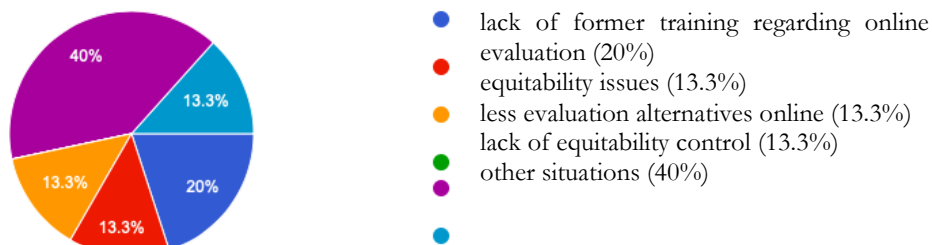


Figure 6. Online Evaluation Challenges (professors' answers)

Professors have specified more flexibility of online evaluation as compared to the “traditional” former way (56.3%) and the progress in using the online platforms (31.3%) among the benefits of online evaluation whilst for the students the progress made in using the online platforms was rated at 36%, slightly more than in the case of professors (figures 7 and 8).

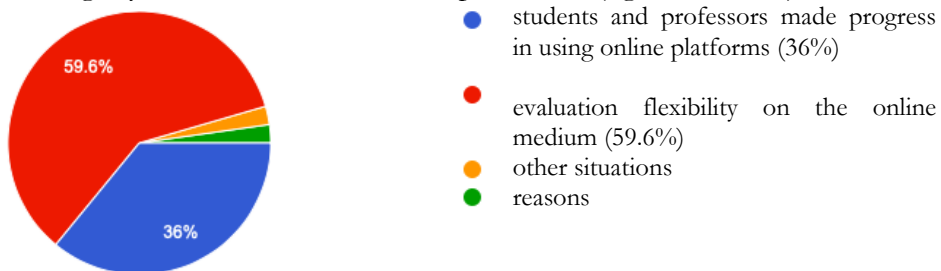


Figure 7. Online Evaluation Benefits (students' answers)

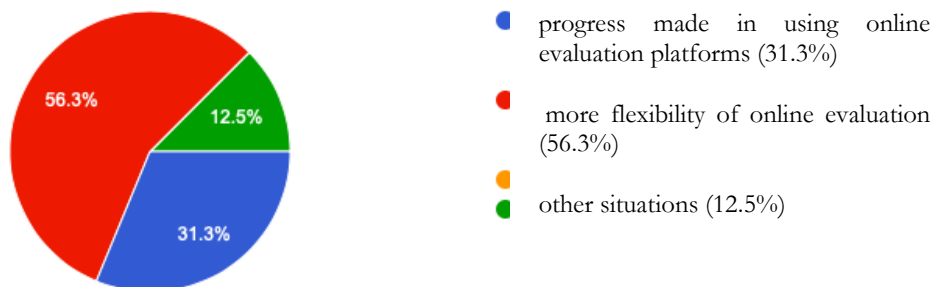


Figure 8. Online Evaluation Benefits (professors' answers)

Semi-structured Interview (addressed to 5 professors)

All of the interviewed professors expressed opinions weighing the evaluation context (their available means, their curriculum context) and did

not mention encountering significant difficulties as they did their best to adapt and involved students in the decision making process regarding the student performance evaluation. All of them used Google Meet.

As the research was conducted by members of the faculty (staff), there was a participative approach to the context of the investigation.

Therefore, the main reasonings within the answers of the interviewed peers were familiar to the researchers, as well.

One of the professors evaluated products/appreciation (radio Vox pops) combined with measurement (and received test answers on the Facebook group), stating that she definitely preferred offline education in general (as she emphasised human interaction as key to communication in education).

Another professor specified that she used Google Forms for testing.

Yet another one of the interviewed professors expressed preference for evaluation on a platform like Moodle, and inclination towards measurement, but she mentioned that also included items with open-ended answers.

5. Conclusions

This study has first and foremost aimed at identifying the preference of professors and of students for measurement or for appreciation or for the mixed approach to formative and to summative evaluation of student performance. One other purpose has been to identify the need for training in the use of online platforms for student performance evaluation. The third aim regards the perceived benefits of online evaluation of student performance.

In terms of the main aims of this research endeavour, the majority of those directly involved in the educational process in the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies showed preference for an interpretive paradigm to online evaluation, as appreciation in the evaluation online proved to be more tempting for the majority of the investigated students and professors, that is, the online assessment of projects prepared by the students.

Professors prefer to combine appreciation and measurement in order to get a holistic image in their assessment, to get both sides of evaluation: the rather objective, and the rather subjective one. Quite many professors evaluate projects as these enhance the students' ability to work on projects on the job, in the future, and these also stimulate creativity, and the subjects taught by the professors at a college/faculty of journalism and

communication have to a large extent to do with creativity which does not lend itself to measurement.

The majority of the students do not enjoy measurement because of the stress when they prepare exams and because they usually say they dislike the possibility of assessment that may involve some "learning by heart", and prefer to come up with their own ideas.

All in all, within an educational environment that inherently fosters creativity in a college/faculty of communication, there is no wonder why both students and professors prefer a rather subjective interpretive approach throughout the evaluation process, inasmuch as the interpretive paradigm is a way to gain insights through discovering meanings as Neill mentioned (2006), by obtaining an understanding of the subjectively created social world "as it is" and as it is reflected by the media, and these all are key to higher education in journalism and communication.

Further enhanced studies on the topic tackled by this research may provide relevant information regarding other curriculum areas (in science and technology) in higher education evaluation, that may require a rather normative approach. Internationally scoped further research may also offer significant support in developing improved online evaluation strategies.

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