



FOCUS GROUP REPORT

REPORT DOCUMENT



Di2Learn:

DISTANCE-DIGITAL TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA

Author: PCG Polska

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PROJECT INFORMATION

Project acronym:

DI2LEARN

Project title:

Distance-Digital Teaching and Learning in the Post-Covid-19 Era

Project Number:

2020-1-PL01-KA226-SCH-095530

Sub-programme or KA:

KA2 – COOPERATION FOR INNOVATION AND THE EXCHANGE OF GOOD PRACTICES

KA226 – Partnerships for Digital Education Readiness

Website:

www.di2learn.eu/

CONSORTIUM:

- Coordinator:
 - SPOLECZNA AKADEMIA NAUK, Poland – www.en.san.edu.pl
- Partners
 - European Digital Learning Network, Italy - www.dlearn.eu
 - A & A Emphasys Interactive Solutions Ltd, Cyprus - www.emphasyscentre.com
 - POLITEKNIKA IKASTEGIA TXORIERRI S.COOP, Spain - www.txorierrri.net
 - Parents' Association "Step by Step", Croatia - www.udrugaroditeljakpk.hr
 - PCG Polska Sp. z o.o., Poland - www.pcgpolska.pl
 - FUNDATIA EUROED, Romania - www.euroed.ro



Report on IO1/A2 Focus Group with Teachers-Students-Parents

Hosted on: 26.07.2021 at 19:00 CET

Where: online via MS Teams

Facilitated by: PCG Polska

I. Organizational issues and focus group participants

The Di2Learn focus group with teaching and learning stakeholders in Poland was organized by PCG Polska on Monday 26 July 2021 using MS Teams tool. The focus group consisted of graduate students of higher education institution who (in this particular case) represented three Di2Learn target groups:

- students
- parents (some of them are parents)
- teachers

Such approach will help us to understand key issues in the area of teaching and learning using new digital technologies from different perspectives as participants have decent experience with e-Learning. They have started their studies pre-Covid in face-to-face mode and they had to switch to online learning during pandemic as students. At the same time some of them who are parents had to supervise their children for online learning. Overall 9 participants (including moderator) joined focus group and finally we had very good discussion on past and future of digital teaching and learning in Poland.

II. Agenda

The agenda of the focus group followed the guidelines agreed by the Di2Learn project:

1. Welcoming note by the event moderator
2. Asking participants for consent to record the discussion
3. Asking participants to introduce themselves and organisations they represent
4. Presentation of the Di2Learn project
5. Discussion based on proposed questions and Focus group guidelines
6. Closing session, wrap-up and summary

Final words and a “thank you” note by the Partner Organization.



III. Minutes

1. Based on invitation e-mail the focus group has started on time as agreed on 26.07.2021 at 19:00 CET. Participants did not have technical problems with MS Teams and audio-video connections however participants decided not to have cameras on.
2. The focus group moderator (Pawel Morawski) started with “thank-you” note to the participants. Pawel introduced himself to the group including but not limited to professional and academic e-Learning background.
3. Moderator asked the focus group participants to shortly introduce themselves and tell few words about their experience with Covid-19 in the context of teaching and learning roles. So introduction round has started.
4. After all participants introduced themselves moderator briefly presented the Di2Learn project using generic, branded Di2Learn project presentation in .pptx. The presentation included short information about the project consortium, project objectives, intellectual outputs and timeline. Also Di2Learn webpage <https://di2learn.eu> and FB profile have been presented as Project communication channels. It was also mentioned that focus group they participate is important part of the project and their contribution is highly appreciated.
5. The participants were asked for consent to record focus group discussion. Unfortunately we did not get such consent to record and publish session. This is mainly because the focus group participants are private persons who have decided to share their pre-during-post pandemic experience with teaching and learning however they are not willing to share their image.
6. After the project overview moderator suggested moving to the discussion based on the questions shared with all focus group invitees by email before the event. As agreed focus group questions were divided into three sections: PRE-COVID, DURING-COVID and POST-COVID sections to analyse their experience and forecast of digital teaching and learning in the context of pandemic. Moderator encouraged participants to get involved in the conversation and interrupted whenever one person spoke too long to give other participants to express their opinion. The entire meeting was held in an atmosphere of respect.



7. All participants had opportunity to share their opinion (answer questions) and whole meeting including warm-up session, main Q&A session and wrap-up session took ca. 70 minutes.
8. Moderator terminated meeting with short summary and “thank-you” note highlighting how discussed topics are important for modern teaching and learning.

IV. Discussion outcomes

It was decided to divide focus group questions into three sections, so called areas of interest: PRE-COVID, DURING-COVID and POST-COVID. Questions were asked by moderator in such order so finally we summarize and analyse answers in the same order.

Pre-Covid questions:

1. *How teaching and learning was conducted in your organization before Covid?*
2. *Was distance learning used at all (if not – why, if yes – how and to which extent)?*
3. *Did you expect such situation as Covid at all - were there any procedures?*

Outcomes and conclusions based on answers:

Before Covid in most Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) in Poland teaching and learning was conducted only in face-to-face mode using well developed infrastructure of Universities. Despite Higher Education law in Poland before Covid already allowed to have part of classes online in 50% (up to 50% of classes could be conducted online) only few higher education institutions did real academic e-Learning. As result only 5% classes at Polish universities were conducted online before Covid despite we had law in place (50% rule) and IT infrastructure was partially ready. Before Covid universities in Poland invested a lot in professional IT infrastructure but mainly on premises (new IT classrooms, central servers, interactive boards, campus WiFi, ...). These IT infrastructure elements were useless in case of distance learning and teaching – at least most of them. All participants have mentioned that university culture presumes that “real” study is only in direct contact in between student and teacher directly at university premises. Finally study online was treated as worse form of studying and unfortunately this is not changing.



As focus group participants have academic background (they are either graduates and/or academic teachers) they referred to higher education. However conclusions (to some extent) can be extrapolated to primary and secondary schools. In case of university they came from – yes, distance learning was used. University of Social Sciences had separate unit called Polish Open Academy which was responsible to implement and manage academic e-Learning at university. University had e-Learning processes and procedures in place. Also IT infrastructure including professional LMS (Learning Management System) and MS Teams (part of Office 365) for online communication were available. Before Covid University of Social Sciences had ca. 500 online students who had most of their classes online. Online students decided for distance learning because of different reasons: place of living, family situation, work conditions, lack of time, disability, lack of time, costs savings, etc. Anyway before Covid distance learning and teaching was marginal in comparison to traditional form of study. If we consider number of faculty members and students in Poland academic e-Learning in pre-covid era was domain of a group of enthusiasts who (btw.) have become change agents and e-Learning leaders when covid came.

In case of our organization unfortunately we were not ready at all for such a sudden situation as Covid was. To be honest no single higher education institution in Poland as well as primary or secondary schools were ready for such challenge. To switch all students into distance learning almost from one day to another was kind of mission impossible. Ministry of Higher Education in Poland gave formal permission to conduct 100% classes online even in case of practical studies like medicine or engineering. But apart from that Ministry did not support universities and school. Unfortunately universities were not ready for that. IT infrastructure (capacity, functionality, scalability) was not in place and moreover lecturers were not ready to teach online. Only few of them had experience with online teaching while most of them had negative attitude to online education. That was not helpful at all and according to focus group participants that was main bottleneck for professional e-Learning at university. Mindset had to be changed - but this takes time. Procedures for academic e-Learning were in place but not for such scale. Higher education institutions were ready to teach online in small scale but not to conduct whole academic operation online.



During-Covid questions:

1. *How (if) your school was prepared to rapidly transform education online?*
2. *What were biggest challenges to switch to online learning (skills, hardware, software, lack of support from authorities, other)?*
3. *How you address these challenges (please provide some good practices)?*

Outcomes and conclusions based on answers:

University was not prepared at all to switch (in such scale) to online education. As discussed in pre-covid section higher education institutions in Poland had formal regulations to conduct classes online however they were ready to do distance teaching only “on paper”. Lack of necessary IT infrastructure, lack of tools and systems for online education, lack of digital libraries and educational materials, lack of processes and procedures for online education. Nobody could predict that from one day to another we must start 100% distance learning therefore nobody was ready for that. Moreover before pandemic public institutions (as schools or universities) in Poland were negative about cloud solutions. Most IT infrastructure was on-premise and just little scalable in comparison to commercial cloud solutions. Fortunately that has changed during and post-pandemic. Only reliable and scalable cloud solutions could help schools and universities to conduct classes online in such scale.

As mentioned before - when it came to digital learning and teaching in Poland mindset was biggest challenge. Students adapted the change (switch to online education) quickly as online world with all social media systems is their domain while teachers were sceptical. At the very beginning of lockdown academic teachers believed to back to “normal” soon so they simply neglected online teaching. Also skills to teach online were not there. Initially a lot of academic teachers were using e-mail as only “tool” for distance learning (sic!). Apart from lack of infrastructure, systems and tools for online education simply they were not ready to teach online. No trainings were ready for teachers to prepare them for professional distance teaching. They didn’t know how to organize classes online, what is difference between asynchronous and synchronous way of communication. Finally they didn’t know how to interest, engage and assess students



online, where to find publicly available digital sources and how to use them in educational process. Lack of skills in that area was really problematic during pandemic.

According to focus group participants to address covid challenges in the area of digital teaching and learning university introduced a lot of ad-hoc solutions to mitigate negative impact. First of all university department responsible for e-Learning (fortunately there was such department established before pandemic) took control of all preparations to transform university to 100% online. So there was single point of contact at university where all students and teachers could turn to in order to get all information and support. Next step was communication campaign. Communication Department at University has started to inform stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, ...) about situation in details. In particular how online teaching and learning will be conducted, which tools, system and resources to be used. How to access and use them. Of course at the very beginning (lockdown day one + 2 weeks) we had a lot of problems, eg. teachers started to use different tools and systems to teach online. Starting from basic e-mail communication through private Skype accounts to more comprehensive LMS solutions (eg. Google Classroom). Finally university has decided to use one central LMS (Moodle) system for asynchronous teaching and Office365 for Education (including but not limited to Teams) for synchronous teaching. All transition to digital teaching was strongly supported by IT Department at University and e-Learning Department supported by methodologists has prepared detailed procedures on how to conduct classes online. All was published online via above mentioned communication channels. A lot of video tutorials (in form of short 5 min. videos) were prepared and published for teachers on how to conduct online classes, how to use systems, how to communicate with students. After one month from lockdown day one, university was ready to deliver their educational services online.

Post-Covid questions:

1. *Lessons learned from COVID-TIME (please share)?*
2. *Are you going to continue distance learning POST-COVID (if not – why, if yes how and to which extent)?*
3. *If yes, what kind of support do you expect and from where?*



Outcomes and conclusions based on answers:

As mentioned many times by focus group participants no single educational organization (school or university) or even commercial organization as companies could be prepared to switch all teaching and learning to online from one day to another. They could not be prepared for such “black swan” as covid was. However university learned many lessons. First of all to start changing teacher’s mindsets into digital education. They should not treat distance teaching and learning as weaker form of education in comparison to traditional face-to-face form. Process of change their mindset has started and was boosted during covid. Also technical infrastructure (mainly IT) should be improved. Educational institutions should not “afraid” of cloud solutions which have proven their usefulness during pandemic. Last but not least educational organizations should be ready with e-Learning processes and procedures just in case second wave/-s of covid.

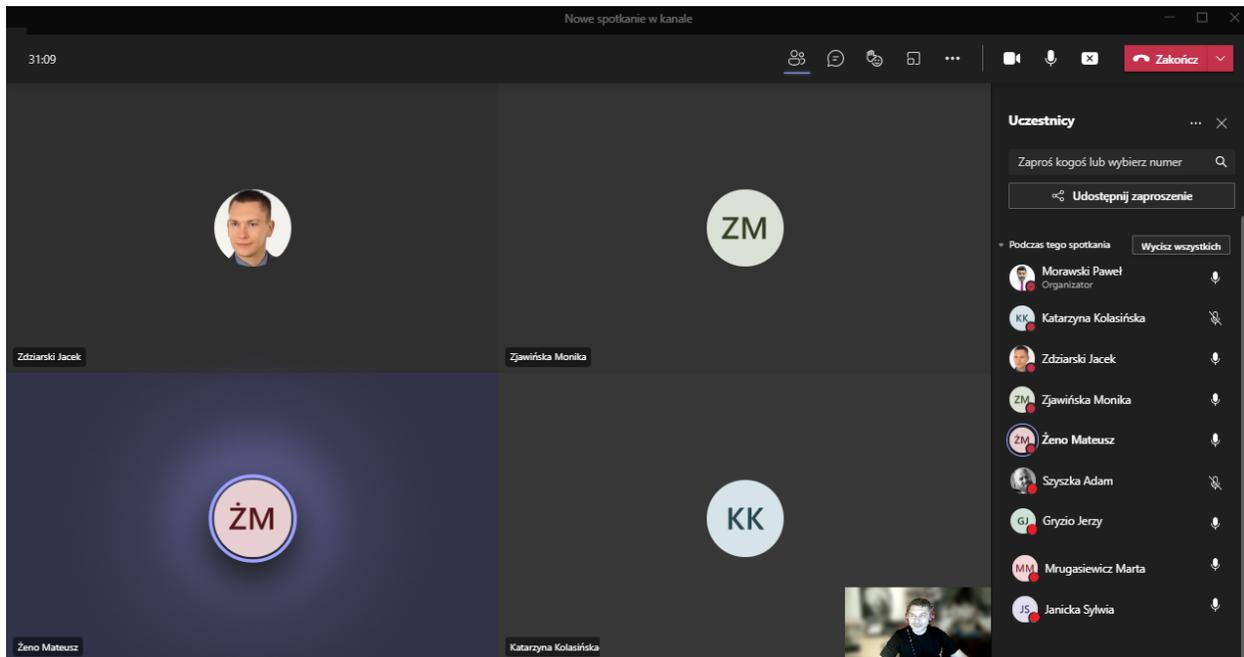
Yes, university is going to continue distance teaching and learning in the form of professional academic e-Learning. Experiences from covid/lockdown time when all classes had to be online showed a lot of weak points and bottlenecks in organization of distance teaching and learning however university saw also pros. A lot of higher education organizations in Poland decided to deliver their educational services in so called blended learning mode. Part of classes (especially for larger students groups like lectures) will be online (Zoom, Teams, ...) to minimize probability of virus transmission while smaller groups will have their practical classes like laboratories, workshops, exercises onsite. All focus group participants emphasized the importance of informal learning in the future.

To make blended learning successful in the future there are some success factors. First of all attitude to distance learning for both students and teachers must change. This is actually happening as they all see benefits of online education. Also authorities at the government level and school/university level should pay more attention to legal regulations in the area of distance teaching and learning. At school/university level there is must for close and synergistic cooperation between all parties involved in online educations including but not limited to IT Department, e-Learning Department and Management. The same apply for higher education institutions as well as for primary and secondary schools which prepare young students to live and work online.

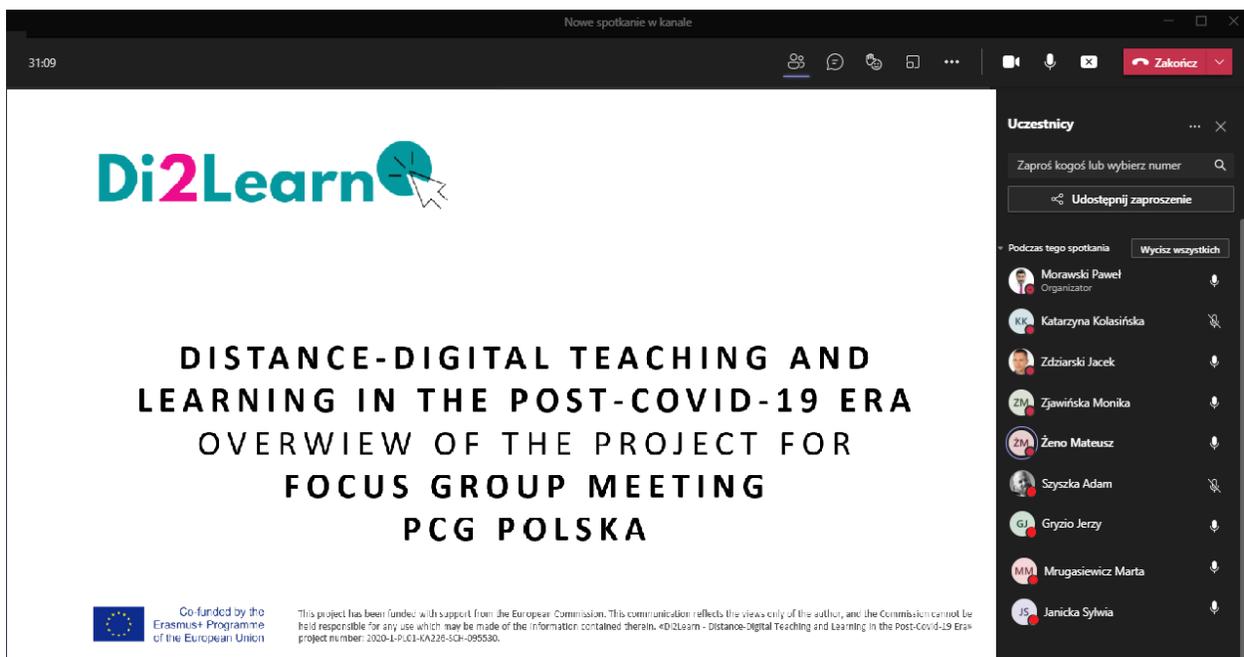


V. Pictures or screenshots from online meeting (MS Teams)

Pic. 1 Focus group participants on MS Teams



Pic. 2 Presentation of Di2Learn Project





Annex 1. List of registered participants Di2Learn focus group

First and last name	City	Country	Position	Organization	Email address
1. Pawel Morawski	Lodz	Poland	Moderator	PCG Polska	pmorawski@pcgus.com
2. Katarzyna Kolasieńska	Cracow	Poland	Academic Teacher	Cracow Univ. of Economics	kolasink@uek.krakow.pl
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