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PERSPECTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A SWEDISH UNIVERSITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 outbreak has had a great impact on our daily lives in many aspects, not least of which includes the education sector. Most governments around the world have decided to close educational institutions in order to contain the spread of the virus, which has required teachers and students to transform their learning styles from on-campus to online. The previous research reveals that this physical transition from on-campus learning to online learning has brought not only technological considerations, but also changes in students' experiences, emotions and perspectives, yet few studies have looked specifically into students' perceptions on their transition to online learning. This qualitative research examines students' learning experiences of and attitudes towards the transition from campus learning to online learning in the context of COVID-19, by analysing twelve semi-structured interviews with students at a university in Sweden. The interviews were created and conducted by thirteen participant-students, six of whom are also the authors of this research. The data collection, analysis and collaborative writing processes were conducted entirely online. Utilising transformative learning theory, the authors investigated how the participants reflected upon the learning transition and on transforming assumptions and expectations. By examining the interviews through the lens of transformative learning theory, the authors uncovered four important themes: life routine, interaction practices, learning process and self-perception.

KEYWORDS: higher education, transformative learning theory, online learning, COVID-19, semi-structured interview, collaborative work, online research.

Introduction

On the 11th of March 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak was defined as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO 2020). Out of necessity, many countries' governments

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had to make decisions regarding the pandemic to protect their citizens from the virus. The usage of the word 'social distance' has become widespread, and many countries decided to close their borders to prevent COVID-19 from spreading further. Other than the overall influence that COVID-19 has had on a country's economic activities, it also has had a great impact on our daily lives in many aspects, including the education sector. To be specific, most governments around the world decided to close educational institutions in order to contain the spread of the virus, which is said to have impacted over 1.6 billion learners globally (UNESCO n.d.). Due to this unprecedented and emergency situation, teaching and learning contexts were "forced" to be transformed from classrooms to digital spaces in different levels of educational institutions worldwide, and Sweden was no exception. Swedish higher education largely moved on-campus learning to online learning, although some universities remained partially opened because of the decentralised system (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021). Access to universities' premises such as department buildings and libraries was also restricted in accordance with the regulations set by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021). International students faced additional difficulties, as the pandemic further complicated the application process for residence permits needed to travel to and enter Sweden. As a result, some international students have not had access to physical school infrastructure in Sweden at all, which means they had to complete courses in their home countries.

The effect of this transition brought about more than just technological considerations, such as learning and adapting to new online platforms (Bergdahl & Nouri, 2021). According to previous research, the social distance resulting from the mode of online learning is related to the increases in psychological issues such as distress, anxiety, stress, and a decrease in motivation and attention span among a majority of students (Al-Tammemi, Akour, & Alfalah, 2020; Gautam, & Gautam, 2021; Quintiliani et al., 2021). These results suggest that university students around the world are facing significant challenges due to this unprecedented learning transition. Thus, it is necessary to explore how students perceive this learning shift in relation to multiple aspects of their lives. Lisa R. Amir et al. (2020) have looked into university students' perceptions of classroom and distance learning using an online questionnaire. The results revealed that only 44.2% of students preferred distance learning over classroom learning, as the former provides more time to study and review study materials, while more students perceived difficulties and less satisfaction during distance learning (Amir et al., 2020). This online questionnaire provided valuable findings on students' opinions of different learning contexts; the aspect of how students were affected during and after the transition, however, was missed despite its significance.

The motivation for this research arose from a research workshop where a group of thirteen international students designed an interview exploring their perceptions

on the transition to online learning in the context of COVID-19. The authors of this article, as part of the group, developed further interests in attempting to understand the changes that were affecting our education, more specifically, how these changes were shaping the ways in which we felt about our education and to a greater extent, our lives. In moving towards developing an understanding of the changes occurring, and, in order to learn about students' meaning-making process on critical effects brought by the learning transition, transformative learning theory, specifically utilised from the works of Jack Mezirow and Victoria Marsick (1978) was applied in this study as it offers a lens to look into changes in people's assumptions and expectations including cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions (Mezirow, 2018). Transformative learning experiences are usually associated with significant life event transitions, the shift from on-campus to online learning here can be considered as a 'disorienting dilemma' that mismatch students' previous learning values and behaviours based on the previous research mentioned above (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore students' experiences of and attitudes towards the transition from on-campus learning to online learning in the context of COVID-19. According to the research aim, the research questions are as follows:

1. How did university students perceive the impact of the transition to online learning on their study and life experience?
2. What challenges have students encountered during the transition to online learning?
3. What changes have students experienced in their studies and lives as a consequence of the transition to online learning?

In regard to research design and data collection, this paper employs semi-structured interviews. In this research, thirteen international students in the same cohort at a university in Sweden participated in the making of interviews, six of whom are also the authors of the research. In total, twelve semi-structured interviews were collected, managed and interpreted. In addition, it is important to note that all the participants of this research took the role as both the interviewer and the interviewee when conducting the interview in pairs. These multiple roles taken by the participants enabled them to critically reflect upon their own and their peers' perceptions on the learning transition, which adds to the reflexivity of the current research. All the participants in this research undertook online courses for almost a year, starting in March 2020, while some of them were not in Sweden for part or all periods of study. This collaborative article by a group of 6 international students also brings unique insights from different academic and cultural backgrounds to the findings. In order to keep the consistency of the terms used in this article, clarification is needed: "the participants" refers to all the interviewees including the authors, while "we/us" refers to the authors only. It should

also be noted that the entire study was conducted online, meaning that the data collection, analysis and cooperation between authors was done through digital means, which provides further insights into the nature of shifting to online learning.

Theoretical framework – Transformative learning theory

Transformative learning is defined as the process through which problematic frames of reference are transformed, such as meaning perspectives, mindsets or habits of mind. Those frames are regarded as sets of expectations and assumptions, and the transformative learning process allows for transforming those assumptions and expectations into more inclusive, open, reflective and emotionally changeable references (Mezirow, 2018). Frames of reference are constructed by language and culture, through which we connect significance and coherence to our experiences and define meanings. Therefore, frames of reference, by nature, shape and delimit our cognitions, feelings and perceptions as they predispose our beliefs, purposes, expectations and intentions. In addition, frames of reference encompass cognitive and affective components, and they may be operated both consciously or subconsciously. According to Mezirow, frames of reference include two dimensions: “habits of mind and resulting points of view” (Mezirow, 2018: 116).

Habits of mind here refer to abstract habitual ways of feeling, acting and thinking, which are guided by assumptions that create a set of codes. These sets of codes embody a variety of aspects such as cultural, linguistic, social, economic, political, educational aspects. Habits of minds are also articulated through particular points of view, which are more accessible to awareness, and shape a particular interpretation. On the other hand, a resulting point of view can be understood as the complex of negative attitudes, feelings, judgements and beliefs we may hold towards specific individuals or groups that possess different features from our own (Mezirow, 2018).

Transformative learning is regarded as a metacognitive epistemology of communicative and instrumental reasoning which ascertains the process of assessing a belief, which often involves critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2018). That is, transformative learning allows for evaluating reasons as well as validating and reformulating meaning structures through reflecting critically on our own assumptions, re-constructing and transforming our own perspectives via active interaction with others which promotes communicative learning and informed continuing discourse. This full participation within the interaction can validate a best reflective judgement (Mezirow, 2018).

There are three fundamental components which facilitate the learning and transformation of knowledge, practices and norms (Mezirow, 2018). Firstly, critical reflection. Through an individual’s own critical reflection of their experiences, perspectives can

begin to undertake a process of transformation. This process improves self-awareness and promotes depth of self-understanding (Mezirow, 2018). The second is rational disclosure. Rational disclosure is encapsulated within logical and rational discussion, whereby said discussions regarding personally held beliefs and assumptions are undertaken in order to focus upon any biases, blind spots in logic, or inconsistencies in perspective or belief, of which allows an individual to consciously address them (Mezirow, 2018). Finally, there is centrality of experience. In essence, centrality of experience refers to just experience. Centrality of experience works in describing life stories, experiences, what is believed, what (if any) faith is held, emotions towards topics, what is worth suffering for, dreams, desires and perspectives. If all three of these components are present to some degree in a learning experience, transformative learning can occur (Mezirow, 2018).

Alongside the three fundamental components of transformation of knowledge, Mezirow further presents ten phases that occur throughout processes of transformative learning, which originated within research pertaining to women's experiences through community college (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978). These ten phases are described as more of a praxis as opposed to a step-by-step method, whereby participants are a part of the active choice making. The phases are described as follows:

1. Disorienting dilemma:

The phase of disorienting dilemma expresses a person's current meaning structure, the situation within which they must conduct meaning making exercises, as not matching the set of normative behaviours and values towards a situation that they currently are in. Transformative learning has not begun at this stage.

2. Self-examination:

Following the prior phase, a person undertaking a transformative learning experience will begin to undertake a self-test of their own beliefs and understandings regarding the said dilemma. This acts in allowing person(s) to develop the idea that their perspective is not the only perspective towards a dilemma or situation.

3. A critical assessment of assumptions:

Person(s) here act in critically assessing their own assumptions, potentially removing or adding validity to each. This further acts in ensuring openness to new ideas.

4. Recognition of others sharing a similar transformative process:

Person(s) at this stage recognise that one's own discontent is also experienced by others.

5. Exploration of new roles or actions:

This phase involves a person's ability to seek and develop new attitudes, actions and relationships towards already existent contexts and present dilemmas.

6. Development of a plan of action:

This phase involves development of an actionable plan which aids in creating a better outcome for those involved, and the context with which the dilemma is taking place in.

7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing said plan:

In combining previous biases and perspectives, involved parties seek to shift their perspectives in actively seeking knowledge and skills which will be utilised to further actionable shifts.

8. Testing the plan:

A critical phase within the transformative learning process, this phase involves the plan being tested and further understandings gained.

9. Development of competence and confidence in new experiences:

Further to phase eight, this phase seeks to utilise understandings gained from previous tested plans and experiences in order to further develop one's ability to act with confidence and competency when challenged with new dilemmas.

10. Reintegration into life:

This final phase describes a person(s) successful reintegration back into life, whereby changes within themselves consisting of their norms, values and perspectives allow a reintegration free(r) from dilemma, with further tools ascertained for use with future plans.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'normal' mode of studying and life on campus was replaced with full-time online learning for many students in Sweden. In this study, transformative learning theory is employed to analyse and identify predominant processes through which the participants were/are coping with the arriving dilemmatic event. In addition, utilising the theory allows not only for us as the participants to reflect critically upon the transition experience, but also for us as the authors to understand the process of reflection and the outcomes of the research, which aids in potentially reconstructing our perceptions and attitudes towards the studies and life situations.

Research Design and Data Collection

This study aims to capture the perspectives and experiences of university students who have been through the transition to online learning, therefore a qualitative approach is best suited for gathering rich in-depth data (Bryman ed., 2012; Bray, Adamson & Mason eds., 2014). The method of data collection chosen for this study was semi-structured interviews, which allows the participants to express their understandings of their world as well as allowing them to disclose how they interpret a situation, or dilemma, from their point of view (Cohen, Manion & Morrison eds., 2018). In this study, open-ended questions were utilised in order to inquire about the feelings, opinions, and experiences

of the participants during the learning transition. The wording, as well as sequence of questions, were altered according to each interviewee and how they responded to the questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison eds., 2018). This flexibility is welcomed and essential, especially when there are multiple interviewers involved in the data collection process, as was the case with this study.

A total number of twelve interviews from second-year master students at a university in Sweden were collected for this study, which includes one male interviewee and eleven female interviewees. All of these students had their on-site university experience altered shortly after they started the 2020 spring semester by COVID-19 and the ramifications of the pandemic. It is to be noted that all of the participants were from the same cohort, which consists of international students from countries including China, Colombia, Croatia, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Portugal, South Africa, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and Vietnam. The age of the participants varied widely and ranged between 22 to 33 years old. This diverse background of the participants adds to the richness of the results through intersections of various cultural, social, and biographical experiences that they carry with them. Each participant was an interviewee and an interviewer in data collection with a partner student. The interviews were conducted and recorded through the online platform Zoom.

After conducting the interviews, six participant-students decided to collectively collaborate in writing this article. We transcribed the interviews produced by ourselves as well as the interviews conducted by the other participants. The transcriptions were made utilising a naturalised transcription methodology, drawing from both Mary Bucholtz (2000) and Daniel G. Oliver et al. (2005). In said methodology, transcription is formatted akin to written language (Bucholtz, 2000), such as through the use of commas and periods in pausing but prioritising verbatim transcription (Oliver et al., 2005), which allows for a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of what the participants have said without change (Bucholtz, 2000; Bryman ed., 2012). A specific point of importance regarding the choice to utilise a naturalised transcription lies within the works of Oliver et al. (2005), who discuss the importance of preserving objectivity within transcription, especially within data such as personal interviews, of which this research employs. Oliver et al. (2005) discuss the implications of enforcing written grammar into spoken language, specifically, that elements of written grammar can be transcribed with a researcher's own personal bias, and such, acts in potentially jeopardising data analysis. With these two transcription perspectives in mind, the authors made an empowered decision to not alter the language produced in the interview, or make it conform to written grammatical rules, instead transcribing it in a naturalised speech-like manner.

After transcription, we decided that each of us would code the interview that we conducted as interviewers. We also decided that the rest of the interviews in which we were not involved either as an interviewee or an interviewer would be allocated randomly among us to code them. When coding the transcriptions, we read through them multiple times to identify keywords and gradually summarise common themes that were relevant to the research aim and questions. After this first phase of coding, we began to discuss a possible theory which could help to interpret and encapsulate the data. The Senior Researcher guiding the process introduced us to transformative learning theory. After researching and reading about the aforementioned theory, we returned to the data in order to assess the relevance of transformative learning theory. Collectively we agreed that the theory might be connected to the data and it potentially would allow an interpretation that would further bring into light the student's reflections on life experiences through the transition into online learning.

The second phase of analysis focused on the transformation perceived by the participants, through which emerging codes were identified individually from each interview. At this individual coding stage, each of us was only familiar with the interviews of which were independently coded by ourselves. In order to find the convergent points among all the interviews, it was decided collectively that one of us would gather all the data in the Nvivo software, further code and draw a mind map so as to highlight the common emerging codes and the potential connection between all the codes. Therefore, one of us reviewed and coded all twelve interviews by relating to the original codes made by the others, in order to make justice to this collaborative work. After this final coding process, we identified four themes emerging from the data: life routine, interaction practices, learning process and self-perception. These themes, as well as the codes and extracts connected to the themes, were discussed among us as well as with the Senior Researcher, who carefully read and approved the themes presented. Alongside this process of coding, the remaining five authors began undertaking different aspects of the project, including theoretical understanding and the writing process. We worked both individually and collaboratively on aspects of the research paper; while individually working on different sections of the paper, members would check and review each other's work, thus ensuring collaborative cohesion.

The issues of quality that have to be taken into account during this qualitative study are dependability, transferability, confirmability and credibility (Bryman et al., 2012). This study is dependable as the processes and procedures have been audited throughout the study and write-up, by all the authors as well as the Senior Researcher. The transferability of this study is assured through thick in-depth descriptions that are described throughout this article. For this study, confirmability is observed through the collaborative nature of the entire process. Throughout the collaborative process, we

ensured no singular person's views or values were given more weight or influence on the theoretical outlook or findings of the research. And lastly, credibility is attained by including extracts from the raw data in discussing the findings, as well as by ensuring that the findings and analysis of the data is supported by the literature (Bryman ed., 2012).

In regard to the ethical issues, this online research followed the necessary steps regarding consent and confidentiality. At the beginning of the interview process, all participants were informed about the study and the intentions for the data use and gave their consent to continue with the interview as well as for their data being used. This was done verbally and recorded with the interview, with the permission of the interviewees. In order to protect privacy, the participants' names were kept anonymous. The names presented in the following sections are therefore fictitious. Furthermore, all the recorded interviews, transcripts, codes and any other additional information regarding the study was uploaded to a shared and secure folder to which only the authors and the Senior Researcher could have access.

Findings

After analysing the transcripts, we identified four main themes, which were (1) change in life routine; (2) change in interaction practices; (3) change in the learning process; and (4) change in self-perception. Below these themes are discussed in-depth.

Change in life routine

All of the participants attested to a change in their life routine after the transition to online learning. The changes were visible in various aspects of their lives. One such change was a move away from a fast-paced routine to a more flexible and self-directed lifestyle. All the participants reflected on what the shift to online learning meant for their own individual lives, and how they had to alter their daily life and learning. This was a phase of critical assessment of their previous lifestyles which were challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I feel like I can arrange my time more freely because we don't need to go to the campus based on this schedule. – Klara

Personally, the pandemic really has slowed down my trail of life... when everything started, I had to relearn how to just take my time. – Joana

The participants indicated that the transition to online learning allowed them to dedicate more time to their studies than they could before. Some of them indicated that

during on-campus learning they sometimes had to miss classes due to time constraints, and that since online learning began, they attended all classes. Some participants reflected on the impact that was brought on by the shift to online learning and took initiatives to change and improve their study planning and productivity.

I still do all of my tasks. I, I haven't missed a single lecture. [...] when we were doing the on campus teaching, I would miss like one or two lectures. So now I feel like I was actually more productive in a sense. – Mila

Sometimes I would be like a bit late when it came to courses and stuff like that. But since the coronavirus situation, it really asked me to calm down. [...] I decided to like create a calendar and really understand by myself when I needed to read what in order to be on time. – Joana

The participants indicated several reasons for the ability to alter their routines. All students reported that part of the change in routine was 'forced' due to the restrictions imposed by governmental restrictions in response to the pandemic. However, some students also indicated that a reduction in time needed for preparation for classes, or the reduced travel time to and from campus as reasons they were able to change their routine. These findings suggest that the participants critically reflected upon previously held beliefs and ideas of how their routine should, or could, look like. The participants examined the assumptions they held about their life routine, and how to alter this based on the changes imposed by COVID-19.

I would have to wake up at 5:00 in the morning and come back at like 6:00 in the evening very often. [...] I would work until 12 o'clock, for example, and then our class would start at one. – Mila

You have to do lots of extra preparations for, for on campus. – Chunhua

Another facet of routine that changed for several participants was the time with which they were able to spend on themselves and their mental and physical well-being. Most indicated an improved sleep rhythm, and a reduction in tiredness. One participant reported an increase in perceived physical health. The changes in routine also allowed some participants to take up new activities for themselves after reflecting on how they, as a person, wanted to shape their newly acquired time.

It allowed me on focusing on like creating myself a routine that I felt like I needed. I started new things thanks to the quarantine in France and the coronavirus. I started journaling. I started yoga. I read more. – Joana

[during on-campus learning] *I didn't really have time to do things for myself. And also because of my body, I was kind of feeling ill at the time. so kind of like starting online courses helped my body kind of be normal.* – Linn

So I just felt really exhausted back then. I was really tired. So this in a sense, this has helped me to sleep more. – Mila

As Mezirow (2018) claims, transformative learning happens when individuals' engage in a critical reflection, a rational discussion and in a description of their experiences. As per our data and Mezirow's work, we suggest that as participants describe their new routines since the start of online classes, they also critically reflect on their previous routines when they used to attend classes on-campus. For example, the participant Mila reflected on her study life before the pandemic, realising how tired and busy she was at the time. Compared to her on-campus learning experiences, she also thinks of the study life during COVID-19 as more "productive". Adding to that, interestingly, participants seem to also reflect on how prior to the pandemic, they were not necessarily aware of personal needs that have now become apparent and very important. This can be seen from Joana's interview. They stated that the transition to online learning gave them opportunities to discover new life routines such as journaling and yoga, which she described as "needed" routines. From these findings, we can interpret that the start of online classes symbolised a disorienting dilemma that imposed a different lifestyle which participants seemed to have embraced in order to critically rethink their routines and personal needs. Moreover, as students share their experiences during the interviews, they seem to also engage in critically reflecting on their previous and current routines. We suggest that COVID-19 shook the participants' routines, yet, the participants used this unprecedented event to critically assess, change and adapt their daily lives. Hence, the transformative learning lies on how participants considered the limitations of their lifestyles prior to COVID-19, which has led them to reconsider some of their habits.

Change in interaction practices

One of the biggest changes for most of the participants was the change in interaction practice, a shift from predominantly in-person interaction to online interaction. Several participants reflected on the fact that, while digital communication is commonplace, up until this point of their lives the dominant form of social interaction was face-to-face. In the context of these changes to social interaction, the participants indicate that they went through several stages of transformative learning through self-examination and critical reflection of their personal social skills, both online and in-person. They

reflected upon how they normally behaved in social settings and what they were conventionally comfortable with.

I think I've learned to socialize face to face and all my interactions of the of the social world and even the academic world, for that matter, has been face to face. – Naya

The sudden change to online learning meant learning new communicative skills for several participants. This transition was easier for those at ease with social media as well as those who already enjoyed a lifestyle with few in-person social interaction; other participants, however, regarded it challenging because the natural cadence of face-to-face interaction was difficult to replicate through video-calling. The latter indicated that the transition to online learning was a shift away from what they were used to while they had to adapt themselves and explore new roles and actions in order to keep in touch with their peers, friends and teachers.

I think actually I think online is easier, an easier space for somebody like me who's introverted and doesn't like to speak up. And this is an easier space for me to speak up. I feel less self-conscious. – John

I had to like then learn to be able to speak to people without it being weird over on the camera. – Naya

So it's in the beginning it was like, OK, should I talk or not? Because I need to wait for somebody stop. – Klara

According to the majority of the participants, the shift to online learning has had a big impact on the quality of their interactions with fellow students, but also with teachers. They point to the fact that their interactions are more limited, and the interactions that do take place are more often between peers that already formed a close relationship during on campus learning. This means that forming new relationships from the ground up was experienced to be more difficult. Another factor that contributes to this is that the every-day or 'mundane' interactions with peers became quasi non-existent. Since the transition to online learning, most participants have come to acknowledge the importance of having such interactions. They often mention the 'coffee break' as the moment in which they were able to enjoy those interactions, which are no longer possible due to the shift to online learning.

The kind of connection that you have with people... like Zoom or like Skype are amazing too, but it's not the same as seeing each other in person. To interact, to... it's different. – Mafalda

When we were in class and we had a five-minute, ten-minute coffee break or some people left the room to go to the toilet, some people chatted amongst themselves. [...] To get those

small moments of interaction, I think helps a lot. Just to understand each other. [...] And I think online it's very hard. – Naya

The social interactions between students and teachers were also impacted by the changes. Several participants indicated before the change it was commonplace to have light-hearted, more personal interactions with teachers. They point out that these types of social interactions with teachers have diminished due to online learning.

The lecturer would often be still present in the classroom so you could talk to them. – Naya

It is important to note that, while the majority of the participants found new challenges in social interaction, most of them also describe positive growth as online learning continues. That is, they went through the process of critical assessment of their assumption on online learning when they were living through the transition.

Before I think it's so hard to talk with friends or teachers and ask questions and listen, and have a discussion. But when we, when it turned to the reality of online I think it's just fine, it works. – Thao

From these findings, concerning the interaction with peers and teachers in an online setting, many participants face new challenges on how to communicate with others and participate in online lectures as they were used to having face-to-face conversations and interactions. Interestingly, during the interviews, all the participants reflected on their previous experiences and knowledge of online interaction. As most social interactions shifted to online, Naya for example, reflects on how she has been trying to learn new communicative skills in order to adapt herself to this new challenge. Although all the participants have expressed being flexible and open to change in the way they interact with others, the majority of participants also question the quality of online social interaction compared to in-person social interaction.

Change in the learning process

Regarding the shift to online classes, all participants indicated that their normal learning process, including learning methods and habits, no longer matched up with the new setting. The factors that contributed to the difficulty of the transition varied. Multiple participants indicated that they experienced professors not being prepared or not knowing how to use the software for online classes. Other participants indicated that changes in learning outside the classroom also limited their ability to learn, such as being unable to access the library or university printers. There was a time of adaptation for these students to shift their established learning habits and routines and they

had to learn how to change their learning process to fit with learning solely at home and with a computer.

We were not ready to like have everything online. It was like a transition period that was really hard to adapt. [...] the teaching methods were, I would say, not the best. – Emma

The first few days it was like “OK, just don’t have to go to campus.” But then you just realise that there’s so much more to it. For instance, the library was closed for a very long time. Or then you can’t just go and print things. [...] I have to start learning to read on a screen because I have no other choice. – Naya

Several participants indicated that their learning processes changed due to changes in the interaction with the professors. They pointed to the fact that during on campus teaching the teachers were easy to come into contact with, especially by physically visiting their office. Because this was no longer possible during online learning, they had to alter the way they would come into contact with professors. Although some of them appreciated the flexibility of the teachers during the initial shift to remote learning, for some students it became more difficult to communicate with a professor or reach out to a professor when they did not understand something during the class, compared to on-campus studies.

Before, if you had a question and you were at campus, you could have just popped into their office or ask them in the corridor when you were passing. [...] With that not be able to happen, you have to wait for the email response and maybe you don’t get it. it’s harder to write a message to be able to explain what exactly you are asking. – Naya

But some lessons, some professors not really sort of organised and made me confused, which, which kind of made me very frustrated because I didn’t really understand. But I’m not sure this is because of the covid situation or online lessons or not. – Linn

In order to respond to these challenges, some of these participants relied on online peer support where they would meet daily to read the course literature, discuss the lectures and feel encouraged to keep working. The recognition of others in sharing this transformative process was vital. Some explored new roles and actions within their learning process in order to adapt themselves to this mode of learning.

We have kind of created the study group with some friends. And that has really helped me a lot in these pandemic times. – Emma

Although the participants reflected on their experiences regarding the disorienting effect that online learning had on their learning processes, they expressed a positive progression in their learning experience as time went by. The participants’ attitudes

toward online courses changed along with the improved quality of the classes and the increased confidence in teachers and themselves.

But now that everyone is more confident with online education then I think it has been improving a lot. – Emma

This has been going better than I expected, like group discussions. when we have the break-out rooms, I would have been anticipated it to be very strained and maybe uncomfortable. I guess sometimes it is, but sometimes I feel like it is like in person as well. – Yolanda

Throughout the interview, the participants express and reflect upon how their attitudes towards the online learning process has been changing. Taking Emma as an example, she reflected upon her own and peers' feelings towards online learning at the beginning of the transition, describing it as "hard to adapt". Then they took actions such as having an online study group which helped them to overcome the dilemma. Later in the interview, Emma expressed her perception of a shared confidence in learning online, recognising the improvement of its quality. During the whole process, Emma recognised that her peers were also experiencing the same discontent after which they developed a new plan together to help each other go through the difficulties when transitioning to online learning. It was a significant turning point for them to eventually gain confidence and competence to adapt themselves to the new situation.

Changes in self perception

As stated before, Mezirow (2018) identifies three fundamental components of transformative learning. The first of which was critical reflection. A few of the participants reflected on their experiences throughout the change from on-campus learning to online learning. They reflected on the impact of these changes on their lives, their learning and their self-perception. They expressed reflection on their self-efficacy when it comes to learning digitally, following courses online and their social interaction online.

Now that we've gone through it, I have a much more positive outlook than I did at the beginning. I was very wary of being able to do everything online and from my computer. [...] will I be able to cope, and will I be able to be able to like, technically do all of those things? – Naya

It forced me to try and to do a lot of things that I had never done before. So, in that way, I learnt. – Naya

As participants expressed being more digitally capable, they also indicated that, over time, they had experienced changes in their perceptions of what is possible when

it comes to digital learning. It seems that, as participants experienced online learning, learnt to adapt themselves to it and hence started to perceive themselves as digitally capable, their assumptions regarding online learning changed. An important factor they point out is the need for flexibility in learning. They found that beliefs they held about learning before the pandemic were challenged.

Now I feel a lot better about it. And I feel a lot more open to online type of events or workshops, lectures, like those kind of things, because I've seen it work in a way, so I'm not so worried. – Naya

My initial point was that I did not think you could do English teaching unless you were face to face and over time changed to realize that it's just about flexibility of things. [...] We have to stay flexible through our whole lives, otherwise we will, we will fall off I think. – John

It can be seen that the participants' perception of learning during the transition does not merely refer to adapting to new circumstances but also includes reframing previous assumptions, exploring new actions, and developing confidence and competence in online learning. The critical reflection on changes in the learning process gives insight that learning takes place in different forms, styles or ways, and that the way participants learn or know can be changed or take to other forms, ways.

Discussion

Through re-analysing Mezirow's three components: critical reflection, rational disclosure and centrality of experience, which congregate within transformative learning experiences, the results above provided critical insight into each of the three. This allows each stage of the process: interviewing, researching and writing, to display and carry meaningful shifts in participants' perspectives and frames of reference. In understanding what Mezirow describes as being the mediums of transmitting frames of reference (Mezirow, 2018) – language, personal experience and culture were all brought into the collected data and as such produce readable results from which researchers can ascertain shifts of reference. From the analysed data extrapolated above, the first step in the process of critical reflection arises. Each of the participants discussed at length their own reflections of the situation and what it meant to each of them personally. This allows each to begin to undertake the process of critically reflecting upon their own experiences during the shift of the educational medium throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarding the first component – critical reflection – the participants acted in undertaking the process of understanding their own standpoints regarding the changes in lifestyle, educational practices, learning processes and interaction strategies.

Specific quotes specifically aid in shining light on this first step in action, through the participants choosing to reflect upon either the surprise in positivity of their interview output or a deeper understanding of the difficulties felt during the interview process.

In terms of rational disclosure, it is encapsulated within the research process itself. Participants both as interviewers and interviewees undertook the critical process of rational disclosure, whereby discussions regarding perspectives, norms and values arose organically within the semi-structured interviews utilised, and most importantly within the realms of theory, allowed participants to consciously address their own potential biases and blind spots through logical discussion. This second component is strengthened within this research through the understanding that participants acted both as interviewers and interviewees. Thus, allowing access to further discussions which sought to focus on a different set of biases and perspectives, potentially allowing participants to further challenge their own held beliefs. This is observable through interviewer redressing and acknowledgement of perspectives and beliefs that may not arise naturally as their own currently held perspectives and beliefs. Furthermore, the other significant element that also adds to the uniqueness of this research is that we, six of the participants, analysed and coded our interviews, which also enabled us to address the situation through a critical lens.

Finally, the third component regarding centrality of experience arose organically throughout the interviews. Interviewees, and sometimes interviewers, acted by frequently sharing stories pertaining to real world experiences which were brought about through COVID-19, and did not always revolve around the shared commonality of being university students. These shared experiences created nodes of knowledge with which participants own norms and values are able to read from, and as such, are able to transform through the process of self-understanding and evaluation of the environmental changes brought with the drastic changes instilled through the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, the interview process itself can be regarded as an agent of transformative learning within the scopes of this research, due to the nature of rational discussion and sharing of experiences being encapsulated throughout interviews.

What can be observed from the above discussion is that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an environment which began shifting participants' lives and approaches of learning. This dilemma event was perceived by each participant as being present and catalysed processes of reflection within each participant pertaining to their lifestyles, learning styles, values and norms. To take an example of change in life routine, many participants expressed positive aspects such as not having to prepare to go out or having more free time as a result of online learning. This can be considered as phase five of the transformative learning process as the participants are in the process of "developing new attitudes and relationships" towards the existing dilemma. In addition, the

results also revealed that some participant students reside in different phases in regard to different issues. For example, although the interviewee Naya expressed a positive attitude in terms of life routine shifts, when it comes to online learning experiences, she expressed more difficulties, such as difficulties to utilise online materials to read. From this, it can be interpreted that Naya is in phase five concerning life routine, and between phase one and two with regard to online learning experience, which means that she is still in the process of the meaning making exercise and of self-examination in the online learning situation.

Interviews as agents of transformative learning can be further understood through phase four of Mezirow's (Mezirow & Marsick, 1978) transformative learning process—recognition of others sharing a similar transformative process. Some participants displayed higher amounts of dismay towards the dilemma at hand with COVID-19, whereas other participants discussed understandings of how things 'could be' and presented perceived shifts regarding the potential future of educational programmes. These discussed shifts also included overt statements where participants' perspectives had changed dramatically, pertaining potentially to said participants sitting towards the latter end of Mezirow's 10-step process within their own developments towards COVID-19 study life. In addition, as both authors and participants, analysing our own interviews also allowed us to further recognise a shared transformative process. For example, analysing the data made us realise that although we had some difficulties in adapting to online learning, such as not being able to interact with other students or professors easily, many of us also held positive attitudes towards the transition such as being able to have more free time to take care of our needs. This recognition also helped us to continuously reflect upon our perspectives towards the situated conditions and learning process.

Limitations and Delimitations

Concerning the limitations of this study, the language used in the interview should be considered one since English is not the first language of most of the participants, which could limit their expression. The language, however, can also be regarded as a strength through which participants from different countries were able to share common understandings. In addition, we took part in this research not only as authors, but also as interviewees and interviewers, which could be considered a flaw of this research. However, participating in the research both as an author and interviewee/interviewer allowed each of us to face our emotions by taking part in the interview and to critically reflect upon ourselves objectively by conducting interviews and analysing them, which helped us to engage in the critical assessment of our own assumptions.

Moreover, this collaborative work allowed us to be constantly reviewed by one another through which the influence of personal values could be prevented to a better extent. Finally, the experiences the participants in this article had were also highly influenced by the university's own approach in shifting learning from on campus to online. Hence, the students' experiences are greatly influenced by their own particular contexts. This article does not aim to generalise every students' experience in transitioning to online learning in the period of the pandemic.

Conclusion and Reflection

Throughout the interviews the participants reflected on the transition to online learning and the impact this has had on multiple aspects of their lives. To be specific, their views and beliefs regarding their learning habits and social interactions in the context of education have evolved due to the experience with the shift to online learning. All participants were found to have faced challenges during and after the transition to online learning. Every participant indicated that governmental restrictions related to social distancing were a significant factor, and that this led to complexities within social interaction such as finding conversational cadence, ease of interaction with teachers, and building meaningful relationships. Other challenges were related to the learning process itself. At the start of the transition the participants found that teachers were not well-prepared to run seminars and lectures online and that the COVID-19 restrictions, such as the closing of the library, hampered their ability to learn. This has in turn led to several participants finding it challenging to study from home while also doing everything else, such as working, from home. The last main finding of this study is four themes of change that the participants have experienced during the transition, namely: change in life routine, change in interaction practices, change in the learning process, and change in self-perception. These changes were often responses to the challenges described earlier and resolved into critical reflection on life routine, interaction practices, learning process and self-perceptions.

It has been almost a year since the transition to online learning started at this Swedish university. The research project was started in November 2020, first the interviews were conducted and then the process of analysing and writing started. We, as both authors and participants, are at the time of writing, still experiencing online learning, and some of us are confronted with a certain weariness regarding this situation, especially now that we are undergoing the process of writing our Masters' thesis without being able to gather for further support. Yet, while coding and reviewing the results of this research, we were reminded of our earlier outlook on online learning, it also allowed us to further critically-reflect on ourselves and the situation. We were also able to further

self-evaluate the positives as well as negatives of this situation, examining our personal development and evolution of our own perspectives through time by participating in this research as the authors. The whole process of the making of this article was a true exercise of critical self-reflection that reminds us that learning is a constant ongoing process. The pandemic is not over. We still face the effects of this global situation and we are still learning how to navigate our lives keeping in mind what we have learned while conducting this research and reflecting on the process of learning. It means that transformative learning continues for both us the participants of the study and the authors of the article.

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