

## **École Universitaire Internationale Adapting to COVID-19**

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École Universitaire Internationale's Research and Higher Education Institute in Peace and Security studies (based in Rome, Italy), provides programs mainly in the fields of Operational Intelligence, Hostage Negotiation, Psychological Operations, and Operational Counterterrorism. All of the Institute's programs have two types of audiences: students and practitioners. Practitioners attending the Institute include police, military, and intelligence officials. A wide range of students come to the Institute from diverse backgrounds, which pose the same challenges of any large university setting.

### **COVID-19 CURTAILS TRADITIONAL FACE-TO-FACE CLASSES**

Every program was taught in traditional face-to-face (F2F) settings until the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed all F2F class delivery and safe social (physical) distancing became the norm. Since then, every program and course at the Institute was delivered via live lectures through online (OL) platforms.

At the time of the initial outbreak, ~150 students were enrolled full time at the Institute. Having to switch to OL classes created numerous challenges, given the Institute's existing commitment to F2F education and the traveling restrictions in force at the time. Together, these led to a significant modification of how classes were delivered and to some degree, what content was delivered to students.

On the one hand, a pivot to OL classes enabled students to complete their programs. On the other hand, OL classes changed the student-professor relationship that characterized F2F lectures. Though OL platforms have the capability to use microphones and chat sessions to ask questions, these tools carry some problems: it gave students the option to unintentionally speak over other participants. For this reason, students were encouraged to use the chat function to submit their questions. The chat function proved a fair and effective way to solicit students' questions, comments, and concerns. However, people's thought processes are different, and they may ask questions that are not in line with the current discussion, sometimes resulting in disruptions to the flow of the class. Instructors/moderators remedied this situation by returning to student questions, comments, and concerns when appropriate or addressing the matters at a later time as is often the case in traditional F2F classes.

COVID-19 changed our teaching modalities. Both the shift to OL learning and the new conditions in which our students found themselves (traditional students quarantined at home for an indefinite length of time and practitioners operating under pandemic conditions) combined to

create a challenging and perhaps opportunistic learning environment. Staff and faculty positively responded in order to meet a rapidly changing set of student needs. For example, prior to running their first OL classes, faculty were trained by the Head of Faculty on how to deliver their lessons via OL platforms and the challenges they would likely face as well as means by which to address the challenges. This effort was comprehensive and included soliciting the expertise of qualified Institute faculty, such as faculty versed in applied neuroscience were consulted for their insights into how the new learning environment might impact student learning.

### **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

Another accommodation to the changed learning environment included actual class structure. In order for the OL lectures to be successful, the Institute decided to create a mandatory 10-minute break for every 50 minutes of lecture. Usually in an in-class lecture, the professor is able to read the class (students' body language) and understand whether to change the rhythm of the lecture (in order to regain students' attention) or to take small five-minute breaks in order to have the class rest before resuming the lecture. With OL teaching, the rules changed. It goes without saying that the attention span for OL learners is quite different compared to the attention span of F2F learners. Students that are physically in class tend to be more engaged with the class because the professor can engage with them more directly and personally. Behind a computer monitor, students' attention physiologically decreases because as they are viewing and listening to their professors via computer screens they are being distracted by continuous external inputs. The use of a laptop itself already leads to an altered perception of engagement because certain parts of the brain are more active in F2F interactions than in OL interactions and need to be met with specific engagement strategies (Whitman & Kelleher, 2016). For example, in shaping OL lectures, professors must pay greater attention to modifying and adapting their voice tone and speech rhythm because of the speed with which both attention span and listening decrease. In addition to this, the Institute's faculty learned that the human left and right ear perceive sound differently and, contrary to in-person lectures, students could use earphones, thus perceiving the lecture differently than they would in F2F settings.

Furthermore, Italy was one of the first countries to be directly impacted by COVID-19 and to impose drastic social distancing and quarantining measures; this peculiar time was taken into consideration in regard to what students and professors were facing. The prolonged quarantine resulted in significant shifts in cultural norms. For example, eating habits changed due to social distancing requirements, which in turn contributed to changes in brain chemistry, energy access, and ultimately brain functionality. This combination changed lifestyle habits; the long period of home quarantine that prevented (or at least curtailed) normal patterns of social interactions, with the high level of fear and anxiety lasting for a considerable period of time, had a great influence on the entire population.

For these reasons, and since the advent of the national quarantine, our University decided to provide free of charge daily one-hour OL lectures on myriad topics that varied, and perhaps most importantly, was a place where students could be in contact with others and facilitate group interaction. We also provided a place in which students could continue to practice thinking and reasoning, essentially a gym for the body and brain to keep fit. All were provided to our students

and to those who wanted to join, in addition to our regular programs. The University was aware of the slowing effect on brain activity that a long quarantine and lack of social interaction can induce, and it was decided to share this initiative nationally and internationally. Thanks to the work of our faculty and to those that internationally had the will and heart to help, the initiative was carried out Monday through Sunday for the duration of the quarantine. This effort created and maintained a fixed daily schedule that allowed people to resume some normality and not find themselves always thinking of the pandemic and the fear and anxiety it creates. This was critical to the emotional health of our campus since at that time, the only news broadcasted on television or in the newspapers seemed to be about COVID-19 and the pandemic. Our programs were also aimed at providing a consistent and reliable respite to the news cycle. These efforts had a great response from those who participated. Participants created beautiful teams of discussion. Encouragingly, many still ask if these initiatives will resume even now that the quarantine has ceased.

### **CONCLUSION**

COVID-19 challenged us to reschedule and reshape lectures, both for the faculty (especially practitioners and operatives that often teach but are not comfortable teaching OL) and for students that were not used to an OL relationship with their professors. Our Spring semester experience also influenced our Summer and Fall course scheduling. Summer and Fall programs were scheduled to be a mix of OL and F2F lectures in compliance with what National Italian regulations allow. For example, to maintain program quality, OL programs could not be as large as F2F programs. So larger classes would need to be divided into separate sections, which adds difficulty in terms of course coverage. Interestingly, the Institute's hope is to be able to restore the F2F course schedule as soon as pandemic management allows, even if OL lectures have resulted in an effective new way of offering courses, maintaining contact, and encouraging engagement with students.

**REFERENCES**

Whitman, G. & Kelleher, I. (2016). *Neuroteach: Brain science and the future of education*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers