Survey for Students in the Department of English and American Studies: Digital Learning in a Pandemic
Wintersemester 20/21
Report: April 2021

As Studentische Hilfskräfte in the Department of English and American Studies and in our capacity providing support during the digital semester, we created this survey in the hopes that the department would:

a) get a better idea of how students are doing and what the student experience in the pandemic has been like;
b) be able to incorporate this feedback into the planning of courses for the summer semester;
c) to understand the long-term potential of online teaching and learning to enhance the university experience.

116 students responded to the survey. Students’ responses were anonymous and were coded and summarized by survey authors Julia Dutschke and Daphne Beers.

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

How many courses did you take this semester?
How many classes have been asynchronous?

How many classes contained a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous methods?
Have you changed your course load amount / LP either up or down due to the digital semester? (1 = a lot less LP and 5 = a lot more LP)

Did you start studying in part because of the pandemic? Have you considered stopping or pausing your studies because of the pandemic?
2. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF DIGITAL LEARNING

To what extent did you experience digital teaching in a positive way?

When discussing what aspects of digital teaching they found to be positive, students at HU in the department of English and American Studies overwhelmingly stated that the digital semester offered them additional flexibility and ability to manage their own time. In particular, students noted that this flexibility allowed them to balance responsibilities outside of their studies, especially employment and parenting. Many students found that the time and energy they saved in not commuting to University was a win for their schedules and time.

Students were generally pleased with the implementation of digital teaching in the summer semester, even as many saw the digital semester as an unfortunate necessity: in particular they found the increase in material available online--like pre-recorded videos, scripts of lectures that they could annotate, and the full usage of Moodle--to be helpful. They found the asynchronous format to be most aligned for lectures, while for seminars most students mentioned regular Zoom meetings worked best. A few said that a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous methods was helpful for some courses. Several students mentioned that the courses were rich and interesting despite the crisis situation.
Many students noted that the communication with and support from professors, staff and other teachers was excellent, and were thankful for the extra support during the digital semester(s), even as they recognized that teachers and staff were also struggling in the pandemic. According to students, some teachers did a fantastic job of adapting their seminars or lectures for the digital semester, such that they weren't trying to teach an analog course in a digital way. These teachers were successful in finding a balance between too little and too much work, and not only asked for but implemented student feedback along the way. Some found regular Zoom meetings helpful, while others found the usage of breakout rooms to be particularly appropriate. Several students wrote that the student support initiatives (Jessica Walter’s tutorial, the student organizers of the Transatlantic symposium in MA Amerikanistik) were particularly helpful.

Some students reported individual benefits to the digital semester, including a decrease in nervousness when speaking and less stress or pressure than when attending courses in person, and, for some, the home environment being more conducive to studying. Students who formed study groups outside of formal Uni structures (through Whatsapp or other avenues) found these helpful.

**To what extent did you experience digital teaching in a negative way? What has been difficult/challenging for you about online learning this semester?**

Of all the negative aspects of the digital semester that students mentioned, the most often mentioned was a feeling of disconnection and anonymity among students. Students shared that the decrease in social as well as academic interaction with fellow students and with professors and staff led to a clear decrease in the academic richness of their studies. Many mentioned that academic and theoretical discussion online—whether through synchronous or asynchronous methods—became challenging and/or nearly impossible. In their opinion, this lack of discussion resulted from a spectrum of factors, including difficulty participating in class due to anxiety and shortened class times, lack of spontaneous communication, and lack of informal communication before and after class, as happens in in-person teaching. Some students mentioned that the anonymity of the digital semester was a catalyst for this difficulty in participation. Despite some students mentioning in the above section that professors and staff were readily available and very supportive, a sizable group of students felt that contact between teachers and students suffered in the digital semester and that professors were less available, with one student stating that some asynchronous courses occurred with no meetings with
professors. The lack of feedback from teachers, some students shared, led to them being less excited about the courses and feeling unprepared for exams and other assignments.

Many students found that the workload in the digital semester was more—or was more difficult to manage—in the digital semester. They found that in many courses, there were too many smaller, weekly assignments that were checked more often, often added to balance out time cut from Zoom sessions or to account for smaller reading assignments. Unfortunately for many, these weekly assignments led to a surveillance environment that felt more like school than university. Additionally, they mentioned that there was too much to read and that some teachers expected them to be available a lot of the time, including outside of the courses’ meeting times, when some teachers requested many additional meetings.

Technical problems were a huge barrier for many, including slow or nonexistent internet or lack of technical equipment. A few students mentioned that teachers’ technology (slow internet, for example, or a low-quality microphone) led to a challenging learning environment, and that some teachers were not very understanding when students had technical problems. One student mentioned that errors in Moodle disallowed them from participating in one exam on time.

Many students shared that they experienced negative impacts on their mental and physical health due to the online semester; one spoke of “desperation among students.” They shared experiencing a lack of motivation for things that they were very interested in before the pandemic, pointing out that with the increase in independent work, they faced more internal challenges. Many noted trouble concentrating, fatigue, and distraction, and mentioned that self-organization and finding a daily routine were increasingly challenging, especially when it remained unclear how long their studies would continue online; this lack of perspective or looking to the future then led to decreased motivation and a reported inability to focus. Other students noted that sitting in front of the screen for so many hours every day was a physical, psychic, and mental challenge; one shared that it was “terrible for my mental health.” Zoom meetings in general were described by students as tiring as well as pressuring and stressful.

Lack of an adequate place to work was another major stumbling block for students: many did not have a quiet space free from distractions, with the technical equipment necessary for studying. Even for those who did have a quiet place, the stress of spending all of their time in one space (for working from home, studying, sleeping, and maintaining social contacts) weighed on them. Several mentioned that the pandemic exaggerated existing class and financial differences between
students, and that those who do not have a place to stay or who lack a private place to study felt left behind. The fact that students needed to pay the full semester fees despite not using the BVG Semesterticket was a hardship for some students. Several mentioned the lack of library work stations to be a major factor in not having space.

Lastly, some students shared that several aspects of the implementation of the digital semester added to their stress. Some formats did not lend themselves well to digitization: asynchronous formats in seminars, for example, or videos of powerpoint presentations with voiceover which did not allow them to ask questions. Some courses were not at all adapted to the digital semester and seemed to be rather analog courses placed online. Some students pointed out that this might also be due to a lack of knowledge on the part of staff and/or a lack of support from the university. Some students felt that they did not have enough opportunities to ask questions or that breakout rooms were inefficient or overused. Other students wrote that the lack of privacy involved in turning a camera on added to the stress they felt in not having private space; still others pointed out that there were few alternatives available when one missed a zoom meeting due to technical problems.

Some students, many of them first-semester students, discussed organizational hurdles and shared feeling confused by the volume of information they needed to sort through. These students stated that they found it difficult to find information on exams and certificates, or that the information they did receive came too late to be helpful for them. The “E-Mail Flut” caused by some Moodle forums made it challenging for some students to sort through whether information was critical or not, and several discussed feeling overwhelmed by the process of getting credit for their seminars. Though students are attempting to make the digital semesters work for them, the negative psychological and academic effects of these formats have been weighing on many.
3. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Do you have suggestions on how to improve things like format, workload, deadlines or communication?

Improve organization and streamline communication

- central, clear place (perhaps Moodle) for all course information: Zoom Link, deadlines, assignments, MAP information – or even a central Moodle course for each Studiengang for deadlines, exam information, enrollment
- a central place online for Zoom links to all courses placed together
- clear communication of Zoom meeting times and deadlines at beginning of semester
- make basic information available regarding technology and HU accounts
  - for example, how to set up email notifications in Moodle to avert the “Email-Flut”
- please keep strictly to the timetable and do not go over the time stated in the syllabus
  - students are pressured to stay when they must attend another class
- set a same “upload day” for all course material so that students have enough time to work with it
- clear communication of course goals and deadlines, written and accessible online and updated as needed
  - students would like to actively participate in co-creating the syllabus and discussing any potential changes to the syllabus during the semester
- professors should read and respond to emails
- optional synchronous Q&A was helpful in some courses
- better support for Erstis needed

Accommodate online semester through a smaller workload

- recognize that many students are overwhelmed by the online semester
  - many balancing home-office or work outside the home with parenting and studying
- assign fewer texts so that students have more time to ask questions or start discussion
● negotiate workload with students: ask students what they can handle, invite them in to discuss how much workload is realistic. What interests the students most?
● offer the chance to sometimes not do the weekly assignment
● fewer, larger assignments rather than weekly small assignments
● institute a “reading week”
● institute no deadlines / flexible deadlines policy

**Adjust course capacities**

● for lectures or other “top-down” courses, consider increasing enrollment
● many students requested smaller groups for seminars considering Zoom / online options

**Support the teachers so that they have what they need and can thus support students**

● technical support, technical equipment (headsets mandatory for better audio quality and information transmission), internet
● training and support so that teachers know how to use software programs
● teachers seem overwhelmed as much as students do – the uni should support them

**Teaching style**

● offer concrete feedback to students on their work to ensure understanding of and ability to further work with material
  ○ similarly, at the end of synchronous seminars, make time for a summary of the relevant points mentioned and check understanding
  ○ when providing contextual information at the beginning of synchronous seminars, allow enough time for students to absorb this information
  ○ students would like more feedback throughout the semester; not just in the MAP
  ○ more exercises for exam preparation
● utilize forums and other asynchronous methods to require students to engage with the material they read before the synchronous seminar begins, such that they can contribute better to the discussion
● professors did a great job managing during the pandemic
● live video conferences rather than asynchronous videos, recorded live if possible
● Take Home Exams instead of in-person or online exams
● offer space within seminars to talk about how students are doing (at the beginning of the zoom, for example)
● using the full range of features on Moodle platform, Zoom, maybe other platforms - instructors should not only rely on Zoom and Moodle

Surveys and feedback from students

● continue doing surveys, perhaps even during the semester
● “Thanks for this survey – for the first time during my time at HU (since 2016) I feel like the Uni has at least some interest in my mental health and how I feel while studying”

Hygiene concept / Hybrid Semester

● attendance in person as soon as possible with a hygiene concept
● students need a space to socialize with other students outside of Zoom Meetings and courses in general

Is there anything about online learning that you would like to retain at the university, if and when we are able to have in-person learning in the future? What can the university learn from this process?

All resources/material/exercises should be provided on Moodle

● pre-recorded asynchronous lectures (easier to make notes and to follow)
● having all material provided online makes it easier to study for exams
● podcast-like lectures
● offer presentations and other info online
● offer editable, annotation-ready scripts
Blended learning

- combination asynchronous and synchronous
  - assess when it is absolutely necessary to meet synchronously or in-person
  - great for accessibility and for working and parenting students
  - q&a or as needed synchronous meetings
  - lectures and talks asynchronous
  - writing skills seminars asynchronous
  - seminars synchronous or in-person
- online and blended formats increase accessibility and barrier-free learning
- allow a camera in the room in order to keep the ability to attend courses online when sick or parenting (Zoom meetings)
- more audiobooks, podcasts instead of reading

Assignments and exams

- offer creative assignments like podcasts
- being able to use materials during exams (take home exams)
- fewer exams and assignments/MAPs at the end of the semester, and instead smaller assignments throughout

Moodle platform and Zoom

- expanded use of Moodle, when well organized
  - incl. handing in assignments online, saving paper
  - people got better at moodle, used it more throughout the semester
  - utilize full range of tools (tests, quizzes, forum)
- Zoom for group work

Support

- tutorium with Jessica Walter
- student advisors
- mental health check ups / mental health services
- office hours offered online
- Dozierende were more reachable, offered support
How educational have the classes been for you? Do you feel prepared for your MAPs? (1 = not educational, 5 = very educational)

Do you feel supported, academically, mentally and socially?
4. STUDYING EXPERIENCE

Do you have a place where you can work regularly that is suitable for studying? (Do you have the technical equipment required, as well as freedom from distractions?)

- Yes: 73.0%
- No: 27.0%

What do you need to be productive?

- Adequate working place (library/office): 40
- Stable internet connection: 5
- Better laptop: 10
- Technical devices in general: 5
- Office chair: 5
Many students have shared that they have had additional financial difficulties since the beginning of the pandemic. Has your financial situation changed due to the pandemic?

- Yes: 45.0%
- No: 55.0%

If yes, have you been able to access financial support resources?

- Yes: 17.0%
- No: 83.0%

Survey and Report prepared by Julia Dutschke and Daphne Beers
April 2021