# Students' Motivation and Engagement during Distance Learning

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**Abstract:** *As counties in the world went into lockdown in order to contain the novel Coronavirus, school throughout the globe closed their doors and transferred to remote learning. After an initial struggle during the transitioning period, schools as well as students came to understand the nuances and benefits of such learning process during these trying times. One thing however was not remedied – teachers found their students less motivated, and students found themselves spending more time than ever online. The lack of motivation, so evident during the classes, noted by the author – a teacher herself, served as an inspiration for this paper. Ever since online classes have started, teachers found students' engagement to be declining, although the attendance was well-kept. High-school students, in particular, being teenagers as they are, showed a significant lack of motivation and engagement, by extension. The author examined the levels of students' motivation during distance learning using a simple questionnaire via Google Forms. The answers from the survey confirmed the initial hypothesis – students are indeed less motivated, but there are some things that they believe teachers can do in order to aid the motivation and thus, student engagement during distance learning.*

**Keywords:** distance learning, online classes, motivation, COVID-19

## 1. Introduction

Schools and the entire concept of teaching have changed rapidly during the past year. One thing, however, did not change: students' motivation is still an ongoing issue both online and offline. Student motivation has been studied meticulously for many a decade. Though a multitude of studies covering this particular issue have been conducted and conclusions have been drawn, students' motivation and by extension, engagement continue to pose a burden for teachers and students now in an online scenario.

The word motivation was derived from the word "movere" which originates in Latin and means "moving" (Seiler et al. 2012).According to Lin's definition (Lin, 2012) motivation is an intrinsic desire which is inherently present in the individual. This desire is reflected in the person's ways of acquiring new information and learning.

Many theories to do with student motivation have been developed throughout the years. Though each theory possesses its own constructs and assortment of explanations, the numerous theories are in fact closely connected(Seifert, 2004). Psychologists, according to Seifert have been long trying to construct all-encompassing theories on student motivation in an academic context. As a result, the four most prominent motivational theories have been developed in the field of educational psychology: self-efficacy theory, attribution theory, self-worth theory and achievement goal theory.

Each theory keeps into consideration the numerous factors that can influence students' motivation. These theories, however, were constructed with the traditional, offline teaching in mind.

A recent 2017 study (Özen, 2017) with a sample size of 772,903 subjects, showed that motivation has a low-level positive effect on student achievement. This study confirmed teachers' assumptions that motivation is indeed linked to students' achievements and as such, it should be strived for it to be increased, regardless of the teaching setting.

Though some students seem to be inherently motivated and enthusiastic, others need, or expect, their teachers to be the ones who will inspire, challenge, and stimulate them. However, whatever motivation students bring to the classroom can be transformed, for better of for worse. This all depends on the setting and the teacher himself/herself (Davis, n.d.). Hence, teachers spend a significant amount of time trying to analyze the factors that influence their students' motivation.

Depicting the nuances that influence the (lack of) student motivation during online classes posses an issue within its own right. With the start of online classes in the spring of 2020, teachers worldwide saw a significant decline in students' motivation, interest and participation. Meeter and Bele's study conducted in October of 2020 – a study that included a sample of 15,125 bachelor students at a large Dutch research university – confirmed teachers' assumptions and found that "students rated online education as less satisfactory than campus-based education, and rated their own motivation as having gone down." (Meeter et al. 2020)

Though some researchers such as Winardi (2021) suggest that teachers could remedy this by designing activities which are relevant and meaningful to their students, the issue with students' lack of motivation during these trying times remains prominent.

**Remote learning in North Macedonia**
As the pandemic hit the country and continued to spread rapidly in the spring of 2020, the government, in efforts to contain the virus opted for full school closure. Thus, in the

middle of March, 2020 all schools in North Macedonia officially shifted their workflow and started operating online.

After an initial confusion, the schools operated with no unified approach country-wise until the end of the school year in June. During the summer, teachers went through a laborious process of trainings and with a one-month delay, the school year started in October featuring a new national platform for online education and a unified online teaching system through MS Teams. Only the youngest students in Grade 1, 2 and 3 in primary school went to school in a traditional setting, under strict COVID-19 protection procedures.

All of the high schools in the country continued working online. As months progressed high school teachers started noticing a slow decline in student motivation and class engagements. Students often refused to turn on their cameras and answered only when prompted. Though teachers have tried to make some necessary changes in order to make online classes more interesting and engaging, many failed in the attempt.

Thus, students often reported feeling unmotivated, unchallenged and sometimes even confused.

## 2. Methodology

The questionnaire method for data collection was employed in the making of this particular paper. The qualitative method was primarily employed, as the answers from the questionnaire were obtained through a series of closed-ended questions with multiple choice answer. Therefore, the data collected is numerical and can be statistically discerned and further analyzed. As students as of March of 2020, do not attend school but learn from home, an online questionnaire was conducted and delivered. The questionnaire was made via Google. Students were asked to answer several questions and submit their answers.

The questionnaire itself included 6 questions. The questions aimed to explore students' opinions to do with the (lack) of motivation during distance learning.

The questionnaire-link was sent to the teachers by the author herself. The questionnaire was sent to both Year 2 and Year 3 students of the local high school of Taki Daskalot – Bitola where the author herself teaches English as a Second language. 68 students answered the questionnaire. The questionnaire itself limited students in the principle of one-answer-per-respondent.

The questionnaire was completely anonymous as students responding were all underage. In addition, such anonymity, the author thought, could aid objectivity as students are probably more likely to be honest if a study is anonymous. In order to increase objectivity, there was only one question do to with the sex of the participants, to ensure sex-inclusion. This study was limited to a sample size of Year 2 and Year 3 students in one high school. To provide a better understanding of the issue, further, greater research can be conducted that will include more students in more high schools.

The research was based on the hypothesis that *Students are less motivated during online classes.*

## 3. Results and Discussion

The questionnaire used for the purpose of this paper was administered to Year 2 and Year 3 students of the local high school of Taki Daskalot – Bitola, North Macedonia. The questionnaire was answered by 68 students. The questionnaire was limited by 1 response per respondent only. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, as the students answering it are underage.

The first question looked into respondents' sex. This was important to ensure the results were sex-inclusive and thus, objective. All but 1 of the 68 respondents answered it. 48 of the respondents stated they were *female*, 17 – *male* while 2 chose the option "*I prefer not to say*". With this in mind, we can state that both sexes have been represented though more female students responded to the survey. (Figure 1)
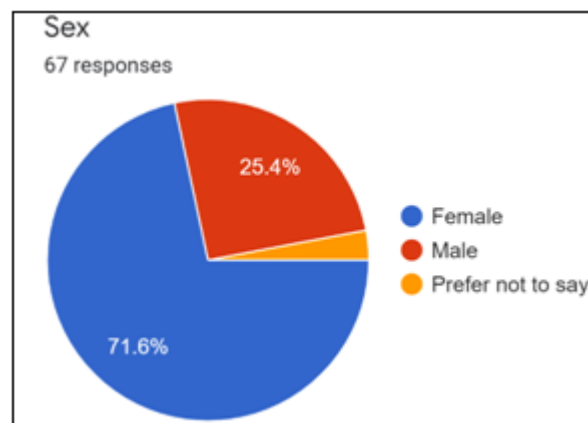


**Figure 1:** Respondents' sex

The following question tried to find out whether or not students were feeling less motivated during their online classes. 66 students answered the question. A significant number – 32 or 48.5% stated that *yes*, they were feeling less motivated. 26 or 39.4% stated they they felt less motivated, *for the most part*. This means that 58 of the 66 respondents felt somewhat less motivated during these online classes – a rather noteworthy portion which confirms the initial hypothesis. 6 students stated that they *sometimes* felt less motivated while only 2 said they *did not feel less motivated*. (Figure 2)
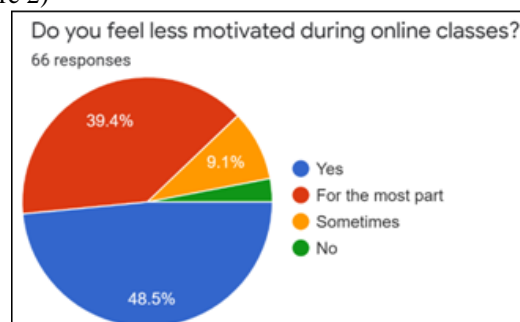


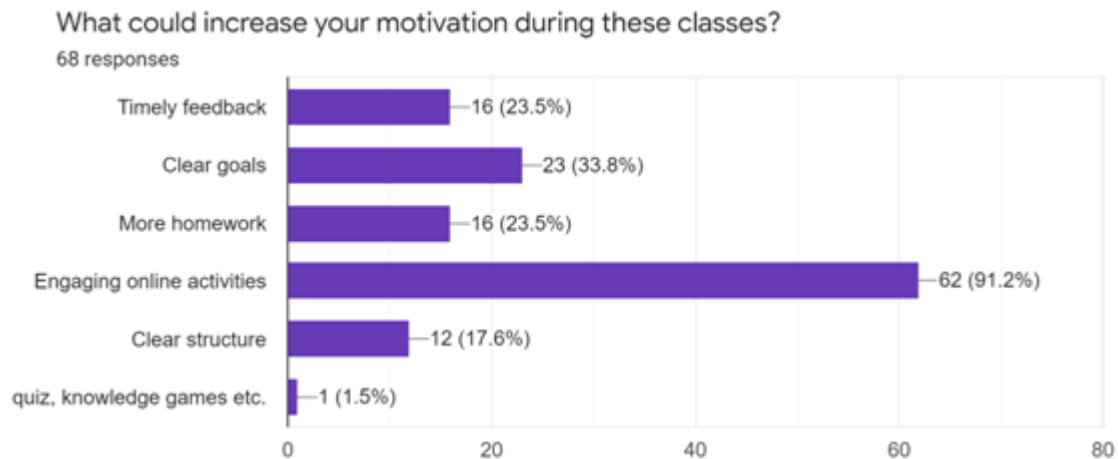**Figure 2:** Students' motivation during online classes

**Figure 3:** Increasing motivation

Following that, the author wanted to examine what could possibly, in students' opinion, increase their motivation during the process of remote learning. The students were given 5 answers, but they could also add their own suggestions. They could choose (check) as many options as they would like. The question was answered by all 68 respondents. The vast majority – 62 respondents i.e., students said that Engaging online activities could increase their motivation. 23 students thought that Clear goals could aid motivation, while 16 thought that Timely feedback and More homework could help. 12 students said that Clear structure of the classes could increase their motivation. One person added that activities such as quizzes, and games could help. (Figure 3)

Furthermore, the questionnaire aimed to find out whether or not students' thought online classes are as effective as traditional, real-life classes. 66 respondents answered the multiple-choice question. A remarkable number of students i.e. respondents – 61 or 92,4% -- stated that they thought that online classes are less effective than traditional ones. 4 students stated they thought these classes were just as effective, while 1 stated that these online classes, for him/her were more effective. (Figure 4)
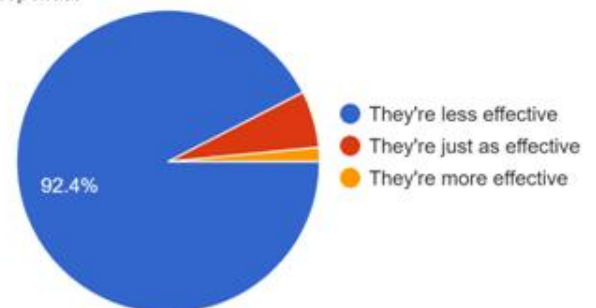


**Figure 4:** How effective are these online classes?!

The following two questions asked the respondents to state to what extent they agreed with two statements – from (1) *I completely agree* to (5) I *completely disagree.* The first statement was as follows:

*"I do not find my online course very interesting so I keep my work to a minimum"*

All 68 respondents answered the question and rated the statement. 5 students said they *completely agree* while 9 stated they *completely disagree*. The majority of the responses fell between these two extremes: 20 students chose (4) – *I disagree*, 17 chose (3) – *Neither agree nor disagree* and the remaining 17 chose (2) – *I agree*. This showed that a significant number of students shied away from working hard due to the less interesting online classes. (Figure 5)

Do you agree with the following statement: I do not find my online course very interesting so I keep my work to a minimum
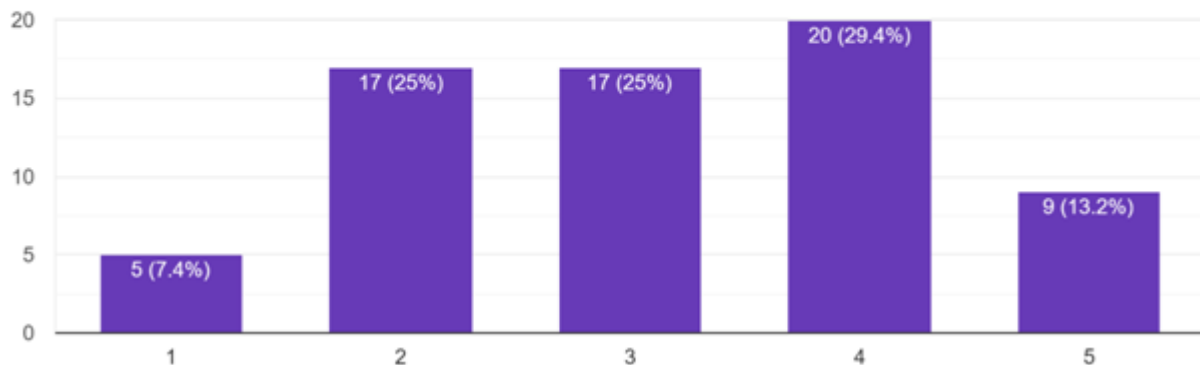
68 responses



**Figure 5:** Rate the statement 1

The last question – in the same format as the previous one – focused on a different statement:

*"I find myself often distracted during online classes. The urge to check Instagram is just too big."*

The students i.e., respondents yet again had to state to what extent they agreed to it in such manner: (1) *I completely agree* to
(5) I *completely disagree*.
All 68 respondents answered to this question as well. 16 respondents stated that they (1) *completely agree* while 8

stated that they (5) *completely disagree*. 27 stated that they (2) *agree*, 11 that they (3) *neither agree nor disagree* while 6 said that they

(4) *disagree.*
This goes to show that a noteworthy number of students indeed have troubles focusing and they find themselves distracted during their online classes. Furthermore, the students find the urge to check Instagram "*just too big*".(Figure 6)

Do you agree with the following statement: I find myself often distracted during online classes. The urge to check Instagram is just too big.
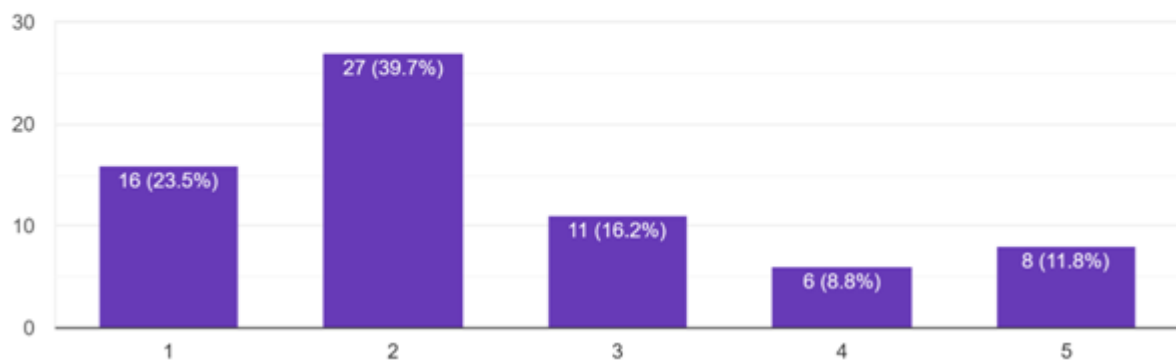
68 responses



**Figure 6:** Rate the statement 2

## 4. Conclusion

In these trying times when the novel coronavirus threatens people from all over the globe, education has also suffered a significant blow. As the virus grew more powerful and governments grew helpless, schools began to shut down and teacher and students had to transition to a novel learning dynamic – learning online.

Thought the distance learning has helped contain the virus and thus, save a significant number of lives, there is one major disadvantage that this mechanism has brought: students were feeling less and less motivated. The participant in the survey conducted for the purpose of this

paper confirmed what teachers throughout the world sensed ever since school closed – students lacked the motivation and found the online learning system to be less effective than the traditional one.

The results from this small study showed that students often find themselves distracted during these online classes and found themselves fighting the urge to check their social networks. A significant number of students also stated that they tend to keep their work to a minimum for they find these classes less interesting.

Though small changes such as implementing more engaging activities, assigning homework and giving timely feedback

could increase their motivation, the students who were part of this study still found distance learning to be lacking.

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