



Article

Hybrid Events as a Sustainable Educational Approach for Higher Education

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Abstract: The sudden shift of online teaching activities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruption. It has been a challenge for both students and teachers. It has also presented an opportunity for a critical analysis of the subject of the educational process in an era of wide access to information technology. One of the desirable consequences of the analysis is to highlight the didactic usefulness of hybrid events. A collective autoethnographic text about the challenges related to moving teaching activities to an online environment during the pandemic at Transilvania University in Braşov (Romania), and an observation report on a cultural event held in hybrid mode in a Europe for Citizens project, hosted by the same university, support the recommendation to consider hybrid education as a solution that must be available to teachers for the efficient management of future possible crisis situations. The teachers retroactively appreciated the logistical, economic and comfort advantages of online education, but they pointed out the difficulties of conducting the teaching process entirely online. The hosted hybrid event highlighted the utility of being able to quickly transition from offline to online. Hybrid learning is efficient because it can combine the benefits of online and offline learning. Teachers trained to manage hybrid events will feel a reduced impact in future crisis situations.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; hybrid learning; auto-ethnography; challenge; eLearning; digital technologies; crises



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1. Introduction

Uncertainty about COVID-19 caused insecurity and panic [1], increased the number of cases of anxiety and depression [2] and produced feelings of helplessness and exhaustion [3]. Facing COVID-19 was a challenge for universities all over the world. The educational landscape is constantly changing and universities are adapting, therefore good change management is needed to overcome the disruptions [4]. Universities need to adapt to crisis conditions so that student performance is not adversely affected [5]. Universities need to manage prolonged student stress under COVID-19 conditions [6]. The COVID-19 restrictions have put universities in front of such a change, namely the transition to conducting teaching activities in an online environment.

The shift to online teaching was a challenge for both teachers and students [7]. Transforming online courses has been a major challenge, especially for academic programs where collaboration and building a social meaning are essential [8]. The sudden transition to online has disrupted the educational process, clinical courses being among the most affected [3]. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies have become an indispensable part of the teaching process [9]. Integrating technology into the learning process is a challenge for teachers and those who train teachers [6]. The main challenges of the new educational context were the following: the internet connection, the teacher's familiarity with the technology and interaction with the students and keeping their attention [7]. The attention paid to the IT component in universities is positively correlated with the productivity and creativity of students in pandemic conditions [10]. The sudden transition

to online has forced students to creatively adapt to the new IT-dependent conditions [10,11]. Occasional research shows that women had better school performance in the semesters affected by COVID-19 compared to the previous situation [12], and computers have been used more often than smartphones to review courses and less often to check results [13].

Efficiency, safety, comfort, greater participation [14], flexibility of schedule and location [15] were indicated by students as positive aspects of the emergency transition to the online environment. Low concentration, high workload, technical problems, difficult access to the Internet, insufficient support from instructors and colleagues [14] and a lack of social interaction [15] were often mentioned as negative aspects. Students prefer face-to-face learning, with many of them reporting unpleasant experiences related to online learning, and the quality of education has decreased [16].

Going online has caused considerable losses in the efficiency of the educational process [17]. The pandemic, through the mental suffering it inflicted on students, affected the efficiency of learning. The effects of going online were perceived differently by students in different degree programs. The decrease in the efficiency of economics students is directly correlated with the difficult access to the internet, family problems, inadequate workspace and the eLearning infrastructure of the universities [18]. Nursing students saw online learning as an opportunity, but the results of online clinical courses were lower than face-to-face [3]. The rapid online transition has closed access to traditional educational spaces and disrupted the appropriate behaviors in those spaces [19].

However, the initial skepticism turned into enthusiasm and positive attitudes towards the change in the educational paradigm [20]. The pandemic highlighted opportunities to improve learning strategies [19]. The pandemic corrected the overbidding trend of the cognitive dimension of higher education and suggested balancing the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions in the transition to online and hybrid learning [8]. It was stressful, but helpful. Additional research is needed to make online learning more effective [3]. The autoethnographic approach to the COVID-19 pandemic could be one of the additional sources of useful information for this rationalization.

Hybrid education can be an effective and adaptable alternative to different types of courses. Hybrid experiential learning also has potential for the future. Blended learning increases student involvement. With minimal interruptions and stable results, mixed training is a key innovation for success in higher education [21]. In microeconomics courses, hybrid learning can be more effective than face-to-face [22]. Hybrid learning has supported the continuity of the educational process during the pandemic [9]. Students in hybrid courses performed better, were more satisfied and gained a sense of belonging to a community than traditional learning [23]. Hybrid learning provides many options for an attractive and satisfying learning experience; students need in its case only cognitive involvement [24].

Four professors from the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) kept a shared logbook during their online learning. The journal notes the discomfort of teaching online, the insecurity of senior teachers about the use of technology, the need for additional training and support felt by them, the inconvenience of talking to a non-interactive screen, the importance of collaborations and sharing experiences with other teachers, technical issues, and communication success of using a robot as a teaching assistant. The conclusion of these four teachers is that there are no failures, there are only experiments that always give rise to other questions and require collaboration between students and their teachers [8].

The need to access eLearning programs have increased students' knowledge of technology, which is a win-win for future endeavors [16]. Online or hybrid training, creative and flexible, must be at hand for future emergencies [16]. Accessibility is important for effective online education. Online access can be a technical problem, but also a pedagogical and training challenge. It needs flexibility, tolerance and communication [16,25]. The study of hybrid training provides resources for the post-pandemic development of higher education [7].

This overview of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational process is organized around a few aspects that we consider relevant in the context of this article. It is, first of all, about the intrinsic dynamics of the educational process, dynamics to which, through effective management, universities are forced to adapt. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced universities to capitalize on their information technology endowments and to focus on new acquisitions in the field. The universities activated the eLearning platforms they already had at their optimal capacity or hired hosting services for didactic activities on other platforms. Academic management teams have been looking for ways to solve the problems of connecting students far from university centers to activities, and to offer generous online access to educational resources, in a student-centered approach. The efforts carried out in this regard have strengthened online education as a viable method in crisis situations such as the pandemic [4]; they have moved the frontiers of the educational and curriculum process [9].

Extending the previous idea, the contemporary educational process implies, along with the integration of IT technology, that most teachers can use this technology. In the process of transferring educational activities to the online environment, teachers are an interested and relevant party, along with technicians and students. Understanding the new ways of teaching online, with their specifics, required effort and additional work. Preparing teaching materials for use online also requires effort [4]. The stake of this effort was to ensure the continuity of the educational process. Quite abruptly, teachers had to recognize as inevitable and indispensable the use of digital technologies in this process [9,26]. Universities' investments in innovative digital technology are effective if both students and teachers can use it, effectively adapting knowledge content intended for face-to-face interactions into content suitable for online delivery. In addition to improving the digital skills of all stakeholders, there is a need to adapt teaching methods to the new learning context and for teachers to assume new communicatively effective roles [9].

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic, as a challenge, also represented an opportunity to analyze and recalibrate the educational process. The COVID-19 pandemic was a lesson in optimizing contingency plans and avoiding failures. It was also the opportunity to improve the higher education system. Under the pressure of lockdown restrictions, distance learning has revealed its strengths, proving to be as good, if not better, than face-to-face for some students. The preparation for a future rapid transition to online when needed also represents an opportunity to develop the digital component of the educational process [9]. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts between all the actors involved in the educational process, which is meant to take place for their benefit and with their participation. The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of taking into account emic perspectives on events, within the horizon of effective collaborations. It was an opportunity to recalibrate the very goals of higher education and, implicitly, the design of the related didactic activities, together with their beneficiaries, not just for them [8].

Finally, hybrid education has proven effective during the pandemic. Students have learned to appreciate the freedom that hybrid education offers them, as it gives them the opportunity to learn at their own pace and in any place. Participating in activities in a hybrid regime, through its extraordinary parameters, worked as an additional motivating factor for students. In fact, hybrid education has proven to be beneficial, through its facilities, for both students and teachers [9].

In this context, how did university teachers feel the pressure of the forced transition, in a very short time, of educational activities into the online environment? Can hybrid events be considered a viable solution to ensure the continuity of the educational process in conditions of limited physical access to closed spaces? How can the chances of the successful running of these types of events be increased?

We will support in this paper the usefulness of programmatic preparation for hybrid educational events, as a solution to effectively address future possible crisis situations that disrupt the continuous development of learning. For this purpose, we will show how the

COVID-19 pandemic was seen from the point of view of teachers, as the main actors in the educational process, present a hybrid event considered successful and formulate some recommendations regarding the conduct of such an event.

For this purpose, we will first present the results of a qualitative research on our reporting, as teaching staff, to the challenge represented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The report highlights the opportunity to ensure the conditions for a simple and quick transfer of education in a hybrid regime. We will then present an educational event organized in hybrid mode in a pandemic context, and the recommendations regarding the good conduct of such events. Finally, we will use these presentations as arguments in the promotion of hybrid educational events.

2. Materials and Methods

From a methodological point of view, our research approach has two distinct components. The first component is of the autoethnographic type. Autoethnography is a method of qualitative research that connects the personal experience of research authors with the meanings of cultural, social and political phenomena [27]. Autoethnography is the meaningful reconstruction of one's own experience [28]. The autoethnographic authors are also the subjects of the research they carry out in an approach that rejects the distinction between researcher/researcher and objectivity/subjectivity of research [29]. The method combines the features of autobiography and ethnography. It is enjoyable for both researchers and readers, providing engaging texts that allow researchers to gain a cultural understanding of the self in relation to others [30]. Relying on one's own experiences also means easy access to research data [28]. Autoethnographic texts can present retroactively and selectively the events to which they refer. The autoethnographic approach is convenient in the case of topics related to university education, where researchers often have their own experiences [31].

Autoethnography makes the personal experience directly presented by its subject a new point of view that contributes to the growth of social knowledge. Tributary to post-modern philosophy, autoethnography overcomes traditional methodological limitations regarding the subjective involvement of the social science researcher in conducting research and formulating its results. The themes already addressed autoethnographically are very diverse, from work and illness experiences, to academic or family life and to alternative, sometimes marginalized, cultural affiliations [32]. Approaches cover the distance between evocative and analytical autoethnography, with an increasing trend for the former. However, to be academically useful, autoethnography must have an analytical dimension that capitalizes on the description of experience as a link between the personal and the social, as Stahlke Wall [32] points out. The analytical dimension of the method coherently links the descriptive content and its theoretical anchors.

Autoethnography is efficient in researching understudied topics, especially from the perspective of the main actor [32]. We considered this approach appropriate to the experience of university teaching staff regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. It is about a new experience. We considered that the autoethnographic approach favors highlighting some detailed and specific aspects. Researching various aspects of academic life is one area where, as we have already shown, autoethnography is an effective method. It represents a shortcut; it is a source of first-hand information. Researchers are the very holders of information.

Of course, this aspect brings into full discussion the issue of the rigor of subjective research and, implicitly, the need for an analytical approach, indicated by Stahlke Wall [32].

At the same time, autoethnography, through its boldness and non-conformity, makes vulnerable the researchers who reveal themselves during the research and poses from an ethical perspective the problem of disclosures that are never only their authors', but are always also about others. This aspect lends weight to the recommendations regarding balanced autoethnographic approaches. Wall [32] proposes moderation in autoethnographic approaches, i.e., balancing the innovative, imaginative and diverse potential of this method with the rigor and utility requirements of academic research.

We have tried to follow these exhortations to moderation, balance and rigor.

The authors of this article are academics at the Transilvania University of Braşov (Romania). Four of them work in the Department of Social Sciences and Communication, and the fifth at the Department of Electrical Engineering and Applied Physics. Each of the authors of this article has retrospectively developed his own text about the experience of teaching in a pandemic context. These texts were then combined into the one presented below. The resulting text, written in plural first person, reflects the positions shared by the authors regarding the challenges and teachings of COVID-19. If there have been differences in opinion, they are indicated in the text with wording such as “Some of us consider that/have felt that . . . ”. The indicated distinction is part of the analytical dimension of our autoethnographic approach. The focus of the text on the aspects relevant to the purpose of the article, to the detriment of the evocative presentation of the very personal experiences associated with COVID-19, completes the analytical dimension of the walk.

According to British Psychological Society guidelines for conducting ethical observations in public spaces, observational research is only acceptable in situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers [33]. The possibility of documenting and understanding ordinary experiences is the main benefit of participatory observation [34]. The researcher observes the group and becomes a participant in the setting [35]. Yin (2018) [36] named this method of research participant-observation and underlined its ability to gain access to events or groups that are otherwise inaccessible to study. The ability to perceive reality from the insiders’ perspective is another relevant opportunity provided when using this method.

The second component of the research approach is the participatory observation of a hybrid event carried out as an activity within a Europe for Citizens project during a period of pandemic restrictions in Romania in May 2021 (more precisely, on May 9). At that time, Romania was on the downward slope of the second wave of COVID-19 and the number of people who could be together in a closed space was limited by government decree. The hybrid event therefore took place during the second stage of the previous autoethnographic presentation. The design of the event capitalized on the observations and experience of the organizers regarding activities carried out in the context of pandemic restrictions. These observations and the experience gained since the beginning of the pandemic contributed to the good organization of the event and were later systematized in the autoethnographic document mentioned above. The observation took place during one day, from morning to evening. The activities of the first part of the day were conducted online. The activities in the second part of the day took place in parallel face-to-face and online. A summary of the observation report is presented below. All the authors of this paper participated in the described hybrid event. The other participants: students and teachers, expressed in writing their agreement to participate in the event and were informed about the subsequent preparation of an observation report on the conduct of the event as a requirement in the project.

3. Results

3.1. Online Education and the Pandemic. Autoethnographic Approach

We, the authors of this paper, consider that we may separate the evolution of online education related to the pandemic into three stages, according to how we perceived online education and how the activity itself was carried out.

3.1.1. Kind of Clumsy and Reluctant Phase

Although the eLearning platform was available for several years, it was only used by very few academics and only to upload bibliographies or course materials, which meant many of us did not know how to use it when going online. Obviously, the first reaction was that of “fear” of the platform. We imagined that it was something very complicated to use and that we would not be able to handle it. Training was even organized for those who had some idea of how it worked to pass on knowledge to others. At first, it was

thought that going online would take a maximum of three weeks, so the only problem was the lack of written communication with students, transmission of courses, bibliographies and homework. After one week, it was decided that the video and audio functions of the platform would be used to carry out the online teaching process live. This intensified fear of the platform and, again, most were reluctant. One of the problems was related to the protection of personal data and intellectual property rights. Questions were raised such as what would happen if students register the lectures and then distribute the recordings online on different platforms. These anxieties then gave way to others.

We were quite confused in the first few weeks; we had problems with organizing the time and the pace of teaching. We were worried about using the video camera; the feeling was that you expose yourself without controlling the other's reaction, without seeing everyone else. Some of us have had difficulty in activating our acting side, in behaving natural and relaxed in front of the camera.

As for the students, in this early period, they became familiar with the platform surprisingly quickly, in the sense that they knew how to connect online and to upload homework. However, it was still confusing for them too, questions such as "How long do we have to stay online?" and "When will we take back our lectures live?" were everyday questions and none of us knew the answer.

In Romania, there is good coverage of the territory with high-speed Internet. In the first weeks of the lockdown, the secretaries called students living in remote rural areas to ask them if they have access to the university's E-learning platform and whether they needed technical assistance or even devices (e.g., tablets). There was a suspicion that in small and isolated villages, the problem of connecting online was a very real one. It was a little surprising but reassuring for everyone when the vast majority of students answered that they were fine and that Internet access was not their main concern.

3.1.2. The Fear of Talking to No One and the Comfort of Home

These worries remained for some academics throughout the time the courses were online. It was an artificially created situation that required wearing a mask and to pay constant attention to the control of mimicry, of reactions, rather than what you were saying. For this reason, some of us preferred to take audio-only courses without a camera, especially since there was no way to encourage students to open their cameras as well. In courses with a large number of participants, this was not even possible for technical reasons, due to the capacity of the eLearning platform. It was very frustrating not knowing who you were talking to, whether someone was listening to you or if you were talking to yourself.

For subjects naturally related to the computer, this problem was not apparent; the students used the computers at home as well as the computers in the laboratory. However, in the case of other courses and practical work, things did not go as well. Students learn by physically performing laboratory work. It is the simplest and thus the most efficient. However, that was not possible during the lockdown. For some of the new challenges we have not found effective solutions. We consider the solutions we used as compromise solutions.

We tried to maintain the interactive method of teaching courses. If at the beginning the students were receptive and interacted with a microphone, in time they stopped using the microphone and interacted only in writing in the chat. One explanation for this is: 1. most colleagues did not allow interaction with a microphone during the course so students gave up this "habit"; 2. Some colleagues said that a significant amount of time was lost and therefore did not allow microphone interactions; 3. Being in a different environments, students did not feel comfortable for those around them to hear what they were saying. However, the abandonment of verbal interactions made the atmosphere of online activities even more different from that of face-to-face meetings.

Like the use, or rather non-use, of the video camera by students, some considered turning on the video camera an invasion of personal space; some of them simply did not want to see their colleagues and how they live, even if the camera does not capture too

much of the surrounding space. A consequence of this was seen this year at the graduation ceremonies when we realized that after two years of the pandemic, we knew the majority of graduates only by name and not by face.

A positive aspect was the higher attendance of students at classes, especially for master's programs. Some of the students' work and online education has allowed them to easily connect wherever they are. It has been said that online education is not an appropriate form of education, but if we consider the fact that most of the online students attended more classes than in the previous period, we think it was a win-win for them.

However, the suspicion that not all enrollees actively attended the courses cannot be ignored. Sometimes, during the verification questions during the course, for questions that had simple answers, numbered a, b, c, only half of the participants answered. This suggests that they were not paying attention, or were not there at all in front of the computer. Or that they were doing several things at once, which, to be honest, has happened to us too from time to time. This is not unusual in today's times, with so much to do in a short amount of time. Online learning has only fueled this trend. It became anecdotal and we were amused for a long time by the confession of a student before Easter: "I was listening to the lesson and kneading sponge cakes with a lot of enthusiasm . . .".

A challenge we faced brilliantly in the pandemic was to highlight the many activities that can be carried out online. For example, student practice. At first, how this could be achieved online was unimaginable. Then, we had to identify solutions, and webinars proved to be more than useful for such an activity and certainly many students were more successful than in the case of face-to-face practice, where, most of the time, students carry out routine activities, unrelated and inconsistent with what they should do.

However, our degree of control over student homework and student plagiarism has decreased (some students have acknowledged that Google is their best friend).

Taking the online exams was a cause for concern for both us and the students, but we did well. We were really surprised by the good results obtained by the students in the evaluations, we almost did not hope that they understood the material taught online. Of course, we took many safety precautions. We looked for the most effective methods of ensuring the correctness of the evaluations. We know how inventive our students can be.

If we have to describe this whole period in a few words, on the one hand, we would describe it as comfortable, considering that teaching from home spared us the time of displacement and for the students the expenses for living outside their home. However, on the other hand, both academics and students agree that the effort for teaching and studying online was higher. We saved time and money, but we worked extra hard in the time allocated to teaching activities. We, the teaching staff, certainly lacked the energy that the attention in the eyes of the students in front of us provides under normal conditions. We had to compensate for this from our own reserves.

3.1.3. Appreciating What Troubled Us

With all the criticism of online education, in less than a semester from the resumption of face-to-face courses, we find that many students want to continue some academic activities online.

After the pandemic, we found that online education can be a very good solution for carrying out teaching activities in different situations such as Erasmus mobilities or conferences, and even mild illness of academics.

The inclusion of new technologies in teaching has become a necessity due to its advantages, including economic ones, and could be a solution in case of a different kind of crises, such as economic, health or military ones. We learned a lot about the university's eLearning platform; we managed to see it as an effective tool after all. Each new activity carried out with its help increased our self-confidence and was an occasion for light joy.

We appreciate retroactively the value of the comfort offered by online teaching. The time now spent on the way home from school and back was time gained in the pandemic,

likewise the fact that the working day was not fragmented between departures from home and returns.

Based on the proven advantages of online education, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has already developed standards that allow universities to carry out mixed activities (online and physical), starting with the academic year 2022/2023. It is a measure that shows that we can learn from previous attempts.

We consider this decision in convergence with our own findings regarding the advantages of the possibility of a fast and reversible transition of teaching activities to online without malfunctions.

3.2. A Hybrid Event Observation Report: TELL Project

During the pandemic, the online environment not only provided teaching facilities but also advantages for organizing different academic events. We will illustrate this starting with one event organized online within one international project.

TELL-Telling the story, Learning from Listening, is a Europe for Citizens project (617791-CITIZ-1-2020-1-IT-CITIZ-REMEM) that aims to highlight the manifestations of intolerance in the recent history of Europe. It is a project with partners from several European countries. One of the project activities was planned to take place in Braşov (Romania). However, during the activity period, the large number of COVID-19 cases imposed restrictions related to the organization of offline events. In these conditions, the TELL team from the Transilvania University of Braşov had to find a format that would allow the activities to take place as close as possible to the project. This is how the hybrid event described below was conceived.

The event held on 9 May 2021 and hosted by the Transilvania University of Braşov (UniTBv) was dedicated to Europe Day and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The event had two parts. The first of these, the Europe Day Celebration Meeting, took place entirely online on the eLearning platform of Transilvania University. It began with a welcome message to the participants by the Vice-Rector of UniTBv, who briefly introduced the university and emphasized the complexity of human rights discussions in a pandemic context. Then, the YouNet representative, who initiated and coordinated the TELL project, presented the project with the objectives, activities and expected results. Next, the main moments in the history of the application of human rights in Europe were highlighted. The event continued online, after a coffee break, with a round table on "Why do we need the EU Charter?", attended by project partners and their guests. Each of the TELL team representatives (from Italy, Greece, Poland, Slovakia and Romania) discussed distinct aspects of the role of human rights in shaping EU policies and the European way of life.

The second part of the event took place both online and offline. It is called "Game-Based Learning Activities in accordance with the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights". The offline part of the event took place with the participation of a group of students from the national colleges "Doctor Ioan Meşotă" and "Johannes Honterus", and university students, both Romanian (from the Faculty of Sociology and Communication) and foreigners (from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science). This part of the event started with short self-presentations of students, broadcast live to project partners through UniTBv's eLearning platform. Then, the students were told what to do and four mixed teams were formed. In fact, the teams were challenged to make short films (three minutes) about human rights in the city, which they presented when they returned, after an hour, to the classroom where the event took place.

After the teams went out into the city (the offline part of the event took place in one of the UniTBv buildings located right in the center of Brasov), there was an online debate on intolerance, starting from the various case studies freely chosen and presented by the project partners. When the teams of ad-hoc movies returned, they were invited to present their films one by one, highlighting the violated/respected human rights to which they

referred. The jury focused on the main idea, while the technical aspects of the short films were considered less important. The event ended with the awarding of all participants.

Some observations regarding the event development:

The teams consisted of high school students, undergraduate and master's students. Some of the members were from Braşov, others from other places in Romania (but studying in Braşov) and others from abroad (international students). "Johannes Honterus" is the German college in Braşov. This college teaches the German language (most students are Romanian, after the mass departure of the Saxons to Germany in the 1990s). "Doctor Ioan Meşotă" College is one of the prestigious colleges in Braşov County. The participating bachelor's and master's students came from two UniTBv faculties, one with a socio-humanist profile, the other with a technical profile (they are the faculties of the authors of this article). These differentiating characteristics of members have given mixed teams an increased sensitivity to possible sources of discrimination, intolerance and inequity. In the short films, the teams captured aspects related to the historical relations between the inhabitants of different ethnicities (reflected in the arrangement of the religious buildings in the city), the foreign students well received by their Romanian colleagues, the city center where tourists and locals mingle, freedom of expression, the challenges and opportunities the city presents for people with disabilities, and the rights of children and the elderly. They included in the video recorded images of the synagogue and of the Black Church (the emblematic evangelical church for Braşov), ad-hoc interviews with the city's youth, and improvised short role-playing games.

Members of all teams easily faced the challenge of finding a subject, filming and minimally editing the footage in a limited amount of time. This confirms the reputation of this generation as good users of technology. At the same time, it signals the resources that they, as a generation, have and that could be used more efficiently. Project team members responded appropriately to the challenge, highlighting situations of significant discrimination and/or potential intolerance. This signals the effectiveness of an interactive approach to such topics, even in the teaching process. Outlining their own scenarios, the team members had to prioritize different topics and choose between them. In this way they had to think about discrimination and intolerance.

The time estimates were realistic and respected for the first part of the event, which took place online. The good timing of any type of event requires planning. The fact that all presentations were required to be submitted before the start of the event helped to minimize the possibility of having longer presentations than the planned program. In the second part, there was a gap of almost an hour compared to the program. This was due to the debut part of the offline event. The estimation of the participants' self-presentation and the presentation of the filming requirements took longer than expected, which delayed the return of the teams from the city and the end of the event. We found, on occasion, that the larger safety time reserves that the organizers should take were useful. The more speakers involved, the better the chances of being late.

The activities were scheduled during the day. It is our opinion that the placement of the offline party after the lunch break kept the participants' interest alive. The educational efficiency associated with the event thus increased.

4. Discussion

The TELL event was perceived as a success. This led us to look for more information about hybrid events. The TELL event was an activity in a cultural project. Its point was to teach young people about the importance of the EU Charter in the recent history of the continent. It was a different kind of history lesson, but it was a lesson. History needs and benefits from new, stimulating approaches [37]. However, in other fields of knowledge, innovative solutions are efficient. We consider that the hybrid approach is useful even in the teaching process itself, not only in extracurricular educational activities.

Hybrid models have already been tested in various fields of study. For veterinary medicine, due to the practical knowledge to be provided, the implementation of hybrid

learning has been a challenge. The University of Pretoria (South Africa) trained its lecturers for the complexity of quality teaching in a hybrid environment long before the COVID-19 pandemic [20]. A five-component blended learning strategy for Chemistry students, Discover, Learn, Practice, Collaborate and Assess (DLPCA), has an asynchronous pre-recorded video streaming and teaching on the video conferencing platform in the synchronous part [7]. A multilingual hybrid game (English, Portuguese, French and Italian) to consolidate knowledge of chemistry has been proposed as an alternative to the traditional problem-solving model. From the students' assessment, the game was effective [38]. Organic chemistry can be taught hybrid through an online collaboration platform. Its use has increased the social presence of students and learning performance. [39]. In the study of physics, a hybrid approach could be developed and desirable [40]. A hybrid model of learning physics in high school was considered a success, as it increased the number of students interested in physics [41]. The results of electrical engineering students have increased with the application of a hybrid learning model [42]. Hybrid learning is useful in performing arts education [43]. A hybrid model for learning academic writing can be developed [44]. The hybrid method can be useful in teaching and learning English as a foreign language [45]. These are just some of the recent highlights of the usefulness of the hybrid approach to teaching tasks.

Hybrid teaching activities can be a solution to reduce the pressure on students by the requirements of attendance and active participation in laboratory and seminary classes. They increase the degree of freedom of students, giving them the opportunity to proceed in the way that suits them best. They can be considered as a way of expanding the educational offer, meeting the wishes of the students.

The hybrid approach can be stimulating for students, as suggested by the TELL event shown above. It is also efficient in terms of the quality of information transmission. Planned and respected exactly, a mixed format allows the development of activities in the laboratory and data analysis, discussions and online communication. The hours spent in the laboratory generate experimental design skills, while simulations, virtual laboratories and remote experiments strengthen the understanding of concepts [21]. The Virtual Cloud Learning Environment system, which uses virtual reality, facilitates students' access to various educational resources and effectively simulates physical presence [5]. Many physical and virtual spaces can be transformed into interesting and motivating hybrid learning spaces, with the help of technology [45]. The online environment improves student performance, increasing their productivity and encouraging creativity [10]. A hybrid system can connect the academic dimension of learning with the creation of friendly social media networks between beneficiaries [46].

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of game-based learning in pressing conditions. Digital game-based learning plays an important role in education [47]. In the COVID-19 pandemic context, researchers demonstrated that by incorporating gaming in the educational process, students' motivation for learning increased and their learning outcomes were improved [48]. The effects of using an educational Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) were previously reported as having positive results on students' performance and supporting teachers in transferring knowledge [49].

To evaluate the effectiveness of game-based methods for learning, the motivation for learning, how it promotes a change in attitude, knowledge gain, and the effect on engaging students need to be assessed [50]. The learners' behaviors are tracked and analyzed at each level and stage through learning analytics in order to collect, measure and analyze the results [51].

We consider the use of hybrid events as an option that the education system should always have available. The hybrid approach to teaching tasks is one of the useful things that the COVID-19 crisis has pushed teachers to consider. It represents an important long-term gain of experience. It is a tool for the timely management of possible future restrictions on the number of people present simultaneously in a room. At the same time,

hybrid events allow a differentiated approach to the particular sensitivities and needs of teachers and students. The flexibility of organizing such events covers a wide variety of contexts, from the full online development of the event as needed, to participation with the physical presence of all beneficiaries as they wish. Once teachers' reluctance (self-reported) is overcome, online learning reveals its advantages. Some teaching activities are even more effective online and students' participation in courses and seminars can be better, as the self-ethnographic text highlights. Hybrid events also allow a differentiated approach, for maximum efficiency, of the different dimensions of the didactic content to be transmitted. Different types of content can be transmitted in the most efficient way. Hybrid events can meet the requirements of different fields of study, from socio-human to engineering. Hybrid events satisfy both the appetite of contemporary students to use the Internet [52–54] and their need for direct interaction with colleagues and teachers [55]. As shown by the results of a previous research we carried out, this need for interaction was intensely felt by students, in this case by students from Social Work in Braşov during the COVID-19 lockdown period [55].

Recent work on the challenge of forced transition to online education in a pandemic context contains a wealth of suggestions and recommendations for managing this challenge and other possible similar future challenges. Thus, investments are needed in online education for continuity in case of emergencies, adequate training of instructors, combining technology with pedagogy, creating support communities to control psychological and educational implications, developing students' skills of self-directed learning and time management, reducing the volume of topics and assessments and, last but not least, a combination of synchronous and asynchronous courses [14]. It is also useful to make better use of students' previous knowledge, skills and experiences in the process of adapting to pandemic learning and using social media for further learning [56]. Additional research is needed to streamline online courses, especially in the case of clinical disciplines [3]. Students should become familiar with hybrid education [5], and the redesign of the teaching process for a hybrid system in collaboration with beneficiaries is important [8]. Teachers need to be helped out of their teaching habits and additional training is needed to grasp the educational potential of hybrid spaces [45]. On the other hand, importance should be given to creating friendly communication spaces; this is at least as important as providing technological support for hybrid courses [25].

A successful hybrid event must bring several benefits, as "The Ultimate Guide to Hybrid Events" [57] states: the event must be inclusive, accessible, sustainable, convenient and flexible. Training teachers in organizing such events is useful on the horizon of future crisis situations. It is a good stewardship, which anticipates the needs of the future. It is a small effort that provides teachers with a tool that can be useful at any time. In addition, adapting project-based learning to the online environment opens up a new, emerging perspective [58]. Such an approach also facilitates the diversification of shared teaching content [59], offers new opportunities for interaction with external partners, such as interactive seminars [60] and supports international symposia for students [61] and summer schools [62], virtual mobility and collaborative international learning [63].

A Well-Prepared Hybrid Event

In preparation for the TELL event and several previous hybrid events held within other University projects, we sought information on the optimal conduct of this type of event. We adapted this information to the context of the events intended for the educational process. We believe, mainly following "The Ultimate Guide to Hybrid Events" [57] and our own experiences, that the following recommendations are useful for a successful hybrid educational event:

- (a) In the organization of events, the general rules should be adapted to the direct experience of the organizers/coordinators.
- (b) The objectives of the event should be clearly presented and understood by all participants.

- (c) Potential beneficiaries should find out in advance how the event will be conducted and its objectives, through accessible promotion channels.
- (d) The potential audience should be determined before planning the event program.
- (e) The schedule/planning of the event should be prepared ahead of time in accordance with the purpose of its organization and the objectives pursued.
- (f) The physical presence of the beneficiaries should be encouraged, within the limits allowed by the context.
- (g) The location chosen for the event should be suitable in terms of easy access of the participants and dimensionally, i.e., it should be large enough to respect the contextual social distancing and safety rules.
- (h) The chosen online platform should be appropriate for the online component of the event; in the case of the existence of a platform already used in an institutional framework, it represents an appropriate choice, being already known to the majority of participants.
- (i) The organizer(s) should ensure that all invitees (when applicable) are aware of the features of the chosen online platform; introducing the platform and briefly practicing its use before the event usually solves this requirement.
- (j) The moderator should have a plan B prepared in case the event does not go according to the prepared schedule for technical or attendance reasons.
- (k) The moderator should know the event schedule in detail in order to manage possible delays or deviations from planning.
- (l) Pre-checking of the screen, sound and projector in the live event hall and internet connection should be carried out; at least a second alternative for internet connection is a necessity.
- (m) Breaks should be scheduled, which should be treated with the same care as presentations; they must be on time and have the scheduled duration, preparing the next moment in the program.
- (n) The connection of the two dimensions, offline and online, of the event should be made, so that all participants feel equally important.

The recommendations strengthen educators' ability to organize successful hybrid events in a timely manner. This ability is reassuring in the horizon of future educational challenges.

The times we live in are perceived as interesting, as Jarzyna [64] shows. The pandemic could be considered an opportunity for academics [65]. It provides an opportunity to reconsider previous research on online instructional technologies. What that research indicated as best practices for online learning did not cover the emotional and physical situations of forced isolation from the pandemic, when, for some of the students, virtual classes were the center of their social universe [66]. By creating online worlds, contemporary teachers could reconfigure the academic world, equitably opening connected spaces for learning [66]. The ability to quickly and efficiently organize hybrid educational events is part of this reconfiguration.

5. Conclusions

The redesign of the mixed format courses must ensure excellent teaching and the own well-being of the teacher, as stated by Tomej and collaborators [8]. This is a generous approach with teachers. However, it becomes sustainable in an educational context based on the real collaboration of teachers with the beneficiaries of teaching. For the latter, teamwork training and pedagogical mentoring can be tools of sustainable education [67]. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many difficult situations, but it also provided an opportunity for a critical inventory of the real means of education available. Hybrid educational events can be enjoyable for everyone; they can balance the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of the didactic act. Balance is always good in crisis situations. With the possibility of organizing a hybrid event, for which they were trained, teachers will no longer experience anxieties due to the onset of a crisis. Every challenge provides lessons.

The need for flexible adaptation to restrictive conditions is one of the lessons of the most recent pandemic. Hybrid events are responses to this need for adaptation manifested at the level of the educational process.

Better knowledge of the representations of all involved actors on the implications of pandemic restrictions supports the development of efficient adaptive strategies. It is useful in this context to highlight the experiences of teachers caught in the middle of the challenge of managing both their own and students' fears, new tasks and restrictions. The chances of using useful things learned in previous attempts increase with opening access to as much of the actors' experience as possible. Chances also increase by sharing hybrid event design recommendations: recommendations made after hosting such events. We consider these to be the contributions that this article makes to empirical research on the COVID-19 pandemic. From a theoretical point of view, the article corroborates the recognition of the usefulness of hybrid education in crisis conditions.

The organization of hybrid events seems to simultaneously satisfy the need for direct interaction and the need for comfort, indicated both by students, as beneficiaries of the didactic act, and by teachers, as the main providers of education. One of the limitations of the research lies in its subjective programmatic character of autoethnography, which was used to outline the representation of teachers regarding the pandemic context. However, like any qualitative research, it can also provide hypotheses for a future approach to the topic in a representative sample approach. As Tomej and collaborators [8] point out, research from an emic perspective, that is, from within, is useful because it produces rich and complicated data about teaching and learning, supporting future theorizing. In emic perspective research, teachers are both subjects and authors of research texts, capturing the dual nature of the constraints and facilities of their own teaching experiences in a pandemic context and in the transition to a hybrid educational system.

Another limitation of the research is given by the presentation of the advantages of hybrid events only in relation to pandemic constraints. As we just mentioned before, TELL event participants were excited about the tasks they received; they were happy to be engaged. The active, productive participation of students in the conduct of events represents an educational dimension that deserves to be studied in a wider context. Enthusiastic responses to TELL prompts could indicate the need for practice and, of course, play by the recipients of the educational act. It can signal a deficiency of institutionalized education, namely its overly theoretical character. This is a research direction that requires more attention in a future research endeavor.

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