Gauging Post Pandemic Return Culture Shock in College Students

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Introduction

Culture shock, as it applies to international exchange, travel, immigration, or business, is well researched and documented. Although existing throughout human history, it was first described as a basic element of cross-cultural interaction by Oberg in 1954. Since then, it has been popularized by a range of sociologists, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and even politicians for a variety of intents and purposes. The common goal has generally been to explore and describe the concept and variables involved in order to better understand, predict and simplify the pitfalls, challenges and misunderstanding that often plague cross-cultural exchanges as well as facilitating peaceful, productive and appropriate communication. Only recently (Stocker, 2022) however, has this idea been associated with groups being removed and reinstated voluntarily and expediently from and back into their own familiar culture. This revised concept, referred to hereafter as 'return culture shock' will be the focus of this report.

Rationale

The Covid-19 pandemic upended life as we know it globally and cross-culturally. Although there were significant differences in responses, precautions, and protocols from the wearing of masks and rolling out of vaccines to mass hoarding, denial and conspiracy theories. The one constant that permeated nearly every effected group on earth, however, was fear, isolation, and a disruption of normal life. One of the most adversely effected communities was the classroom. Wang, Z. et al. (2020) in a cross-sectional study of college students, found high levels of anxiety and depression as a direct result of pandemic

[83]

related restrictions. Regardless of language, culture, ideology or nationality, classrooms, as close contact incubators of ideas, communication and bacteria were quickly disbanded on a global scale as an almost unanimously agreed upon precaution. Although great effort was put into this transition, much less thought was given to the long-term implications (Wang, X. et al. 2020). Institutions quickly implemented alternative methods, online classes, various learning management systems, social distancing, communicating without seeing each other or through masks and generally taking the human contact element out of education. Teachers and students alike had to hastily adapt to a new classroom with new and unfamiliar materials, methods, and manners. Being the flexible species we are, for the most part, we quickly adapted and although not ideal, a semblance of quality education was maintained (Smart, 2006). This short-term fix for a few months or a semester slowly turned into a Covid winter of 2+ years, with (at the time of writing) a return to normal in many contexts still far from imaginable. Now that face to face teaching has resumed, a new and unforeseen challenge brought on by the pandemic paradigm shift has emerged. In many cases, students have forgotten how to learn, interact, behave, socialize, and even communicate in non-virtual groups. Previously taken for granted, common sense and reflexive skills like manners, nonverbal communication, sensing nuances, reading the air, exercising patience and restraint, turn taking, humor and interpersonal relations have generally deteriorated, become unfamiliar or have had to be relearned. This disjuncture of virtual and physical realities has created a return culture shock for teachers and students alike. The unexpected and sudden nature of this pandemic side effect is continuing to take its toll on reintegration efforts, becoming more and more evident as it effects student's attitudes and motivation. Having been originally masked by the euphoria, excitement, and relief of returning to the classroom, initial reintegration difficulties were overlooked or ignored. Being able to meet friends, connect with teachers, communicate clearly and actively engage with subjects, instilled such a level of enthusiasm that not much thought was given to anything else. Administrators similarly were preoccupied with safety measures and preventing breakouts, clusters, or further lockdowns. Unfortunately, the unintended and

unimagined consequence of this was that many students with social-psychological difficulties such as anxiety or depression were not accommodated and students who had never suffered from social problems before but were suddenly experiencing them now, were not considered. By the time awareness of social readjustment challenges became apparent, any measures of assistance and accommodation were reactive and not preventative. Romero (2021) found the same challenges reintegrating children back into the classroom. In hindsight, this is a regrettable shortsightedness and a less than optimal position for teachers and administrators tasked with supporting, facilitating, and enabling learning by ensuring all students have equal accessibility to resources and education. The following reports on preliminary research aimed at understanding the challenges and difficulties students faced reintegrating into the classroom, documenting and understanding their experiences of return culture shock and providing insight and ideas for support to facilitate a return to normalcy.

Method

In order to understand the effects of reintegration on students and to determine the extent and even existence of feelings of return culture shock, a voluntary questionnaire was administered to several groups of first to fourth year and graduate college students. The questionnaire consisted of 10 self-rating and yes or no questions distributed using an anonymous Google form (see appendix). The questionnaire was simply titled *First Semester Experience Survey* as to avoid generating bias or otherwise cloud responses. Subjects were informed that the purpose of the survey was to assess experiences in the first semester and that results would be used for improving the learning environment in general. Although responses were anonymous and voluntary a response rate of 99% was achieved. A total of 320 students responded and a summary and analysis of their views and experiences readapting to university life after several semesters of online learning is what follows.

Results and Discussion

Questionnaires were categorized by year and analyzed by considering

average and most common responses. These were then organized into tables in order to infer trends, tendencies as well as describe the nature of students' attitudes and experiences reintegrating to face-to-face classes. The results were further divided into response types for ease of interpretation and correlation. Short self-rating responses (questions 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 9) were placed in tables for cross referencing and longer answers (questions 4, 5, 8, 10) were condensed and summarized to provide a holistic sense of the group's attitudes, preferences, and experiences. Categorizing and analyzing these by year provided a clear visualization of the impact of Covid-19 measures and restrictions on students' education experiences and subsequent attitudes.

From the results in table 1 it becomes apparent the first and fourth year students were among the least effected by pandemic measures. Both groups had fairly high response to being able to readjust 3.81 and 3.9 respectively and also had the lowest experience of return culture shock reporting 27.3% and 25% respectively. One possible reason for this is that first year students had nothing to compare to as they are just beginning their university experience and fourth year students have had 1 year experience interrupted by 2 years online and therefore could feel positive or nostalgic about returning. Second and third year students appear to be the most effected reporting the lowest scores of adjustability 3.1 and 3.26 out of 5 respectively while also indicating high levels of return culture shock 46.2% and 78.9% respectively. These responses might be attributed to extensively interrupted education, having had no chance to attend regular university classes or an overall negative feeling about the university experience, anxiety about the future or worry about attending in person classes for the first time. To better understand these tendencies, in terms of cause and effect or correlation, a detailed analysis and summary of each grade and category is required.

Summary of first year students' responses

First year students reported the least amount of disruption in their learning with 13.2% answering that they had had no experience of online classes. This is

logical as they are transitioning from high school to a new learning environment. Despite having a high response for being able to adjust 3.81, and also one of the lowest claims of experiencing return culture shock (27.3%) they indicated a 40.9% preference for on demand classes over face to face or hybrid. The biggest difficulties reported were not unique and included time management issues, worry about how to make friends and how to communicate with new people. First year students also reported a high level of feeling happiness 77.3% but also of nervousness 44.1% and fear 31.8%. This could be due to the thrill and intrepidation of entering a new learning environment by starting university classes for the first time. Varma, (2021) found that younger learners suffered more from sleep deprivation, loneliness, depression, and anxiety as a result of upheavals brought on by pandemic restrictions. This is also supported by positive responses regarding making friends, communicating with teachers, and socializing. In summary first year students do not seem adversely effected by online learning and their social and psychological challenges are likely due to the transition and excitement of the novelty of entering university.

Summary of second year students' responses

Responses from second year students suggest a moderate level of disruption and isolation but also a strong willingness to return to normal and an acceptance of the situation. This may be due to the shortened period of online classes and the fact that their transition from high school was not combined with the lockdowns, fear and anxiety brought on by the onset of the pandemic. Although they reported the lowest adjustment score (3.1) they also experienced only moderate return culture shock (46.2%). This is further supported by experiencing mixed feelings such as high scores for happiness 75% and optimism 53.3% but also for anxiety 46.2%. They appear to be a well-balanced and open-minded group with a high preference for hybrid style class 44.2% but still positive and hopeful yet ambivalent about face-to-face or on demand options, both rated equally at 25% preference. The major challenges they faced involved time management, communication and adjustment issues yet their positive experiences were communication, interaction with others and socialization.

This group seems to have come face to face with the challenges, processed them and is ready to move on.

Summary of third year students' responses

Third year student are unique in this group in that their entire university experience has been interrupted or completely online. They have not been able to experience orientations, senior advisory consultations, club activities, part time jobs, parties, social activities or even relationship building, in the traditional sense. This group has had the most significant disruption and the nature of their responses strongly indicates this trend. Although very optimistic about returning to face-to-face learning with a score of 4.42 they reported low responses for being able to adjust 3.26. This group reported that 78.9% experienced return culture shock, more than twice as much as any other group. This number alone is quite significant especially considering that they also have the highest preference for on-demand classes. The challenges that this group faced is further indication of their difficulty. Many of their responses were typical such as problems with time management, making friends, and commuting, however responses like "no experience or guidance", "everything was new", "did not know how to make friends or communicate with new people", "first time taking face-to-face classes" or "forgot how to act" clearly indicate the deep social and psychological trauma that this group experienced. In contrast their positive experiences were vague and limited, such, communication, motivation, focus on classes or easier to understand teachers. These do not show a joy, relief or enthusiasm for being students on campus but are rather more utilitarian and mechanical characteristics of individuals wanting to complete a task effectively and efficiently. Furthermore third year students also reported high levels of happiness 89.5%, anxiety 47.1% but was the only group to indicate high levels of depression 20.8%.

In summary third year students represent the biggest challenge of the pandemic disruptions of education. This was a group of which much was expected, who sacrificed a great deal but to which very little was given in terms of guidance, preparation, consideration, empathy or understanding. Third year students

represent a cautionary tale which teachers and administrators should take to heart when considering similar situations in the future and how to accommodate and best serve these students as they continue to strive to move forward today.

Summary of fourth year and Graduate students' responses

Similar to first year students, responses indicate that fourth year and graduate students were also only marginally affected by changes to their learning environment. Mostly this is due to a perspective that extends beyond the pandemic and the subsequent ability to be able to see present difficulties as temporary. These students are more mature and therefore have more experience to draw on. They had the most positive feelings towards returning to the classroom 4.3 and 4.5 respectively and had the highest scores for being able to easily readapt 3.9 and 4.3 respectively. This is also evident in the fact that few of these students experienced any form of return culture shock. They also have the highest preference for face-to-face classes and the lowest interest in on demand or any form of online. Fourth year students indicated the highest preference for hybrid, but this is probably due to the fact that their lives outside of the university are quite busy and dedicated to other activities such as job hunting or teacher training exercises. As expected, the biggest challenges faced by these two groups involved time management, commuting, communicating with others, and participating in classes. Graduate students indicated they had difficulty learning how to learn but this, as with first your students, is probably due to the transition of entering a new program with primarily independent research focused methods. Interestingly, though these groups also indicated high levels of happiness (83.3% and 87.7%) respectively and excitement (61.4% and 75% respectively) but also anxiety (50% and 62.5% respectively) and fear (33.3% and 37.5% respectively). Further research is needed here, however, one could speculate that this is likely due to the anticipation and worry about graduating and entering the workforce during uncertain times.

Table 1: Students Responses

1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	Graduate
s-90	s=67	s=87	s=68	s=8
1) How many years of online learning have you experienced?				
13.2% (none) 41.2% (1 year) 41.2% (2 years)	11.5% (1 year) 84.6% (2 years)	13.2% (1 year) 41.2% (2 years) 41.2% (3 year)	70.8% (2 years) 29.2% (3 year)	37.5% (2 years) 62.5% (3 year)
2) How did you feel returning to face-to-face learning? (1-5)				
3.77	3.57	4.42	4.3	4.5
3) Were you able to easily adjust to returning to the classroom? (1-5)				
3.81	3.1	3.26	3.9	4.3
6) Did you experience any kind of 'return culture shock' returning to the classroom?				
27.3% Yes 72.7% No	46.2% Yes 53.8% No	78.9% Yes 21.1% No	25% Yes 75% No	37.5% Yes 62.5% No
7) Were your teachers supportive and accommodating? (1-5)				
4.43	4.6	4.78	4.75	4.9
9) Which style of learning do you prefer?				
27.3% f-to-f 27.3% hybrid 40.9% on demand	25% f-to-f 44.2% hybrid 25% on demand	11.8% f-to-f 38.2% hybrid 45.6% on demand	37.5% f-to-f 50% hybrid 4% on dem	62.5% f-to-f 37.5% hybrid 0% on demand

4) What was your biggest challenge returning to the classroom after learning online?

1st Year	Time management, wearing masks in class, anxiety, communication difficulties, no friends, meeting new people
2nd Year	Time, motivation, commuting, how to make friends, new lifestyle, how to communicate
3rd Year	Time, everything was new, no experience or guidance, meeting people, how to make friends, communicating, crowds, first time taking face-to-face classes, forgot how to act
4th Year	Time, communicating with others, participation, making friends, commute
Graduate	Time, learning to learn, commuting

Graduate
s=8

5% (2 years)
5% (3 year)

4.5

4.3

e classroom?
5% Yes
5% No

4.9

5% f-to-f
5% hybrid
· on demand

rning online?

:ation

yle, how to

; people, how
-to-face

ls, commute

5) What was positive about returning to the classroom after learning online?

1st Year	Work with friends, easy to understand classes, socializing, meet friends, communicate, motivation, concentration, talk to teachers
2nd Year	Friends, communication, interaction, connect with teachers, communication, motivation, discussion, interaction
3rd Year	Friends, communication, connection with others, concentration, motivation focus on classes, easier to understand teachers
4th Year	Meeting people, interaction, motivation, socialization, discussions, friends, communication, experience, social skills
Graduate	Communication, discussion, interaction, friends, motivation

8) What emotions did you experience when returning to face-to-face learning?

1st Year	Happiness 77.3%, Anxiety 47.1%, Nervousness 44.1%, Fear 31.8%, Excitement 22.7%
2nd Year	Happiness 75%, Optimism 53.3%, Excitement 46.7%, Anxiety 46.2%
3rd Year	Happiness 89.5%, Anxiety 47.1%, Nervousness 44.1%, Excitement 31.6%, Optimism 26.3%, Depression 20.8%
4th Year	Happiness 83.3%, Nervousness 54.2%, Optimism 53.3%, Excitement 61.4%, Anxiety 50% Fear 33.3%
Graduate	Happiness 87.7%, Excitement 75%, Anxiety 62.5% Nervousness 50%, Fear 37.5%, Optimism 25%,

10) What is your suggestion for the future format of university education?

1st Year	Hybrid, not zoom, flexibility, students' choice, autonomy, On demand options
2nd Year	Some classes should be hybrid or online, most classes face-to-face
3rd Year	Hybrid options, hybrid is revolutionary, reduce time and financial burden, flexibility, accommodation, choices
4th Year	Flexibility, consideration for students' schedules, autonomy, more active learning
Graduate	Flexibility, hybrid options

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this survey indicate that the impact of restrictions to educational and interpersonal experiences brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic affected different people differently. Some were easily able to adapt and adjust to changes others were deeply influenced socially and psychologically. It is clear though that the nature and length of disruption experienced, contributed to heightened senses of discomfort, anxiety, and withdrawal. The most adversely affected group remains 3rd year students who entered university at the peak of lock downs, social distancing protocols, elaborate restrictions, a total removal of basic personal freedoms as well as an unknown future. These students could not benefit from basic university experiences as first year freshman nor could they use their experience to guide them when they finally were able to come to campus as sophomores. They not only had to play the role of newcomers who were unfamiliar but also of experienced seniors getting ready to choose seminars and prepare for a job hunting. This created a complicated and contradictory social position for which no one was prepared. A positive outcome, however, is that each group reported that teachers were very helpful in supporting students. This may indicate an instinctive empathy or understanding of what these students are going through (Guison, 2022, Wakui, 2021). Further research investigating what teachers did, how they accommodated students, how much experience they had and the nature of their instruction, support and communication would be very useful and necessary for understanding their role and influence.

The pandemic and its restrictions burdened teachers and students with many obstacles and challenges but also provided many tools, lessons, and opportunities. Social distancing deprived us of the classroom and face-to-face discussions however online tools and LMS's provided us with a modern and efficient way to connect and communicate online. It's also clear from students' responses that a more flexible, accommodating, hybrid style of learning is desirable and necessary for the future. By considering students experiences we can fully understand the depth, nature, and impact of Covid-19 disruption to

traditional education. The four years students spend at university is much more than just learning about any subject, it is a time to discover themselves, take risks and challenges, experiment with relationships and actively consider their futures and possible careers. The pandemic made most of these experiences impossible, limiting students' activities to just learning about subjects without actively engaging or connecting with teachers or each other. This is a tragedy, the impact of which will take much time, consideration, and research to fully understand. However, it is also a golden opportunity to learn from our mistakes, apply our successes, coordinate our innovations, and move forward to create a new, flexible, inclusive, and dynamic learning environment.

Appendix
First Semester Survey

The purpose of this questionnaire is to assess your experiences in the first semester. Results will be used for improving the learning environment in general.

1) How many years of online learning have you experienced?

None	1 year	2 years	3 years

2) How did you feel returning to face to face learning?

Negative	1	2	3	4	5	Positive

3) Were you able to easily adjust to returning to the classroom?

Very Difficult	1	2	3	4	5	Very Easy

4) What was your biggest challenge returning to the classroom after learning online?

5) What was positive about returning to the classroom after learning online?

6) Did you experience any kind of 'return culture shock' returning to the class-

room?

Yes		No	

7) Were your teachers supportive and accommodating?

No, not very helpful	1	2	3	4	5	Yes, very helpful

8) What emotions did you experience when returning to face to face learning?
(Check as many as apply)

Happiness	Anxiety	Nervousness	Disappointment	Fear
Excitement	Freedom	Optimism	Depression	Relief
Other:				

9) Which style of learning do your prefer?

Online (Live)	Online (On Demand)	Hybrid	Face to face
Other:			

10 What is your suggestion for the future format of university education?

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