

UDC 378.147.091.32:004.738.5; 37.018.43:34(497.11)

CERIF: S 281, S 210

DOI: 10.51204/Anali_PFBU_22408A

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ONLINE TEACHING – EDUCATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS OR EDUCATION OF THE FUTURE?

The paper analyzes different aspects of online teaching as the prevalent method of education at the Belgrade University Faculty of Law during the COVID-19 pandemic. The starting assumption is that the combination of online and traditional teaching better meets the modern requirements of the labor market and better trains law students for different career paths and modern professions. Since digital technology has become an indispensable part of all spheres of law, we advocate the idea that an adapted form of online teaching develops young lawyers' digital literacy. The paper draws on the results of a qualitative study, i.e., four focus group discussions with teachers at the Faculty of Law who conducted classes during the pandemic. Despite different personal affinities and experiences regarding online classes, the general opinion was that online teaching should become part of the teaching practice, with noticeable disparity regarding its intensity and implementation.

Key words: COVID-19 pandemic. – Online education. – Digital literacy. – Teachers. – Faculty of Law.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Some will say it is difficult to analyze the implications of an ongoing event and that it may be imprudent to make predictions at this time. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease, whether it has the characteristics of a “black swan” or a “gray rhino” (Hanić 2020, 10–12, 23–25),¹ certainly requires a detailed analysis of different aspects of social life, and especially of the higher education system, which inevitably had to adapt to the new reality. This change, which might have been gradual in a regular course of things, reduced the possibility of the traditional form of learning and face-to-face classes, which is why learning via digital platforms became the prevalent way of operation for most higher educational institutions. Although it is difficult to observe one segment of society separately from the others, in this paper we will critically analyze the current mode of formal educational preparations in order to determine whether it provides law students with the best training for their future professional engagement.

In line with the theoretical debate and obtained empirical results, the author asks the question whether the current form of teaching needs to be modified. The argument is in favor of online classes being retained, in a redesigned and adapted form. In addition to the basic advantages of distance learning – operational flexibility, time and space savings, availability of lecturers and teaching materials, lower costs, possibility of greater student involvement (Stojanović 2020, 138; Arkorful, Abaidoo 2017, 401–403) – it is the author’s belief that this form of teaching motivates (but also forces) students, as well as teachers, to use digital devices more significantly. The use of online tools and navigating one’s way through the digital environment encourages “confident, critical and responsible use of digital technologies for learning, at work and for participation in society,” i.e., develops digital literacy as one of the general competences that every individual in a modern society needs.²

¹ “Black swan” is defined as an event that happens rarely and exceptionally, one that is of great significance and is predictable, while “gray rhino” is a major high-threat event that is highly probable and likely to have wider implications, yet people neglect these threats. Hanić focuses on the difference between the two, while advocating the position that the COVID-19 pandemic meets the criteria for both, and that its defining depends on individual interpretation (Hanić 2020, 10–12, 23–25).

² For more on digital literacy as one of the eight key competencies see: Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning (Text with EEA relevance), *Official Journal of the European Union* (2018/C 189/01), 7, 9–10, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)&from=EN) (last visited on 25 November, 2021).

Relying on the results of exploratory empirical research, this paper will critically analyze the organization and implementation of distance learning,³ with special emphasis on the experiences and perspectives of the teachers at the Faculty of Law in Belgrade. The social and educational implications of e-learning will be reviewed in the short term and in the long term, and proposals for improving the preparation, implementation and evaluation of online teaching will also be given. Due to the fact that only the Faculty of Law in Belgrade was analyzed as a case study, the paper mainly has practical significance – it was written with the desire to advance the current form of teaching in order to better train future lawyers and increase their visibility on the labor market, and therefore, also their chances of employment.

2. DEVELOPING DIGITAL LITERACY AS A FUNCTION OF ONLINE EDUCATION OF LAWYERS

2.1. The Legal Framework for the Development of Digital Literacy

The European framework for the development and digital transformation of education at the national, regional and local level is based on three basic strategic frameworks (Senić Ružić 2021, 13–15). The Framework for Developing and Understanding Digital Competence in Europe (DigComp)⁴ recognizes digital literacy as one of the eight key competences that all people and students need for lifelong learning and personal development. Digital literacy includes 1) managing information, 2) communication skills in a digital environment, 3) creating digital content, 4) safety in a digital environment, and 5) problem solving (Brečko, Ferrari, Punie 2014). The Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)⁵ is

³ Note on terminology: the terms *traditional*, *live* and *face-to-face* classes will be used in this paper as synonyms, while the terms *online learning*, *distance learning* and *e-learning*, which have the same meaning and denote “an interactive or two-way process between teachers and students, with the help of electronic media, with the emphasis being on the learning process, while the media are merely a tool supplementing the process” (Soleša 2007, 11, translated by author).

⁴ The other key competencies for lifelong learning are: 1) literacy competence, 2) multilingual competence, 3) mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, 4) digital competence, 5) personal, social and learning to learn competence, 6) citizenship competence, 7) entrepreneurship competence, and 8) cultural awareness and expression competence. For more see: European Commission (2019).

⁵ This framework includes a total of 22 competences of educators, divided into six areas. For more see: Redecker (2017).

aimed at empowering educators with the digital technologies that can be used to improve and innovate educational processes. Finally, the European Framework for Digital Competent Educational Organization (*DigCompOrg*)⁶ promotes systemic integration of digital technologies through educational innovation in the pedagogical, technological and organizational sphere in educational institutions.⁷

This framework also impacted Serbia, which, in the process of accession to the European Union, is looking to align with and implement European values contained in important documents (Senić Ružić 2021, 13–15). The Digital Agenda for Serbia, modelled after the Digital Agenda for Europe (2010), was also adopted by adopting two strategies – the Strategy for the Development of the Information Society to 2020 and the Strategy for the Development of e-Communications in Serbia from 2010 to 2020, with the aim of developing information society and broadband Internet, the so-called “digital oxygen of European prosperity” (Bogojević, Gospić 2010, 96–97). It is also important to mention the Strategies for the Development of Education and Upbringing up to 2030 (SROVRS 2030),⁸ which envisage an increase in the number of schools in which hybrid (mixed) and online education is implemented, as well as the Strategy for Digital Skills Development in the Republic of Serbia from 2020 to 2024, which aims to continuously develop digital competences by aligning curricula and learning programs with skills for the 21st century.⁹ When we talk about digital competences programs that

⁶ *European Commission website*. 2021. The European Framework for Digital Competent Educational Organization (DigCompOrg). <https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/digcomporg/framework> (last visited 19 December, 2021).

⁷ This is the basic European framework, but it is important to also mention other European documents such as: the Lisbon Strategy for the period 2010–2020, in which the European Union launched the transition to information society; Europe 2020: Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Growth, which continues the process of transitioning to a knowledge economy; the European Skills Agenda, through which member states begin developing digital skills strategies; A common European response to shared goals: A concept for tackling the digital skills challenges in Europe (2017), which offers examples of good practices as possible solutions to specific digital challenges; the Digital Education Plan 2021–2027: Resetting education and training for the digital age, and many others (Matović 2021, 6–12).

⁸ For more see: Strategije razvoja obrazovanja i vaspitanja u Republici Srbiji do 2030. godine (SROVRS 2030) [Strategies for the development of education and upbringing until 2030]. https://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1-SROVRS-2030_MASTER_0402_V1.pdf (last visited 20 December, 2021).

⁹ These are just some of the important documents, for others see: Strategija razvoja digitalnih veština u Republici Srbiji za period od 2020. do 2024. godine [Strategy for Digital Skills Development in the Republic of Serbia from 2020 to

are developed and initiated in the field of higher education in Serbia, there is a general trend of strengthening specializations in the field of information technologies, both in formal and in informal education. This trend is accompanied by an increase in the number of programs aimed at developing digital competences intended for teachers and other employees at preschool and school institutions (Matović 2021, 46).

2.2. Lawyers in the Digital Environment

The world of education and the world of the labor market perhaps only seemingly function separately, but they are connected and interdependent in many ways. The modern education systems should not, therefore, focus only on providing basic knowledge and skills, but rather help students discover their own potentials and abilities that can help them in their further career development and professional achievements (Shubina, Kulakli 2019, 95–96). Therefore, the “product” of higher education institutions would be competent experts who are of key importance for the survival and development of professional organizations, social institutions and society at large (Kallioinen 2010, 57). This primarily refers to the skills of applying knowledge, solving problems, adapting to social, economic and other changes in society, developing personal autonomy, responsibility and self-regulation (Shubina, Kulakli 2019, 95–96). However, when we talk about lawyers, in addition to these, the skills that also need to be developed are those of interpreting and applying legal norms in concrete cases, drafting legal acts, moral consciousness and responsibility, the ability to negotiate and make public appearances, etc. (Bećirović 2015, 12–13, 16).

Competitiveness in the world of education, in the sense that a large number of faculties in Serbia have accredited legal education programs, poses an additional challenge for the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law: how to organize, i.e., advance the teaching process in order to respond to the demands of the labor market? In analyzing whether the study programs in the field of law are quite conservative and standardized, and whether they pay sufficient attention to developing soft skills, Bećirović had some interesting findings: out of a total of 48,278 accredited study places in first cycle studies, 26,860 study places are in the fields of social studies and humanities, of which 5,830 study places are reserved for law students. This

2024], *Official Gazette of the RS* No. 21/18. <http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/vlada/strategija/2020/21/2/reg/> (last visited 20 December, 2021).

means that *one in eight* at state and private faculties in Serbia offers the possibility of acquiring the academic title of Bachelor of Laws (Honors)¹⁰. The fact that almost every university in Serbia has a study program in the field of law, more precisely thirteen out of the total of eighteen universities, results in a trend of an increasing number of holders of Bachelors of Laws (Honors) degrees in the past decade (Bećirović 2015, 8–22). Thus, while in 2010 a total of 1,982 Bachelors of Laws (Honors)/Masters of Laws entered the labor market, by 2016 this figure had almost doubled (3,506), followed by a notable downward tendency by 2020 (2,898). These findings show that law studies are still quite attractive.

Table 1.
Number of Bachelors of Laws (Honors) graduates in Serbia,
from 2010 to 2020.¹¹

Year of graduation	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total number of Bachelors of Laws (Honors) (1 st and 2 nd degree of education)	1982	2593	2935	3039	3337	3223	3506	2603	3079	2618	2898

Source: Author

In the case of the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law, which offers the highest number of study places, at the end of 2019 Mila Đorđević conducted a quantitative study on a sample of fourth-year students in order to examine the potential of the current study program to train young lawyers for the practical application of acquired knowledge. The questionnaire was filled in by a total of 334 students, of whom almost half (46%) were of the opinion that the Faculty had only partly trained them for their future profession, while as many as 97.5% pointed out that they were overburdened by theoretical studies and that they lacked practical knowledge (Đorđević 2020). As Đorđević concluded, and the author agrees with this view, the global trend of

¹⁰ Suad Bećirović based these statistics on the results from Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance. 2015. *Vodič kroz akreditovane studijske programe na visokoškolskim ustanovama u Republici Srbiji* [Guide through accredited study programs in higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia]. (Bećirović 2015, 8–22).

¹¹ The data for the first four years, from 2010 to 2013, was taken from Bećirović (2015, 12), while the data for the period 2015 – 2020 was obtained from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, on 17 December 2021. The shown data refers to all students of undergraduate and Master's studies who completed the law educational program at state and private faculties in Serbia.

expanding practical training classes in law schools should also be applied in Serbia, but in a way that “practical work should be introduced for the sake of a better and easier mastering of the theoretical material” (Đorđević 2020).

Looking only at the case of the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law, the Legal Informatics course unit is taken only in the fourth year of undergraduate studies, and has the status of an elective course, i.e., skill.¹² If they choose this course, students have the opportunity to get acquainted with the general basics of legal informatics and with various forms of application of information and communication technology in the legal profession. The syllabus mainly focuses on covering practical knowledge for working in a digital environment, with the aim of training students to use new technologies, electronic databases and search engines for legal purposes.¹³ Regardless of the fact that this elective course unit directly trains future lawyers for the practical use of digital contents, the question arises whether it would be purposeful to also opt for the so-called pervasive method and to additionally develop digital literacy also through other courses?

3. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Analysis of the Existing Scientific Research

There is no doubt that the pandemic had strong impact on various aspects of education of young people around the globe. Speaking of *young people in Serbia*, empirical research shows that the pandemic quite negatively affected their education and that those who had online classes are mostly dissatisfied with their quality (Stojanović, Vukov 2020, 15–16, 28–33; UN Human Rights Unit in Serbia, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia 2020, 18–26). Some young people did not have the necessary conditions to adequately participate in the online education system, while most respondents said the conducting of classes and grading during the state of emergency was unsatisfactory (SeConS 2020, 10, 42). A substantial number of young people experienced a decline in motivation to learn during the pandemic, while the fact that a substantial number of them either postponed or interrupted their education is something that specially calls for a societal reaction (SeConS 2020, 10, 42).

¹² University of Belgrade Faculty of Law. 2020. Syllabus for the course Legal Informatics (Skill) for 2017/2018. <https://ius.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/02-2-SILABUS.pdf> (last visited 24 November, 2021).

¹³ *Ibid.*

Regarding the experiences of *students in Serbia*, the respondents were, in general, partially satisfied with the implementation of online classes (Radojević, Drobac 2021, 211–217). What they singled out as the main benefits of online classes was that they save time, offer flexibility in following classes from different locations, enable easier taking of notes because they can record classes, and the financial aspect, i.e. not having to pay for accommodation and transportation (Radojević, Drobac 2021, 211–217), as well as the comfort of the space they are in during classes (Pejatović, Orlović Lovren, Čairović 2021, 171–176). What the students listed as the main downsides are reduced interaction,¹⁴ decline in motivation, insufficient instructions from lecturers, not being able to attend practical sessions, and internet connection problems. Their main suggestions on how to improve online classes included asynchronous learning, i.e., recording classes and posting them online, which would enable them to repeatedly listen to lectures, as well as greater motivation, interest and training of teachers for this type of work (Radojević, Drobac 2021, 211–217).

A study conducted through an online questionnaire in 2021 on a sample of 548 students from all four years of undergraduate studies at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law showed that the vast majority of students (41.6%) believe that online learning will not provide the same results as traditional learning, as well as that online classes should not in future be a standard form of work (50.4%).¹⁵ Consequently more than half of the students (57.3%) prefer traditional learning, 29.6% of respondents believe that blended learning also suits them, and only 10.8% prefers online education.

¹⁴ An example of good practice in overcoming these shortcomings and ensuring the greater student participation is the way classes are organized at the Legal Clinic for Environmental Law at the University of Belgrade Law Faculty, where online classes were standard practice even before the pandemic. Greater interaction and informal communication among students and lecturers were encouraged by enabling them to join the internet platform ahead of time and to stay on it after classes, which gave the students more opportunity to ask question. Student feedback was made possible by using the Kahoot! app in which the students could, at the same time, give answers while remaining anonymous to everyone except to the lecturers (Drenovak Ivanović 2021, 177–180).

¹⁵ Led by Danilo Vuković and Valerija Dabetić, and as part of the activities of the Center for Socio-Legal Studies, first year students, members of the 2020/2021 expert group in the course Basics of Sociology of Law at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law, conducted a quantitative study on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The analysis of the effects of the pandemic was quite extensive in the questionnaire, but due to the limited scope of this paper, only the results related to challenges in education will be presented here. We owe special thanks to the members of the expert group who participated in the making of this questionnaire.

Table 2.
Opinions of students of the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law
regarding online classes.

Questions	Online learning will result in the same knowledge as offline learning		Online learning will result in less knowledge than offline learning		All students can equally participate in online classes		Online classes should in future be a regular form of work	
	Number of filled-in questionnaires	%	Number of filled-in questionnaires	%	Number of filled-in questionnaires	%	Number of filled-in questionnaires	%
I do not agree at all	228	41.6	66	12.0	119	21.6	276	50.4
I mostly do not agree	129	23.5	67	12.2	104	18.9	60	11.0
I neither agree nor disagree	73	13.3	68	12.4	101	18.3	74	13.4
I mostly agree	61	11.1	167	30.4	97	17.7	47	8.6
I fully agree	41	7.4	161	29.4	109	19.8	71	13.0
Incorrect answers	17	3.1	20	3.6	20	3.6	20	3.6
TOTAL	548	100%	548	100%	548	100%	548	100%

Source: Author

Speaking of *teachers*, as the bearers of the education process, the results of the poll of that around 15,000 teachers, expert associates and principals of primary and secondary schools in Serbia, showed that 58.4% of respondents have a positive attitude towards distance learning and believe that it should become an integral part of school practice after the pandemic. Half of respondents (52.6%) were of the opinion that distance learning should systematically become part of education, either by supplementing face-to-face classes or by being combined with them.¹⁶

¹⁶ For more see: Zavod za unapređenje obrazovanja i vaspitanja (Institute for Advancement of Education and Upbringing) 2020. Teachers in other countries, such as Bulgaria, Canada and Norway, have similar experiences (Grozdić 2021, 33–35).

3.2. The Process of Conducting a Focus Group Discussion

As a specific type of interview, a focus group discussion¹⁷ takes place simultaneously for a larger number of people, i.e., in a group of respondents who have certain common characteristics. This method of gathering data requires that approximately 6 to 12 people assemble at the same place and time to interactively discuss questions posed by a moderator. As Slađana Đurić concludes, “this is not a spontaneous conversation of randomly gathered people, but a guided discussion of carefully selected participants” (Đurić 2005, 21). The comparative advantage of this method is in the interaction, dynamics, i.e., in the “synergy effect of the group”, which is emphasized in the specific and rather relaxed environment (Bešić 2019, 316–317).

Due to a number of similar characteristics, taken as a suitable sample from the ranks of teachers were: a) demonstrators and junior teaching assistants (6 respondents, ages 24 to 25), b) teaching assistants (7 respondents, ages 26 to 34), c) assistant professors and associate professors (7 respondents, ages 35 to 45) and d) professors of the Faculty of Law (9 respondents, ages 46 to 66). Although it is often suggested in literature that the respondents should be so-called “homogenous strangers” (Bešić 2019, 321), the fact that our respondents know one another and collaborate actually reduced the likelihood of the answers being “contaminated” and enabled them to speak freely (Mirković 2014, 834). Diversity, in the sense that the respondents being from different Departments, paved the way for a potential comparison between the application of online teaching in different areas of law.

The main topic – the educational process through distance learning in the function of developing digital literacy – was further achieved through three basic issues: a) the preparation of online classes, b) the advantages and disadvantages in the implementation of distance learning, and c) valorization, i.e., testing knowledge in the sense of achieved educational goals and outcomes. During the discussion, the respondents also spoke about the tools that they most often used in communication with students, how they overcame the challenges they encountered while conducting online classes, about the potential training needed for teachers, and about

¹⁷ In literature there is sometimes insistence on the methodological and terminological differences between a group interview and a focus group. While in a group interview, participants mostly answer, in an order, a larger number of questions/topics asked by a moderator, in the case of a focus group the entire group deliberates one question/topic. As there is no essential discrepancy regarding the preparation, realization and analysis of group discussions, we will from this point on use the conciliatory term “focused group discussion” (Đurić 2005, 5; Bešić 2019, 316–317).

what classes should be like following the pandemic. The first three focus group discussions were conducted in December 2021, and the latest was conducted in in June 2022, at the Faculty.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Online Classes as Inevitable Future Teaching Practice

The participants in the first focus group were the youngest teachers – *demonstrators and junior teaching associates*. Comparing their student and educator experiences, the respondents were of the general opinion that it is necessary to diverge from the traditional, *ex cathedra* model and embrace the interactive model of teaching, in order to encourage students to participate more actively in classes. A teaching system oriented towards reproduction of knowledge leaves little room for additional research and fails to develop critical thinking aimed at problem solving, which is one of the general competences in the modern labor market, and some teaching activities should be created with the aim of acquiring practical knowledge. The younger teachers are categorical in their view that such activities should not be elective but compulsory.

“When you ask a [Faculty of Law] graduate if they would recommend the Faculty of Law and when they reply, well, no, because you do nothing creative over there, then you know that it’s a lost case. What is law if not creative? Law breeds creativity. Indeed, only a creative person can truly practice law. Those who do not perceive that in this way, they do not understand the task... that is, that task is a priori not properly established at the faculty.”¹⁸

The respondents’ general opinion is that the implementation of the distance learning educational process will no longer be a matter of personal affinities, but, just as the pandemic changed some things irreversibly and forever, this form of digital classes will also be present in general. The respondents see it as an inevitability that will not be discussion much, only the way in which they will be implemented will vary from one chair to another. They point out that the need for comfort is an inevitable part of human nature, and that the students’ desire to follow practical sessions from a comfortable armchair in their home instead of having to go to the Faculty will often prevail. The respondents caution that such behavior, i.e., this

¹⁸ All focus group transcripts translated by the author.

advantage of distance learning, can be a double-edged sword, but if these classes are held properly, once per week, they can be a great advantage of the faculty as an institution.

“...it is wrong for online classes to serve to imitate face-to-face classes. And I am glad we made the Chair aware of this early on, that this is not how it should be and that, if there is that online model of holding practical sessions, it should be a special model that makes use of all the advantages of that model while also trying to eliminate certain weaknesses. The existing live approach should not be imitated through Webex because it simply physically cannot be identical and of the same quality. The only way for it to be equal in quality is for it to take its own course, following some rules of its own.”

What the respondents listed as one of the major advantages of the online model is greater participation of the students who, in their impression, were much more open to speak up and ask questions while for them, as teachers, the online model provided more flexibility in terms of time management. What they singled out as the greatest downside is the lack of social contact and the limited pedagogical role of the professorial profession. What the respondents cited as reasons for their sometimes lower personal motivation in conducting online classes is the absence of direct (non) verbal communication, the exchange of “energy” with the group, which the traditional model of teaching enables.

“The advantages of online practical sessions are not insignificant, especially for students who are not from Belgrade and who could not attend because student dormitories were closed and they are from the interior. If at least one period remained as an online period...that period would not steal anything from anyone’s knowledge, and it would be of help to those who cannot follow... In addition to this, people who do not want to miss practical sessions for any reason – they are sick, or working, or they are away, they can make up for that this way... a possibility for connecting that is far cheaper, more practical and will be increasingly present, which I personally don’t think is a bad thing, especially in an academic community in which there is constant insistence on critical thinking and improvement of knowledge.”

4.2. “We Are Older Than We Think”

Comparing experiences from their studies, the second group of respondents – teaching assistants – noted that the use of computers was not compulsory but was also not needed for most of them at undergraduate studies classes while they were students (it is interesting that some even studied for their

legal informatics course exam by learning only the theoretical part from a textbook). Those who opted for the moot court competition started using computers more seriously only in the fourth year of studies. Others did this in their Master's degree studies, where they had the practical skills course, which, among other things, taught them to search literature and write papers and, they also gained knowledge on different software tools.

“And that is something lawyers need the most – Word, for those who work in commerce they need Excel, we also need Power Point, and most of these bases are intuitive, easy to search and you don't need that... but I think that perhaps starting in the first year, but that's a recommendation, we should literally go to soft skills, because our students don't have soft skills nor are they aware of how important soft skills are, and I learnt that along the way and then also in the organizations that I was in, the non-governmental, student, and I realized the importance of that.”

At one point a lively discussion developed among respondents, regarding whether it is at all necessary to organize education aimed at developing digital literacy at the university. The position of one part of the respondents was that developing digital literacy should be reserved for the informal education segment, while others were of the opinion that digital literacy is prior knowledge that students should acquire in primary and secondary schools. The general conclusion was that students should be trained, but that equal support should be provided to teachers in terms of finding a systemic solution, because digital literacy of the teachers is not just a matter of personal aspiration to develop a skill, but the responsibility of the university and of the entire educational system.

“We are now in a situation, as the pandemic has shown us, that we cannot do without that. Not to go into what someone likes or what they are better at, we would not have been able to function for a while – and not just us but any university – without online platforms.... Equipping, first pupils and then also students, to be digitally competent and capable of using all those tools – I don't think that should be a matter of a person's enthusiasm, but something that is normal at the level of an institution”

The respondents' general position is that an additional form of education, aimed at increasing the level of digital literacy, should be provided at the Faculty of Law, because this can be a comparative advantage over other faculties. This kind of training would certainly not be a substitute for professional, legal knowledge, but would facilitate competent presentation and application of acquired knowledge (Bećirović 2015, 14). It is the respondents' general opinion that it is unquestionable that at the present the

Faculty of Law cannot only train students for classical legal vocations such as judge, prosecutor, enforcement agent, notary public (possibly attorney), because there is a limited number of these jobs.

“Law faculties function on the principle of mass. We don’t get the best, we get the most. But ever since the beginnings of the Faculty of Law, the emphasis has been on numbers and that is what keeps us going. However, in general, this is a problem. You have so many lawyers who don’t want to practice law... I think the point here is that we are abandoning the pattern of education that perhaps existed until some thirty years ago, when we had a narrow specialist for a single area. And that may have been sufficient at the time, although I think these soft skills, or whatever we call them, were always needed. I think that now, in the modern world, this is an essential need and that one needs to be complete. And not just ‘I have great grades and I graduated on time, and I have no other knowledge’.. by introducing such forms of classes or by inserting those elements into our traditional classes, we can additionally arouse their interest.”

4.3. Openness to New Ideas and Readiness to Adopt New Educational Practices

The participants in the third focus group were *assistant professors* and *associate professors*, who taught classes online, in addition to online practical sessions. Apart from the initial teacher concerns about whether they would be able to hold classes using digital tools with which they had no prior experience, the teachers invested additional effort in teaching classes online. Communication with the help of digital tools created an artificial atmosphere in which the teachers were unable to see the students’ reactions, to assess their interest or possible fatigue, or determine to what extent they understood the topic being discussed. Because of the constant feeling that they were being recorded while speaking, they felt a certain uneasiness due to which they were unable to conduct themselves more freely when holding classes, which was not the case with face-to-face classes. Even though students most often recorded the classes without their permission, i.e., despite their requests not to do so, respondents reported the results of asynchronous learning – repeatedly listening to what they had recorded, some students used their sentence structures in class, which they noted as a positive consequence of this practice.

“I noticed that I invest a lot more energy because I have to follow my train of thought, there is no room for digressions or simply for some jokes, because they can record that and, finally, in order for it all to make some sense, the

presentation needs to be concise. I also noticed that, after these online classes I am as tired as if I'd been run over by a tank..." "They almost never turn their cameras on, because then I could assess their reaction by looking at them, and not like this, where I just see my face and the rest are just rectangles with names and surnames, or nicknames."

The teachers are of the general opinion that, although the teaching online classes was sometimes more mentally strenuous for them as lecturers – the quality did not decrease. They see a major downside of online learning in the sphere of learning outcomes and valorization of knowledge, because some respondents point to a lower quality of knowledge which, in turn, resulted in a lower pass rate. What the examiners see as the possible causes of poorer grades are a) lack of direct contact, which impacts the formation and maintenance of work habits, b) medicalized social reality that affected the students' motivation, and c) deficiencies within the primary and secondary educational practices. The teachers especially had problems with the valorization of knowledge, because preliminary exams and elimination tests were mainly in written form, resulting in an increased abuse of digital technologies, use of unpermitted means and a higher degree of non-academic behavior.

"I don't think online teaching was the only thing that contributed to the drop in the quality of the students' knowledge: we don't have a clear insight from the university, we work with a finished product from secondary school. The situation was catastrophic long before covid... we are yet to experience the decline, but I don't think it is directly related to this situation with the pandemic; it just deepened the existing decline that originates from lower levels of education."

The teachers were in agreement regarding the advantages that online classes have for different categories of students: for those who do not have the financial means to live in Belgrade but want to attend classes, those who are employed or whose work involves a place of residence outside Belgrade, for students with disabilities or those with mobility difficulties, those with family obligations, etc. In the opinion of some respondents, following the pandemic these advantages could be retained through the practice of a "hybrid" form. The respondents note that, to this end, significant financial investments should be planned to improve technical conditions, as well as to engage additional administrative staff who would serve as support in conducting classes. Still, the respondents' general impression was that they as teachers, just like the students, also have higher affinity for the traditional form of education, which is confirmed by the many appeals of students for face-to-face classes.

“In teaching I am mostly guided by direct contact, because the spoken word is the spoken word. I don’t use presentations during lectures but direct and live contact with the students... The impression is the same, the students want to return to lecture halls, especially where there are smaller groups. The experience that they have – they understand that it is better to be face-to-face and how many more new opportunities this offers compared to online classes... I think the enthusiasm waned a lot this year... as if they have had enough of this model and that they look forward to and share my hopes that the epidemic of this contagious COVID disease will end next year.”

4.4. “The Future Is in Digitalization, But We Can’t Do Without the Spoken word”

Following the initial concerns regarding the use of new digital tools, which was common for all groups of respondents, professors stressed the importance of interaction and direct contact with students, which is made possible by the traditional form of teaching. The exchange of “energy” with the group, smiles, hand gestures, are the main advantages of face-to-face classes that, among other things, also enable the teacher to move around the room and look students in the eyes. This is why for most of the respondents talking into “the black box” was a specific mental and psychological challenge, because it often boiled down to talking to one’s own reflection. The fact that most students were unwilling to turn on their cameras on and, by doing so, to join in the communication, drained the teachers of more energy, which is why they sometimes felt emotionally empty and exhausted.

“They have to see you, they have to look at you, they have to see all your habits and tics... to see what you wore that day... Meaning that, when I walk into the lecture hall, I precisely feel the students, when I speak I feel them, they don’t even have to ask me – I will repeat what I felt was murmuring, or them looking at me strangely, yet here the situation was impossible... you see, we can do all that through Power Point, and those slides, and camera showing a video, all of that can be done, but I think, that spoken word, truth to tell, I am that generation, how can I put it, that’s the way my synapses have fused, that communication is much better at least for me, and I think that every lecture, really every single lecture, is a unique piece of authorship, and my every lecture is different...”

Even though age significantly affects the level of digital literacy and receptiveness to technologies in general (McCrinkle 2014, 15, 53–56), most respondents showed a positive attitude towards using digital practices in

teaching. The teachers pointed out that all the advantages of every model of teaching – traditional, hybrid and online – should be used in further work. The respondents' general stance perhaps correlates best with Marc Prensky's idea that professors should not "change" but that they should "adapt" to the new context and environment we all find ourselves in" (Prensky 2011, 3–4). Some respondents shared the positive experiences that they had at other faculties domestically and abroad, as suggestions of good practice that could also be followed.

"It's about a new form of studying, which emerges as fully equal with this kind of studying. After two years of online classes, today I think that is the impression of us all, as well as of the young people who attended. This is a phenomenon that will come to life in its own way ... The future is in digitalization. This is a completely done deal, people in the future won't ever see one another. No more networking... It'll be difficult, once you experience that everything can unfold without any physical movement, without getting out of your pajamas, and giving a lecture, but there, we've all agreed that it's almost irreplaceable... We cannot do without the spoken word."

When we talk about young lawyers, specifically those who are finishing the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law, during the discussion, the question that arises is in what direction should the admission policy for new students be conceived. Should the large number of students be retained, and then leave it to the labor market to distribute them and perhaps retrain them, in line with market demand? Should the number of enrolled students be reduced in a situation where the labor market cannot absorb such a large number of Bachelors of Laws (Honors)? Perhaps young lawyers should be taught new skills, at a time when the lack of digital literacy causes "new poverty" (Grozdić 2021, 30).

"...it depends on what the aim is. So, if we were now to single out only the quality of conveying knowledge, which is the faculty's main mission, of course it is best that you see a person, for them to come, interaction, personal, however, this is one of the priorities. We also have other priorities... for example, maintaining the number of students... by expanding the circle of people who can study, without having to pay for apartments here and everything else, we would definitely expand the base with that... Now, the third thing, when we look into the distant future... the world is going in the direction where you don't have to move from one place to another to perform the act of communication, you do it from there. So, in my opinion, that is the future."

4.5. “Anything Is Possible When Teachers Are in Agreement”

What all respondents have in common are the *tools* that they most often used for communication with the students, and this includes email, Zoom, Webex, Moodle, and less often Facebook, Socrative, Draw.io, and Kahoot!. The advantage of these tools is that they are not used only for the teachers’ one-way communication, but also enable two-way communication and interaction. The downside of this method is the quantity of innovations. For example, on the UNICEF website alone there is a list of a total of 91 open digital educational tools for interactive online teaching and learning, which are available to teachers (UNICEF website 2021). As for the *training of teachers*, the respondents showed openness and willingness to undergo training for new digital teaching practices, which could be organized by the faculty and IT sector, while some respondents were of the opinion that they should be part of the faculty requirement (for example, as part of a faculty project, where, in addition to writing papers, teachers would also have to undergo one training course per year).

Speaking about *teachers’ concerns* as a set of emotions and attitudes in facing a certain challenge, and possible anxiety and insecurity when implementing innovations, there is a notable general trend regarding concerns at the informational and personal stage (Radulović, Sekulić 2021, 97, 99–100). In other words, teachers are generally worried about whether they have had sufficient information about the features and methods of implementing digital innovations and on how developed their knowledge and skills in the field of information technologies are. Some teachers also expressed concern at the refocusing stage, meaning that they are aware of the advantages of innovations and wish to find something better, to further advance their professional skills.¹⁹ Participants reported that these concerns dominated the first wave of the virus pandemic, following which the teachers’ confidence regarding the use and management of digital devices increased with the number of classes they had taught, while the intensity of their concerns decreased. When they had *doubt* about conducting online

¹⁹ Teacher concerns can be explored by applying different scientific methods, and a Stages of Concern Questionnaire is one that is often used. According to this questionnaire, concern is divided into seven stages – 1) awareness stage, 2) informational stage, 3) personal stage, 4) management stage, 5) consequence stage, 6) collaboration stage and 7) refocusing stage. This finding also correlates with the results of other domestic and foreign research, in which most teachers demonstrate a high intensity of concern at the informational and personal stage (Radulović, Sekulić 2021, 97, 99–100).

classes, most respondents turned for help to the Faculty's IT department, which, they say, professionally and promptly answered their questions, while some respondents solved these problems on their own and attended training courses.

Regarding the *preparation of online classes*, respondents invested the most time during the first period, when the state of emergency was in effect, following which the time required for preparing online and traditional classes was the same. The method of *knowledge valorization* differed in the sense that examination was oral, written, and written with the help of digital tools, with the majority of respondents examining their students in person, orally, and less often in written form.²⁰ Regarding the level of acquired knowledge, there is a disparity in the respondents' experiences, but the predominant view being that the level of students' knowledge has decreased. The reason for this may be the fact that the grading was mainly summative, i.e., the students' work was mostly evaluated at the end of a semester, which was the predominant practice of traditional teaching. What should be taken into account is that the imperative of the new, online method is an fundamental transformation of the "teaching process", i.e., of the methods and means of teaching, ways of presenting study material, forms of interaction between teachers and students and among students (Nikolić, Antonijević 2021, 103). In other words, traditional forms of evaluation cannot simply be copied to the digital environment while expecting the same effects. Preference should be given to formative assessment, which will continuously analyze the whole process of the students' achievements and progress.²¹ This would help overcome the lack of direct contact and maintain a higher level of student motivation and participation.

²⁰ Even though the teachers mostly opted to hold the preliminary exams in person and in written form, as was the case before the pandemic, the results of a questionnaire conducted at the University of Kragujevac Faculty of Philology and Arts, on a sample of 63 students from all four years, show that it is possible to hold an online preliminary test with screen recording. The possibility of implementation and grading was explored, and the results showed that an online preliminary test, in the form of writing essays, can be a substitute for a classroom-held preliminary test, and that, as such, they are an adequate means and appropriately reflect the students' knowledge (Dragović 2021, 199–203).

²¹ Nikolić and Antonijević provide a list of more than 30 digital tools that can be used in formative assessment (Nikolić, Antonijević 2021, 104–105).

4.6. What After the Pandemic?

All the teachers point out that traditional, direct teaching is an indispensable method of conveying knowledge, which should remain the predominant form of education. Despite different personal affinities and experiences in the implementation of online teaching, the respondents' general opinion is that it *should become an integral part of the educational practice after the pandemic* – however, there is disparity regarding the intensity and manner of organizing it. Older teachers manifested what Prensky called “digital wisdom” (Prensky 2011), i.e., a positive attitude towards the use of digital tools and readiness to adapt to the new form of communication, as needed. Even though they are closer to the opinion that the effect of direct teaching is the greatest, they also believe that other models of teaching should also be retained in certain segments of education. Younger teachers maintain that, in addition to the traditional form of teaching, there should be at least one online class per week, as a supplement to face-to-face classes. They note that this practice perhaps should not be an option during the initial years of studies, while it should definitely be retained in senior years and postgraduate studies.

Also voiced was the opinion that the option of fully online studies should be made possible, which would be an additional source of income for the Faculty as an institution. Another thing that is mentioned is that one consultation session should be held online, as well as that meetings of faculty bodies should be held in this form, since this would ensure greater attendance. Teachers see the online model as indispensable when it comes to department meetings, seminars, conferences, additional lectures and different types of regional courses, which can provide additional income for the Faculty.

5. CONCLUSION

This might sound incredible to the readers, but the assumption that studies at the Faculty of Law can be completed without a computer is confirmed by the situation in which, at his first job in a law office, a law graduate rotated the screen, i.e., the whole device, so he could read a PDF document that had been sent in PDF format, rotated 180 degrees, because he did not know how to do this with a click of the mouse. This anecdote – a true story from the life of a young legal trainee whom the author of this paper knows personally – might best reflect the importance, utility and necessity of digital literacy as a

set of knowledge, skills and attitudes required for communication and work in the digital environment, but also in professional, personal and public life (Grozdić 2021, 29).

In a situation when the activities for preventing the spread of the virus reduced social reality to medical issues, and social segments were mostly neglected or had to satisfy the requirements of the epidemiological adequacy test (Vuković 2021), the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law demonstrated readiness to respond to the newly created challenges. Through a series of activities and adopted measures, teachers and students relatively quickly adapted to a new mode of work and classes proceeded smoothly, in the sense that they were all held according to the predefined program. Initially online classes were asynchronous: students could access the necessary materials at any time, via Internet platforms, and then synchronous online learning took over, which was implemented in real time through the interaction of teachers and students (Arkorful, Abaidoo 2017, 400).

The teachers initially invested additional efforts to prepare and conduct classes online, and it took some time for them to adapt to the new method of work but also living circumstances. Without diminishing the advantages of online teaching – the most frequently mentioned being time saving and flexibility – the teachers' general opinion is that the traditional, direct transfer of knowledge is, among other things, a social moment, a specific social interaction, which is lost when a medium exists between them. It is their opinion that students recognize this and that after the pandemic, face-to-face classes should remain the predominant method, with differing answers regarding how online classes should be used as a supplement. Evaluation of the students' work was a great challenge for the teachers, especially in the context of the use of prohibited means and non-academic behavior, which was on the rise during the pandemic.

Due to the current pandemic, most educational systems around the world started online teaching without any prior training for teachers and students, without them getting acquainted with the appropriate digital tools and with minimum or no prior experience in conducting and attending online classes (Knežević 2021, 13). On the other hand, in order for online classes to provide quality and meet the needs of the “digital generation”, which was born and has lived most of its life in a digital environment,²² they need to be

²² Mark McCrindle classifies generations according to attitudes towards and the use of technologies. Because they grew up in a digital environment, members of the digital generation, i.e., Generation Z or “the digital natives”, born between 1995 and 2009, have a different, multidimensional way of thinking (McCrindle 2014). In extracurricular activities they are used to quickly receiving and providing

technologically, pedagogically and didactically adequately structured (Soleša 2007, 10). Creatively conceived, online classes based on digital content, containing images, sound and videos, implemented through various Internet platforms for distance learning, and with adequate IT support, can awaken all the senses required for learning and support the new generations' multidimensional way of thinking. In this way, technology can be an equal educational participant in the interaction between teachers and students (Katić, Stanišić 2021, 124).

The focus group discussion, as the main method for data gathering, played an explorative role in this particular study. This has been the first step in examining the positions and experiences of a part of the teachers, it is the author's suggestion is for a more comprehensive study to be conducted, in the form of a questionnaire of all the teachers and full-time students. The obtained results would enable the Faculty of Law, as an autonomous scientific and educational institution, to organize classes after the pandemic, in accordance with the preferences of the majority of their participants, to achieve maximum efficiency, and to competitively respond to the global trends in the field of higher education. With a modern form of teaching, the University of Belgrade Faculty of Law can gain a market advantage and be an equal partner to prestigious academic centers across the globe (Górska 2016, 35–43).

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information, while the intensity of their ability to memorize increases if a picture precedes a text, and every interaction implies frequent feedback, rewards and an equal relationship in the exchange of messages. These are just some of the reasons why the traditional way of teaching is unable to fully meet the needs of the digital generation (Katić, Stanišić 2021, 122–123).

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Article history:

Received: 1. 9. 2022.

Accepted: 1. 12. 2022.