



***Designer, Creator, Trainer and Mentor...
or an Academic Teacher Online
Projektant, kreator, trener i mentor...
czyli nauczyciel akademicki online***

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The objective of the reflections undertaken is to present the competences of academic teachers necessary for online teaching and the necessary changes of attitudes in this professional group.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: In the context of the specific objective, the research problem is included in the questions: What competences should an academic teacher have in order to teach online effectively? How should universities support academic teachers in acquiring those competences in their teaching work? The method used was literature analysis and interviews with academic teachers at the University of Łódź collected during online training within the project: "Scientific excellence as the key to excellence in education". Operational Programme Knowledge Education Development".¹

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The introduction presents the development of academic e-learning in Poland within the last twenty years. This is followed by the discussion of the competences of academic teachers conducting online classes and the necessary changes in their attitudes. The participation of universities in this process is also shown.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The presented reflections indicate that not all teachers were prepared for e-learning before the pandemic and that some universities failed to support them sufficiently in their teaching work. The pandemic showed that the preparation for remote teaching should be one of the goals of teacher and university development.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS: Online teaching requires changes and systemic preparation of teachers for conducting classes in the digital reality.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **E-LEARNING, ACADEMIC EDUCATION, TEACHER, UNIVERSITY TEACHER, COMPETENCES OF A UNIVERSITY TEACHER**

¹ The training sessions were carried out between 4.11.2019 and 16.06.2020, and they included 156 teachers of the University of Łódź. Focused interviews were carried out with them concerning: the teachers' self-assessment of didactic, methodical and digital competences; their experience in online work; problems and difficulties in e-learning. For the purpose of this text, references to the interviews were marked as (a.r.) which is the abbreviation for "the author's research."

STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Celem podjętych rozważań jest prezentacja kompetencji nauczycieli akademickich niezbędnych w nauczaniu online oraz koniecznych zmian postaw w tej grupie.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: W kontekście określonego celu problem badawczy zawarto w pytaniach: Jakie kompetencje powinien posiadać nauczyciel akademicki, by efektywnie nauczać online? W jaki sposób uczelnie powinny wspomagać w pracy dydaktycznej nauczycieli akademickich w ich zdobywaniu? Wykorzystano metodę analizy literatury oraz wywiady z nauczycielami akademickimi Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego zgromadzone podczas szkoleń online w ramach projektu „Doskonałość naukowa kluczem do doskonałości kształcenia” Program Operacyjny Wiedza Edukacja Rozwój².

PROCES WYWODU: Wprowadzenie prezentuje rozwój e-learningu akademickiego w Polsce w ostatnich 20 latach. Następnie omówione są kompetencje nauczycieli akademickich uczących online i konieczne zmiany postaw. Ukazany jest także udział uczelni w tym procesie.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Z przedstawionych rozważań wynika, że nie wszyscy nauczyciele byli przygotowani do e-learningu przed pandemią, a część uczelni niewystarczająco wspierała ich w pracy dydaktycznej. Pandemia pokazała, że przygotowanie do dydaktyki zdalnej powinno być jednym z celów rozwoju nauczycieli i uczelni.

WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE: Nauczanie online wymaga zmian i systemowego przygotowania nauczycieli do dydaktyki w cyfrowej rzeczywistości.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** **E-LEARNING, KSZTAŁCENIE AKADEMICKIE, NAUCZYCIEL, NAUCZYCIEL AKADEMICKI, KOMPETENCJE NAUCZYCIELA AKADEMICKIEGO**

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, discussion has been carried out in Poland on the place and systemic way of conducting online education in various specializations and at different universities. At first, irrespective of the lack of proper legal regulations, only a few people were interested in e-learning (the first legal act which introduced e-learning regulations was the Act “Law on Higher Education” of 27 July 2005 (Ustawa z dnia 27 lipca..., 2005), and another act issued in the form of the regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 25 September 2007 (Rozporządzenie..., 2007)). At

² Szkolenia odbyły się między 4.11.2019 a 16.06.2020 r. i objęły 156 nauczycieli akademickich UŁ. W ich ramach przeprowadzono wywiady zogniskowane dotyczące: samooceny kompetencji dydaktycznych i metodycznych oraz cyfrowych nauczycieli; doświadczenia w pracy online nauczycieli; problemów i trudności występujących w e-learningu. Na potrzeby niniejszego tekstu odwołania do wywiadów oznaczone zostały skrótem (a.r.) od słów „the author’s research” (badania własne).

the beginning, this form of education was accompanied by the lack of interest of university authorities, reluctance of ministerial authorities towards online studies, and great distance of a significant part of the academic community. The value of online learning and competences obtained in this process were negated, as noted, among others, by M. Dąbrowski (2005, pp. 63-70) and J. Mischke (2009, pp. 19-24). Later, however, when it was noticed that this form of studies is popular and e-learning is effectively used at universities all over the world, the discussion on online university education began to spread. More and more people started to emphasize that, at the current stage of development of the information society, universities cannot afford to give up or undermine the role of the use of technology which is used in other areas of social or economic life (cf. Bednarek & Lubina, 2008, pp. 23-29; Dąbrowicz-Tłałka, 2008, pp. 21-23). Following the discussion, various individual projects of e-learning classes have emerged, as well as offers of full remote studies.

Online classes should, by definition, be different from traditional university classes. And it is not only about changing the space of the didactic process, i.e. (as we have seen during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic), rapidly “moving” from the lecture room to the virtual space, and conducting classes in the synchronous time. In the case of a large e-learning project (and the launch of online education in any field of study certainly is a large project), it is necessary to learn about and adjust the learning environment to education (and here the choice is increasingly larger: from educational platforms to videoconferencing applications), to consider the selection of appropriate communication tools (Wierzbicka, 2021, pp. 51-55), and to select the tools for transferring, activating and verifying knowledge and competences. It should be remembered that any choice of tools/applications recommended by the ministerial authorities (see *Rekomendacje MNiSW...*, 2020 [*Recommendations of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education on E-learning*]) or the university authorities should take into account the didactics and teaching methodology of very different fields (from education of students of humanities to education in scientific or artistic specializations). This is because the technological solutions chosen by universities are to support the educational process and increase its effectiveness, and not just to satisfy the student’s need for the contact with the university.

Also, it should not be forgotten that the selection and application of the best technological solutions will not solve the problem of preparing academic teachers to use them effectively in e-learning. The pandemic situation showed that it is not difficult to find a remote learning environment, while it is difficult to conduct online classes, especially for those who have never taught in such a way and are not familiar with remote teaching tools (which was indicated by 56% of teachers in the interviews – a.r.). And that is why, during the first wave of the pandemic, it was difficult to speak about e-learning understood as a well-thought-out and prepared learning process (cf. Wierzbicka, 2019, pp. 16-17). It should be noted that, since the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, e-learning has often been conducted using accidental tools, uncoordinated by university authorities, organised in a hurry and often by people who were not prepared didactically and technically for such a process (Klimowicz, 2020, pp. 2-3).

In this context, remote education at the beginning of the pandemic should be described as *emergency remote teaching* (see Hodges et al., 2020), which was only focused on ensuring the students' contact with the teachers (through any electronic channel). Such emergency education often resulted in the students' passive participation in online activities (they were usually hidden behind avatars in the MS Teams application). Despite numerous failures in remote learning at the beginning of the pandemic, this situation contributed to the evolution of the approach to remote teaching and made many people (including university authorities) realise that it is necessary to implement systemic changes regarding the improvement of academic teachers' competences and the place of such skills in the online teaching process (a.r.). New technologies, as well as a different learning environment and new teaching methods used in e-education have become the impulse for changes in universities and made university teachers face new challenges.

Competences of an academic teacher who conducts online classes

The quality of university education depends on many factors, but one of its key aspects is the competence of the university teacher (cf. Sajdak, 2015, pp. 25-26). The current Act on Higher Education of 20 July 2018 lists three groups of academic teachers: those who teach, those who carry out research, and those who both teach and research. However, despite this distinction, the Act does not require any of these groups to complete postgraduate pedagogical courses or studies or to have a teaching specialisation. An academic teacher does not need to have certified knowledge of the basic pedagogy, psychology or didactics of the academic discipline he or she represents, and the same is true for digital skills. Interestingly, in the same legislative act, in article 201, it is stated that students of doctoral schools functioning at universities should undergo professional practice: "The curriculum may include professional practice in the form of teaching or participation in teaching, and the time spent for such practice should not exceed 60 lessons per year" (Ustawa..., 2018), while such curriculum is determined by the senate or the scientific council of the university at which the doctoral school functions. In practice, it means that, in addition to the obligatory teaching practice, a university may (but is not obliged to) include classes in didactics, pedagogy or psychology in the doctoral curriculum. The above-mentioned provisions show that almost all the effort related to shaping didactic and digital competences is to be made by the academic staff themselves. And this is one of the main reasons for the current status of academic didactics, including digital didactics, which, in practice, is mainly giving way to research work.

The experiences of teachers who conducted online classes before the pandemic, and of those who only came into contact with such didactics during the pandemic, show that the participation of a university academic teacher in remote teaching is more active than in the situation of classroom teaching (see Romaniuk et al., 2020, p. 16; a.r.). The lecturer fulfils not only the role of the person who is teaching and examining, but he/she also selects appropriate technologies facilitating learning, prepares e-materials, as well

as motivates and activates students who sometimes “disappear” in the virtual space of applications such as MS Teams, Zoom or other educational platforms (e.g. Moodle). That is why, the teacher must not only be excellently prepared in terms of content and didactics, but also proficient in the use of various applications in order to be able to effectively convey relevant information, to verify the students’ understanding, and to develop certain competences in the students (cf. Wierzbicka, 2019, pp. 31-65). Above all, it is the academic teacher who bears the greatest responsibility for the course of online classes. Without his/her involvement in the process of creating the materials (lesson content, instructions, exercises, etc.) and in conducting and evaluating the course after its completion, and without his/her support and motivation, the student may have problems with completing the course or passing the exams.

This situation necessitates a change of existing habits not only in the organization of the place and time of work, but also in the existing teaching work, which has to be redefined not only because of the need to use technology. As interviews with teachers at the University of Łódź have shown, undergoing a short training course or reaching for tutorials prepared by the university enables teachers to quickly become proficient in using applications such as MS Teams or an educational platform (e.g. Moodle). A greater difficulty, however, is the preparation of such activities during online classes that will ensure the students’ active work and real assessment of their knowledge. It is also important to develop electronic classroom materials, which is extremely time-consuming (cf. Romaniuk et al., 2020, p. 16; Klimowicz, 2020, p. 22). Teachers indicated that the time to prepare e-courses increased at least 2 times (51% participants), 3 times (32%), 4 times and more 17% (a.r.). It is equally important to develop effective forms of electronic communication through chat rooms, forums or videoconferencing systems, and to learn how to moderate discussions in asynchronous time (cf. Wierzbicka, 2021, p. 55). Therefore, it becomes necessary to redefine one’s competences and approach to education. E-education and the pandemic make many academics realize that the existing model of education needs to be modified, and changes have to be implemented, including in didactics and in the teaching methods that have been used so far (see Wierzbicka, 2019, pp. 24, 27). It is hard to resist the impression that the “widespread sluggishness of the introduction of e-learning today”, as described by J. Mischke (2009, p. 23), “should be treated as tangible evidence of pushing didactics in all its aspects to the periphery of the activity of universities, and, at the same time, it should be treated as a measuring instrument.” Although the article was published 13 years ago, the above-mentioned words are still relevant, which certainly is alarming. Pushing didactic issues to the background, or an insufficient offer of courses or training sessions which improve didactic and digital competences, were confirmed by the academic teachers themselves who, during the pandemic, were often left on their own by the university authorities and had “no daily, continuous support, e. g. in the form of training sessions or consultations” (Klimowicz, 2020, pp. 15-16). Many of those teachers also complained about “the lack of university’s interest in e-learning” (a.r.), or “the inability to get help from the university” (a.r.). In the interviews the teachers also spoke about their needs. Just before the pandemic

(the training started in October 2019) and during the pandemic, up to 69% of teachers indicated that they needed to complete additional training in order to improve their own teaching competences necessary to conduct e-classes. The majority of them emphasized that they mainly needed to acquire didactic and methodological competences (55%), followed by digital skills (27%). Only 18% specified that didactic and methodological competences were as important for them as digital skills. A significant group of teachers (44%) were also interested in innovative educational methods that work well in e-learning (a.r.). This certainly indicates university teachers' growing awareness and the need to introduce institutional support for its development.

The dynamically changing world, knowledge-based economy, new demands from employers, pandemic-induced changes, as well as expectations of students themselves result in the fact that teaching should be practical, authentic, meaningful and adjusted to the modern world. It is important to emphasize that students are no longer the "consumers" of knowledge and that teachers ceased to be the only people who can provide this knowledge to them. Students should be involved in co-creating the process of education according to the principles of Peer to Peer Learning, Problem/Project Based Learning, Process Design Thinking, Research-Based Education, or "gamification" (cf. Wycisk, Matysik, 2021, pp. 13-28), and their failures and mistakes should be a part of the education process, teaching them new behaviour and inspiring them for creative activities. In this context, redefining the competences of academic teachers should be a response to the changing reality: it is necessary to consciously use technology, which involves the use of active teaching methods; it is necessary to follow the changes in applications and to choose solutions that support the teaching process and make it more effective, also in the sphere of new forms of communication with students (not only, as before, via e-mails, but primarily through video-conferencing applications and discussion forums on educational platforms). Also, we have to remember about the need to develop a new time management system in the teaching process. It is because online learning is not only about videoconferencing via MS Teams, but it also includes constant online monitoring of students' activity after the classes and their work, e.g. on the learning platform. Moreover, online learning means motivating students to work via forums or private messages, reacting appropriately to typical e-education problems (e.g. decrease in activity or technical problems), and showing students possible paths to acquire necessary competences taking into account different needs and learning styles.

Changing teaching attitudes and habits is a challenge for teachers, and they often have to deal with it themselves. How they do this is aptly described by P.R. Ostolski:

The methodological competences and changing conditions of the implementation of the didactic process can result in the qualification of university teachers into four different groups. The first group includes those who take no action with regard to the changing situation due to their habits of adaptation and total confusion in the new reality full of challenges, opportunities and threats. The second group includes teachers characterized by apparent and external formal adaptation, who repeat old patterns while using new and fashionable slogans. The third group of teachers includes the critics of everything and everyone, who are

void even of the reflection on their own actions, and uncritically accept new, yet different solutions. The fourth group includes academic teachers characterized by creativity, who are always imaginative in carrying out their tasks inside and outside the university, and who are sincere and spontaneous in what they do (2021, pp. 297-298).

So, what do you need to pay special attention to when you want to go beyond the current didactic model, being a university teacher implementing e-learning? How to be creative and imaginative? How to teach online effectively? A summary of changing attitudes and necessary competences is presented in the following Table 1:

Table 1. Change of attitudes and competences of university teachers in *e-learning*

Teacher	E-teacher
from knowledge provider (lecturer)	into a tutor, coach, guide, consultant, leader
from answer provider	to answer interpreter
from the provider of materials	into the designer of various educational experiences of the student
from the one who shows others one educational path	to the one who shows students different solutions and encourages them to find solutions on their own
from the one who shows students one interpretation of the problem	to the one who emphasizes various approaches and shows interpretation doubts
from the one who is used to working alone	to the one who works in a team and with a team of students, as well as teachers
from a person used to total control over the scientific environment	to the one who cooperates with the students on building that environment and gives its members freedom of choosing the tools
from the one who is used to independence	to a person open to discussion with the students and other teachers
from a person who is not guided by learning styles when constructing their classes	into a person who takes into account various learning styles and students' needs (including the needs of the disabled*)
from a person who uses traditional teaching methods	into a person who searches for innovative methods of work and is not afraid of experimenting
from a person who does not know the methodology of online education	into a person who is constantly improving their knowledge of digital education methods
from a person who negates the value of online education	into a person who knows the advantages and disadvantages of this form of education
from a person who knows and uses one or two applications for online learning	into a person who constantly learns about new tools and uses them according to their didactic needs and students' abilities

* In this situation, the process of online education carried out in the Internet requires the application of the guidelines of WCAG 2.1 related to the availability of the Internet contents (see *Dostępność cyfrowa*, 2021 [*Digital availability*, Service of the Republic of Poland]), to which all public entities are obliged by the law (see *Ustawa z dnia 4 kwietnia...*, 2019; *Ustawa z dnia 19 lipca...*, 2019).

Source: the author's own work

Taking into account the above, it is particularly important for an academic teacher to feel well in the role of:

- a designer of new didactic experiences and digital teaching aids – it is because the teacher prepares his/her own programme of activities based on the actual didactic needs, with the use of changing digital technologies;
- a creator of many possible ways of acquiring knowledge by the student – where the latter, in a conscious manner (preceded by reflection), makes his/her own decisions on the basis of previously acquired information, and these should produce adequate effects in the form of changes;
- a tutor and trainer – the students will be seen and supported by the academic teacher; they will have a high degree of freedom of action and choice, and they will be provided with social support due to which it will be possible to reduce the negative effects of distance resulting from remote learning; in this situation, the academic teacher becomes an e-moderator whose role in the teaching process increases with the advancement of the technologies used (Miśniakiewicz & Krnáčová, 2021, pp. 47-66);
- a mentor – an academic authority who not only shapes the digital learning process and the development of the student's potential based on partnership, but influences the student's personality.

University systems of supporting academic teachers

The preparation of academic teachers for e-learning should not only be their own responsibility. The pandemic *emergency remote teaching* has shown that without systemic solutions, both in the sphere of existing legislation and direct support from university authorities, academic teachers will not be able to cope with the new requirements, and they will not immediately become great online teachers (cf. Romaniuk et al., 2020, p. 26).

Although online classes have been known in Poland for more than 20 years, only a few Polish universities have organized and dedicated e-education units. The reasons for this may be found, among others, in the low awareness of the academic community, which was highlighted during the recent pandemic (a.r.). Moreover, university authorities are not always interested in introducing systemic e-learning solutions and appointing teams of specialists, because this entails considerable costs, both in terms of staff (employees) and equipment (servers, software). E-learning requires many organisational and legal changes (e.g. how to organise a unit dealing with remote learning; what authority/responsibilities should be given to it; how to train academic teachers and encourage them to participate in such training if not everyone is interested in them). These problems result in the fact that digital didactics at Polish universities is developing slowly, and the existing units supporting the process of remote education are not present in all public high education institutions. Examples of units that are functioning include: the Digital Competence Centre at the Warsaw University; the Centre for Development of

Non-stationary Education at the Warsaw School of Economics; the E-Learning Team in Kraków; the E-Learning Centre of the University of Science and Technology in Kraków; the Team in charge of Remote Learning of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń; the Remote Education Office at Marie Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin; the Centre for Online Education at the University of Szczecin; the Centre for Online Education at the Jagiellonian University; and the E-Learning Centre of the Łódź University of Technology. The main tasks of such units include: promoting e-learning solutions, preparing teachers for e-education, and assisting them during the creation of materials and maintaining the IT infrastructure needed for e-learning. Such units offer teachers training related to:

- e-learning methodology;
- developing didactic competences typical of an e-teacher;
- standards and specific features of working/studying online;
- using tools necessary for e-learning;
- communication in the synchronous and asynchronous mode;
- solving problems connected with online learning;
- activating and motivating students who are studying online;
- evaluation of the online education process;
- management of the teaching process with the use of various tools.

Participation in such training session prepares a teacher for conducting e-classes and makes it possible for him/her to:

- develop their own style of teaching, i.e. effective forms of communication, motivation, assessment, and evaluation;
- respond to didactic and technical problems typical of e-education;
- avoid mistakes and unnecessary work;
- maintain the hygiene of remote work and avoid overwork.

As it has already been mentioned, a university, when implementing remote teaching systems, must not only be prepared in terms of organisation, but it must also consciously work on teacher training curricula, taking into account the specific features of individual fields of science. General university regulations, which impose particular forms of classes and remote work, cannot always be reconciled with specific classes as the didactics of humanities is different than that of exact, experimental or artistic sciences. For this reason, it is also important for individual faculties to be able to make autonomous decisions on the forms and course of online classes.

Conclusions

Digital didactics continues to be a challenge for university teachers, even those who had previous, pre-pandemic exposure to it. It requires the creation of a methodological and didactic setting adapted to the digital learning environment, and such a setting should be grounded in pedagogical paradigms, take into account the individual potential of learners, and it should be relevant to the world in which we function on a daily basis

(cf. Smyrnova-Trybulska, 2018, pp. 300-301; Turula, 2018, pp. 125-128). This is a difficult task, especially in a situation in which academic teachers do not have to meet any formal requirements related to the improvement of their teaching competences (including digital ones), they are not sufficiently supported and, at the same time, everyone expects that they will prepare themselves for e-learning spontaneously, when, for example, a pandemic unexpectedly appears. The results of the analysis carried out show that, along with the changing world, the teacher has to change, too, redefining learning objectives and outcomes and, above all, working on developing new competences and self-image as an instructor, tutor, trainer, creator, and mentor. Once again, it should be emphasized that e-learning at the university is not only about changing the place of academic classes, the teaching process, the teaching methods and resources, but, above all, it is about redefining the work with students, who, in the online space, do not need to be guided. What they need is to be shown different possibilities, different solutions, and different perspectives in their pursuit of knowledge. This change should take place at the level of the individual and the entire academic community, with the support of the university authorities. The latter should also care about both a high level of didactics and further scientific achievements, as the hitherto university's decisions related to the implementation of online education have proved insufficient (cf. Klimowicz, 2020, pp. 2-3; Romaniuk et al., 2020, pp. 16, 24).

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