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Online Learning from the Perspective of Life Positions of Pupils and Students – Report of a Pilot Study

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Abstract

Life positions in transactional analysis allow for defining the attitude of a person to themselves and their surrounding. In the article, the author attempts to analyse whether the life position adopted by the respondents may somehow affect their attitude to online learning forced by the pandemic.

Keywords: life positions, online learning, COVID pandemic.

The pandemic situation in the country and the world has forced a change in the teaching-learning process from stationary – with direct contact, to online – with contact via a computer and the Internet. From the point of view of pupils and students, this led to a significant change in their daily functioning. Presence during classes did not require leaving home. However, it also did not entail the possibility of a direct meeting with a group of peers. On the one hand, such circumstances may seem comfortable. The necessity to commute was eliminated, and it was possible to participate the classes from one's room. The computer and the Internet provided entertainment during the breaks and, unfortunately, during the classes as well. The comfort of one's room in comparison with the school or university room seems indisputable. On the other hand, peer contacts

suffered greatly, and the teacher-student relationship was limited to contact through new technologies.

This situation was completely new and unknown for most teachers. Distance learning requires not only literacy in tools operation used for contact and transfer of knowledge via the Internet. The methodology of work in such conditions differs and requires a different approach to the transfer of knowledge from the teachers as well as other methods of activating and motivating students, other forms and ways of establishing and maintaining relationships. In addition, it should be mentioned that in contact through new media, the media becomes not only a tool. Man shows a tendency to treat them personally, which was proven by B. Reeves and C. Nass at the end of the 20th century by formulating the so-called media equation – $\text{media} = \text{real life}$ (Reeves, Nass, 1996). The author of this article analysed this topic from the perspective of transactional analysis, confirming the tendency to assign to new technology tools the profile of the Ego states similar to the one of the user (see: Łęski, 2016).

Restricted relationships in the classroom can be a source of problems in terms of students motivation and attitudes. This issue was analysed in the literature numerous times. For example, J.D Nicols, sharing the results of his research, wrote:

The results appear to offer an argument to support the need for extended discussions with teachers to reflect on the classroom learning environment and motivational factors that can be encouraged or discouraged in the classroom. The initial findings suggest that classroom structures can be defined in terms of motivational boundaries along a relationship and empowerment continuum that could well encourage the exploration of additional instructional formats that support student ownership of achievement while setting the stage for an internal motivational structure to develop. Additionally, the results provide support for the development of a learner-centred classroom [...]. Providing a classroom environment or community culture that is based on positive social relationships, while encouraging the empowerment of students, could well be an initial step towards improving student motivation and achievement (Nicols, 2006, p. 158).

The author also developed a diagram showing the dependence between the relationships in the classroom, the style of the teacher's work (from controlling to reinforcing) and the atmosphere and motivation prevailing in the classroom, and thus – effectiveness (Figure 1).

Anne K. Reitz, Julia Zimmermann, Roos Hutteman, Jule Specht and Franz J. Neyer wrote about the importance of peer relationships themselves for personality development:

The importance of peer relationships and particularly peer groups sharply increases during the transition from childhood to adolescence. About 75% of preschool children are involved in reciprocal friendships with their peers, which rises to 80–90% in teenage years when adolescents enter larger peer ecologies during the transition to middle school [...]. When adolescents shift their attention from parents to peers, peers become

a core influence for their development [...]. This is in line with group socialization theory that proposes that peer groups play a major role in children and adolescents' socialization, which goes beyond dyadic relationships [...]. This is reflected in findings showing that adolescents spend an increasing amount of time with peer groups, and they become highly, and more than people of other ages, concerned with obtaining social acceptance in peer groups [...]. In addition to peer groups, close dyadic relationships with peers also increase during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Adolescents start to form close ties with peers, which prepares them to engage in important relationships later on, such as with romantic partners (Retz, Zimmermann, Hutteman, Specht, Neyer, 2014, p. 280).

The above citations clearly indicate the importance of personal contact (and its quality) between all subjects of the learning process. In the event of distance learning, this contact significantly changes the character. It stops being direct, and many nuances related to interpersonal communication (especially non-verbal) may be blurred. Thus, one can risk a statement that its educational, didactic, and developmental value is diminished, and in extreme cases - it disappears. Obviously, the above considerations are not intended to lead to the conclusion that distance learning cannot effectively achieve all the goals that are achieved in traditional education. However, it must be emphasised that this is a much more difficult and demanding task for which the majority of people directly involved in the educational process were not sufficiently prepared to.

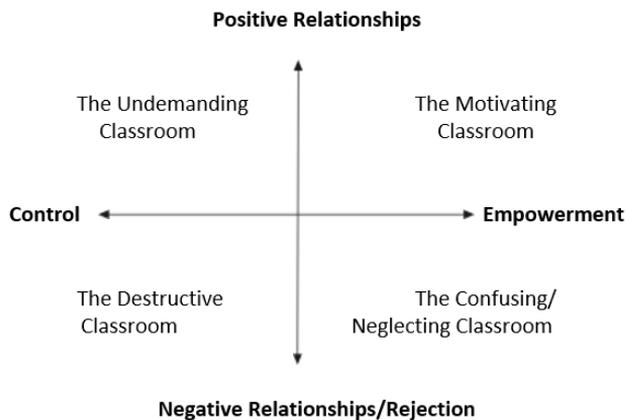


Fig. 1

An example of a quadripolar classroom dimension model

Source: Nichols, 2006, p. 154.

The change of learning conditions, the organization of the day, and the weakening of the possibility to contact friends was perceived differently by pupils and students. As in any other case, it can be marked on a continuum, where on one side there are those who handled the new situation perfectly and on the

other side there are those for whom it has become extremely difficult. The author of this article, as an academic teacher, had daily contact with students who dealt with the new situation relatively well, but also with those for whom it was so difficult that psychological intervention was needed.

Among the many factors from the perspective of which it is worth to analyse the way such difficult situations are dealt with, one should focus on one of the branches of the concept of transactional analysis. These are life positions. The transactional analysis itself was developed with psychotherapy in mind. At present, after many years of development, it is also successfully used in such areas as working with organisations, consulting, or education. Initially, it was used mainly by practitioners. Currently, it is more and more appreciated by the scientific community as well. One of its features is specific and relatively simple terminology. Thanks to it, studies and scientific research based on transactional analysis are easier to understand by recipients, and the results of analyses can be more effectively translated into specific practical activities. D. Pankowska states:

[...] especially for people who do not have extensive psychological knowledge, looking at the psychological and social reality from the perspective of transactional analysis will allow them to understand more and act more effectively. Teachers are in such a situation, who acting in a complicated social and interpersonal reality face everyday problems that require making decisions that are extremely important from the point of view of the development of adolescents* (Pankowska, 2010, p. 105).

Life positions in the transactional analysis is the attitude of a person to themselves and their surrounding. They are sometimes like the feeling of being OK. There are 4 basic life positions differentiated:

1. *I am O.K. You are O.K.* – cooperation; belief in our values as well as in values of other people.
2. *I am not O.K. You are O.K.* – avoidance; belief in the values of others and undermining ourselves.
3. *I am O.K. You are not O.K.* – rejection; belief in our values, undermining others.
4. *I am not O.K. You are not O.K.* – hopelessness (deadlock); undermining ourselves and other people (Stewart, Joines, 2009, p. 117–118).

Of course, depending on various factors, such as time or environment, there may be situations in which a person feels different and has a different attitude towards themselves and a different vision of their surroundings. I. Stewart and V. Joines note that

Each of us arrives in adulthood having written a script based on one of the four life positions. But we don't stay in that position every hour of the day. Minute by minute, we shift between positions (Stewart, Joins, 2009, p. 119).

* All translations – A. Machnia.

However, the same authors emphasize at the same time that although everyone switches between life positions, they also have their “favourite”, base position in which most time is spent (Stewart, Joines, 2009, p. 122).

Relating the issues of life positions to the issues of relationships that occur in the teaching process, it is easy to notice that the preferred position here is *I am O.K., You are O.K.* – both concerning the teacher-student relationship and peer relationships. Therefore, a hypothesis can be drawn that it is people with such a basic life position who will be the most dissatisfied with online education. On the other hand, people who perceive themselves or others as “not O.K.” may consider compulsory online learning as a situation that gives them more comfort and a sense of security. The interpersonal relationships themselves may be of secondary importance for them – less important or difficult.

When examining life positions, one can rely on behavioural indicators or on the analysis of beliefs, opinions, or emotions that an individual relates to themselves and other people. In quantitative research, questionnaires are used that incorporate the Likert scale or semantic differentials, allowing for the assessment of the respondent’s attitude towards themselves and other people (compare, inter alia, Pankowska, 2010, pp. 230–233). In the study analysed in this article, semantic differentials containing 15 pairs of adjectives were used. This tool is a slightly modified version of the tool that the author of this article used in the research published in the book “New Technologies – New Times – New Generations. Characteristics of Young Users of New Media from the Perspective of Transactional Analysis” (Łęski, 2018, pp. 95 and 182–184). The difference is that in the present study, each subject filled not one, but two differentials. The first differential was to define the “I” position, while the second one related to “You” (the other people). In addition, the questionnaire included a number of additional questions that made it possible to assess the attitude of the respondents to online learning.

The said tool was published on the online questionnaire website of the Jan Długosz University in Częstochowa (<https://ankiety.ujd.edu.pl>). The link to the study was then sent to schools and other academic centres across the country. The study was available from April to June 2021. In response, a total of 129 fully completed questionnaires were obtained which were suitable for further analysis. The respondents included 107 women and 22 men. 22 people were students of humanities faculties, 68 – were students of social studies, 21 respondents were students of science, 18 people were students of secondary schools.

The results of studies show the following life positions of respondents:

- *I am O.K. You are O.K.* – 60 persons (46%);
- *I am O.K. You are not O.K.* – 57 persons (44%);
- *I am not O.K. You are O.K.* – 2 persons (2%);
- *I am not O.K. You are not O.K.* – 10 persons (8%).

At the same time, no significant correlations between the life position of the respondents and their sex, age or study profile were observed.

When analysing the said values, on the one hand, it is satisfactory that most of the respondents have a healthy, basic life position – *I am O.K., You are O.K.* At the same time, a very small percentage present positions in which they do not perceive themselves as OK. However, at the same time, a significant percentage pointed to the position “*I am O.K., You are not O.K.*”, in which there is a belief in self-worth, while undermining other people. The question is whether such a result is one of the effects of the pandemic and the resulting limitation of relationships and, in a way, forcing actions taken in isolation from other people. Such a thesis would be confirmed by the comparison of the above result with the research carried out earlier by the author. Results of studies published in 2018, conducted on a sample of 391 persons (including students and pupils), show that the life position *I'm O.K., You're O.K.* obtained 52%, the life position *I'm O.K., You're not O.K.* obtained 22%, the life position *I'm not O.K., You are O.K.* obtained 14%, and the life position *I am not O.K., You are not O.K.* obtained 12% (Łęski, 2018, pp. 110–112). These results cannot be strictly compared and they cannot be used for calculations and analyses, as the research procedure was different in both cases. Nevertheless, the differences are so large that it seems that there is a clear tendency to increase the importance of the position *I am O.K., You are not O.K.* during the pandemic.

The analysis of the collected research material did not show much correlation. The respondents were asked, inter alia, whether after the end of the pandemic, online learning should remain the dominant form, whether it should be balanced, or whether direct-contact teaching should regain its dominant form. The summary of the obtained results is presented in Table 1. Statistical calculations did not show any significant correlation here. It can be seen that most of the answers indicate the willingness to return to direct-contact teaching. The answer in which direct teaching should significantly prevail was ranked second. The desire to maintain a balance between online learning and direct learning was ranked third by the respondents.

A slight correlation was observed concerning the statement “*I feel safer studying at home in front of the computer than in the classroom at school/university*”. The respondents referred to it by marking the answers on a standard five-point scale – from “*definitely yes*” to “*definitely not*” (Table 2). Spearman's correlation coefficient was -0.218 and it is statistically significant. The analysis of the distribution of answers clearly shows that people who perceive others as *not O.K.* feel safer in online learning than in direct contact. The difference is most noticeable between the two largest groups – *I am O.K., You are O.K.*, and *I am O.K., You are not O.K.*. In the latter one, noticeably more people chose the answer “*definitely yes*” and noticeably fewer chose the option “*no*”.

Table1

Summary of the analysed life positions with their relation to online and traditional teaching

	Life position:				Final sum
	I+ You+	I+ You-	I- You+	I- You-	
Direct teaching should be a dominant form	18	13	1	1	35
Direct teaching should significantly prevail	15	10	1		26
Direct teaching should prevail only to a little degree	1	1		1	13
There should be a balance	11	12		1	24
Online teaching should prevail only to a little degree	2	1		2	1
Online teaching should significantly prevail	1	1		1	11
Online teaching should remain a dominant form	1	1		2	12
Final sum	60	57	2	10	129

Source: own study 2021.

Table 2

The feeling of safety in online teaching and direct teaching in comparison with life position of the respondents – 2021

Life position	I feel safer studying at home in front of the computer than in the classroom at school/university					Final sum
	Definitely yes	Yes	I have no opinion	No	Definitely no	
I+ You+	1	15	13	21	1	60
I+ You-	17	15	11	12	2	57
I- You+	1			1		2
I- You-	1	2	1	1	1	10
Final sum	28	32	27	35	1	129

Source: own studies.

The obtained result confirms that only a fully healthy life position is associated with the willingness to establish and maintain positive relationships with others. A position in which others are *not O.K.* leads to rejection and isolation. Others become a threat or an unnecessary element, and therefore staying at home in a remote relationship is more comfortable and safer.

In the study, the respondents were also asked about several features of online learning. Their summary, together with the obtained correlation coefficients concerning the life positions of the respondents, is presented in the Table 3. Statistically significant results are highlighted in red and italics.

Table 3

Features of online teaching – correlation coefficients concerning the life positions of the respondents

Online teaching:	Correlation coefficient with <i>life position</i>
Effective	.056
Interesting	.009
Annoying	-.039
Engaging	.232
Comfortable	-.204
Tiring	.003
Attractive	.151
Demanding	.071
Pleasant	-.027
Allowing being loose	-.130
Ineffective	-.146
Tedious	.048
Allowing for an objective evaluation of progress	.039
Flexible	-.049
Injustice	-.101

Source: own studies 2021.

As seen in the presented table, the correlation with such features of distance learning as “engaging” and “comfortable” turned out to be statistically significant.

Online learning is “engaging” much more often for people with the life position *I am O.K., You are O.K.* (Table 4). It seems that, apart from the relational aspect, there is also the issue of approach to duties and responsibilities.

Table 4

The summary of declarations of online teaching as “engaging” with the life position of the respondents

Life position	Online teaching – engaging					Final sum
	Definitely yes	Yes	I have no opinion	No	Definitely no	
I+ You+	1	18	1	18	9	60
I+ You-	2	9	11	20	15	57
I- You+				2		2
I- You-	1	2		1	1	10
Final sum	10	29	19	43	28	129

Source: own studies 2021.

The above thesis seems to confirm the correlation with the adjective “comfortable”, which, in turn, was more often chosen by persons for whom others are *not O.K.* (Table 5). Of course, comfort also correlates with the previously observed correlation with the sense of security, but as a broader term it may also refer to such issues as, for example, no necessity to appear at classes on time, access to home entertainment

Table 5

The summary of declarations of online teaching as “comfortable” with the life position of the respondents

Life position	Online teaching – comfortable					Final sum
	Definitely yes	Yes	I have no opinion	No	Definitely no	
I+ You+	24	29	2	1		60
I+ You-	38	12	1	1	1	57
I- You+	2					2
I- You-	1	2		1	1	10
Final sum	70	43	1	1	2	129

Source: own studies 2021.

To sum up the considerations and study results presented in this article, it should be emphasised that the study on life positions using quantitative methods is still in the phase of research and experiments. Transactional analysis has been used for years on a practical basis, where the identification of the problem is usually based on qualitative procedures and refers to individuals or small groups. Therefore, the author treats this study as a pilot study on the way to a larger and more complex research project. Nevertheless, it was possible to observe some interesting interrelationships and draw some interesting conclusions. First of all, an alarmingly large number of people was observed amongst the respondents with the life position *I am O.K., you are not O.K.* This number is significantly higher than in other studies conducted by the author before the pandemic and the resulting limitations in interpersonal relationships. This conclusion certainly requires further exploration and confirmation, nevertheless, it points to possible areas of necessary preventive and therapeutic measures after lifting of restrictions and full return to pre-pandemic education.

In addition, research has shown that online learning is for people for whom others are *not O.K.*, less engaging and more comfortable. These persons also pointed out that with this form of teaching they feel safer than in direct contact. This result, together with the conclusions cited in the previous paragraph, should be disseminated amongst people directly involved in the education pro-

cess at various levels. It can have a direct impact on the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student or student, as well as on the quality of peer relations and the functioning of groups. And this, in turn, will probably have a direct impact on the effectiveness and quality of the entire teaching process.

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Nauczanie zdalne z perspektywy pozycji życiowych uczniów i studentów. Raport z badań pilotażowych

Streszczenie

Pozycje życiowe w analizie transakcyjnej pozwalają na określenie stosunku człowieka do samego siebie oraz do swojego otoczenia. W artykule autor podejmuje próbę analizy, czy przyjmowana przez respondentów pozycja życiowa może w jakiś sposób wpływać na ich stosunek do wymuszonego przez pandemię nauczania zdalnego.

Słowa kluczowe: pozycje życiowe, nauczanie zdalne, pandemia COVID-19.