

More activities than time

STUDENTS' CHALLENGES WITH REMOTE LEARNING
FALL 2020 SEMESTER

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Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning (CITL)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Memorial University conducted a survey of undergraduate and graduate students during October 2020 asking about their experiences during the fall 2020 semester. A summary of the full survey can be found online:

<https://citl.mun.ca/studentssurveyresults.php> Students were asked the following question:

What was your biggest challenge in the fall 2020 semester?

The 2,786 open-ended responses allowed us to explore the challenges students faced. Major themes that emerged through analysis include:

- students' perception of an overwhelming workload in courses;
- the lack of timely and meaningful communication with instructors and other students;
- mental health, physical health and school/life/work balance and the relationship to perceptions of workload;
- concerns with instruction quality and the feeling of having to "teach themselves"; and
- the feeling that there is a lack of understanding and flexibility on the part of instructors.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, Memorial University offered a survey to students to gather feedback on their experiences during the fall 2020 semester. This survey sought to collect students' learning experiences, their technical capabilities, their learning preferences, their communication preferences, and offered a number of opportunities for open-ended feedback. This report summarizes the open-ended responses to the following question:

What was your biggest challenge in the fall 2020 semester?

METHODS AND APPROACH

There were 2,786 responses to this question. The survey received a total of 3,585 responses, meaning that almost 78% of respondents submitted a response to this question. The raw responses were divided up into three groups, with CITL staff members reviewing each response and tagging (assigning a theme) each comment according to the content of the response. A single comment could be tagged with multiple themes. CITL staff members then summarized the content of the responses for the themes they identified.

The three groups of tags were later combined into a single list, with similar tags collapsed into similar themes. Once similar themes were identified across the whole dataset, the task shifted to combining these themes into larger themes and identifying key points that were extracted to provide an overall summary of these themes. These themes were then sorted into major and minor themes for the survey responses. Major themes consist of ideas or concepts that received over 200 mentions among the responses. Minor themes received between 100 and 200 mentions among the responses. Major and minor refer to the frequency of appearance of ideas, and not the overall importance of that idea to the success of students studying during the fall semester.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

A reminder that this report summarizes the challenges students faced during the fall 2020 semester at Memorial University. Reading the following (without keeping this in mind) could paint the picture that all students are facing extreme challenges with remote learning. That is, however, an incomplete picture.

As you will see, while there is little doubt that students are facing some extreme pressures this semester, this report omits students who responded positively to this question or respondents who skipped the question because they faced no challenges. We also had students compare and contrast challenges to other rewarding course experiences this fall. All this is to say that students had positive learning experiences this fall; however, these positive experiences do not appear in this report because that was not in the scope of what they were asked.

For instructors at Memorial University who read this report and are inspired to change a course learning experience for the winter 2021 semester, you are encouraged to reach out to CITL and other academic support units within the institution. Staff within CITL are ready to discuss course design or course delivery, with the goal to help address any concerns you have. Reach out to your academic unit's Academic Support Representative (ASR) to have them connect you with the right team or person within CITL that can provide you with support.

MAJOR THEMES

Course Workload

Over 30% of student responses specifically identified course workload as their biggest challenge this semester. This is not a surprise given the results in the quantitative survey data showing that 73% of undergraduate students and 50% of graduate students felt that the workload this semester was higher than their expectations and previous experience.

This workload caused some students to drop courses. Some students also had trouble contacting their instructors and hearing back from them in a timely manner. This further complicated the workload situation as students could not make progress without the information from their instructor. Due to the higher amount of lower-stakes assessments, many students struggled with managing deadlines. Students commented that these smaller assessments often still had a significant workload attached, and grade point per time worked is higher than a few higher stake assessments. For this reason, students mentioned having to decide which assessments to skip because they simply did not have time to work on them all. Students also felt that there was little flexibility to work with some instructors on adjusting these deadlines.

Some students commented that questions on assessments, or the nature of the assessments themselves, were made more difficult to compensate for having non-invigilated assessments. Students who were in courses that used online discussions as a replacement for in-class participation found that this mode of participation took considerably more time than asking questions during a synchronous session. If all of their courses used a similar design style, students would spend hours per week reading and commenting on discussion posts before study could begin or work on larger assessments.

Some students who had asynchronous learning videos available in their class noted that without a time limit some instructors provided so much content that it was too time consuming to view it all. Additionally, large videos covering a number of topics in a single video made it difficult for students to find information they needed. Many students commented they did not have time to actually "learn anything" in their course and instead spent time moving from assessment to assessment.

First year students seem to have additional challenges as they are unfamiliar with the university workload, but in addition to navigating a university for the first time, had to also learn in a new delivery method (remote or online learning) that some were unfamiliar with.

This week alone, I had 22 separate "course work" due. This course work included everything from midterms, essays, formal lab reports, semi-formal lab reports to post-lecture quizzes, end of chapter online assignments, end of chapter handwritten assignments and everything in between. I understand that as I increase my level of education (i.e. first year to second year etc.) that the workload will increase, but it is usually not this dramatic. I have talked with many other students about the increase in workload all every single one of them agree that it is way too much. I also have a friend who is retaking all the courses that she took last year in order to improve her marks, and even she can see an increase in the workload while still taking the exact same courses as she did last year. I do understand that University takes a whole lot of time and effort in order to be successful, but there is no reason why I should

start my classes at 9:00am every day, including weekends and do not stop working on "course work" until 12:00am or 1:00am most nights.

ive only taken online courses at mun and i was so surprised how difficult they became this semester. i have done exams online previously and this was tossed out and replaced by dozens of assignments and quizzes. it is completely overwhelming and i have struggled all semester to keep up with workload. for example, i took xxxxxxxx and it was a midterm and a final. i am retaking it now and its 16 weekly quizzes, 2 tests, a paper, 4 journal assignments, group chats every week. i chose online for flexibility and because i work full time. i feel like that flexibility is gone and my confidence to keep up with school has dwindled to the point i am considering skipping winter semester.

Time Management

Likely related to course workload, students stated that time management was a challenge for them this semester. Many students commented that the higher workload made it difficult to work towards future deadlines. Students requested tools or techniques to aid in managing the workload, due dates, and course schedules. Some students commented that they had unclear expectations from the instructors on due dates or they lacked a complete course overview, and this contributed to time management challenges. Other students commented that assessments or due dates overlapped between their courses, making it tough to keep priorities straight.

Other pandemic-related home or life demands also put pressure on students and made demands on their time. Some students commented that they are uncomfortable with the lack of structure present in their asynchronous learning and would appreciate additional scheduling information to help them stay on task.

My biggest challenge was managing the work load for all my courses. I would consider myself to have good time management skills, but with online learning came a lot more weekly quizzes and assignments. As well, the professors were not as strict with time limits of their lectures. This led to courses that were only supposed to have three 50 minute lectures a week, having three 90 minute lectures a week. When this happens in every class for five courses, it adds ALOT more time spent watching lectures. Which in turn, makes it hard to keep with all my courses.

Instructional Quality

Many students felt that overall instructional quality was lower than their previous experiences and they had to “teach themselves” with little guidance, support or feedback. For example, students reported cases where instructors recommended textbook readings and then assigned assessments and provided very little instructional information beyond this. Other instructors simply posted recaps of assigned readings without additional guidance, thoughts, or insights. In some cases, students supplemented their course learning experiences with friends’ content from other instructors, similar online open courses or even hiring private tutors.

Students found that discussions with instructors were more difficult when compared to in-person classes, and students had difficulty getting feedback on work completed. Different courses lacked consistency in the tools and techniques used to engage students and many were not re-designed for online delivery. Since different tools were used for course delivery, and course layouts changed from instructor to instructor, students struggled to find relevant information in a timely manner. Some students commented that some assigned readings did not align with the material tested. Students experienced difficulties being engaged with long, synchronous sessions when no opportunity was given for discussion or online lab sessions that did not allow for hands-on experience. Students also struggled with calculations in math and science courses related to the viewing of instructor formulas, as well as their own writing of calculations and practice.

I understand completely that some instructors are having just as hard a time coping with online delivery as students, but I can't help but notice that some put a lot of effort into making the experience effective, while it seemed others are doing the bare minimum. I really don't know what to recommend by way of solving this, besides encouraging instructors to communicate with students in a meaningful way? As well, instructors are all using different tools. It would be ideal to standardize certain aspects of remote delivery; some instructors are using Webex, some are using Bongo, some are uploading YouTube video lectures, some are uploading PowerPoint presentations that they've recorded their voice over. Any way it could all be kept within D2L would be ideal.

Communication with Instructors / Understanding from Instructors

During the fall semester 2020, many students described less frequent communication with instructors, teaching assistants and lab assistants than expected. Students also report that they would have appreciated more understanding towards their unique situations. Students commented on the lack of regular communication with some instructors as a source of their struggles and feelings of isolation this semester. Some

students reported delays in receiving grades or feedback on course work. Other communication issues emerged, including unanswered instructor emails, instructors with few or no office hours, and a lack of course schedules and course information. Students taking multiple courses struggled with the various methods and technologies that instructors would request for communication. Students were also confused with late changes to deadlines or course schedules, adding complications to their existing plans.

Some students in cohort-based programs commented that instructors within the same program were scheduling conflicting work with other courses in the program. This lack of coordination within the program was frustrating for students. Overall, there was an impression that some instructors did not understand the challenges that students were having with remote instruction and the students would like more flexibility. A few students mentioned demeaning attitudes and overly negative responses from instructors during the semester as well. Importantly, students reported having great learning experiences in some of their courses, and terrible experiences in others, showing that while these are real challenges, they are not universal.

I am in some courses where all the professor does is just upload assignments and slideshows with little to no guidelines for expectations. Some professors take days to respond to emails which is surprising for an all online course load.

The course load is immense and incredibly overwhelming. Several students have come forward and said that contact profs and it is very difficult, and certain profs respond very rudely and refuse help. It's too much and I'm suffering because of it.

Mental, Physical Health and Life Balance

Many students commented on their mental or physical health, or work/life/school balance. The main source of mental health concerns stem from the increased stress of studying, living and working through a pandemic. The lack of socialization opportunities within and outside school, the lack of routine and structure of traditional classes, and higher than normal workload are contributing to these struggles. Students are feeling increasingly isolated and disconnected from their instructors, peers and the university community.

One of the major concerns was too much screen time, and the mental and physical toll this takes on an individual. Due to the lack of mobility, course work, synchronous sessions, assessments and studying all happen in the same way: staring at a screen. This is leading to screen fatigue that is affecting motivation as well as physical

problems like eye strain and headaches. Some students struggle with the motivation to get out of bed in the morning and walk over to the desk to start their school work.

Due to the higher workload, students report finding that they have no time to unwind. This results in higher stress levels. Due to home and living situations, students struggle to study effectively and balance personal and household needs. Some students have young children that cannot be placed in care, or elderly parents to take care of in addition to school work and a job. Some students had to take on additional part-time work to make ends meet because their normal employment did not take place as it typically would. All of these other responsibilities may be manageable for an individual under normal circumstances, but during a pandemic it is becoming unmanageable for some.

Since there is so much work and no time for breaks, many people have breakdowns every week or even everyday. Personally I have to choose between a shower (basic human hygiene) or finishing assignments on time. This shouldn't even be a problem. Students are always feeling like they are behind and can never get on top of the work, even if they work from the time they wake up till they sleep without breaks.

Its been extremely taxing trying to stay on top of everything, especially with the paranoia of feeling like you're missing assignments/tests because they're all scattered and invisible online. However now that I've gotten my schedule system built, it's still hard to ever find time to get away from the computer and take breaks because there's always something assigned/due each day and each week.

"Balancing massive school workload, with work and working from home, while still going through a pandemic. St John's is doing fairly well right now, but my family does not live in St. John's and I still worry about them, plus I didn't really have a place where I could sit at home and focus on work other than my bed, which is not ideal."

Technical Issues

Students faced a number of technical issues with remote and online learning, and would like more accommodation and understanding for their technical issues during lectures and assessments. Internet issues negatively impacted participation in synchronous sessions or completion of online assessments. A lack of accommodation for problems during assessments, or not recording a synchronous session for later review added to students' frustration. Some students discovered that they had insufficient internet speed or bandwidth to participate. Some students reported

having to upgrade their internet services to take part in their courses this fall. Other students lived in a large household where multiple individuals were completing course work, or engaging in remote work at the same time, resulting in reduced internet quality.

Some had problems running the software required by their course because of incompatibility with their operating systems. Students reported struggling to use the software packages required for their course, and it was apparent that some instructors also had difficulty using the same software, which impacted the learning experience. Many students and instructors had to learn how to use collaborative software in order to transition to remote learning. They had challenges joining sessions, sharing content and fully participating in video conferenced online classes. Video conferencing software varied between courses such as Online Rooms within Brightspace, Webex, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. Some students also commented having issues connecting to Memorial resources and required a Virtual Private Network (VPN).

Managing the workload has been my biggest challenge as well as managing wifi issues as a student living in a house with 4 other students and a poor wifi connection.

Starting grad school has been challenging. My wifi connection at home has never given me problems before, but seems to like dropping connections or audio during multi-person video calls, so meetings can be extremely frustrating at times.

The video classes are tiring, and there is a time lag with people who have bad internet connections. This time lag makes class less efficient.

MINOR THEMES

Adapting to Online Delivery

Some students thought that courses which were normally taught in-person should be better adapted for online delivery or remote instruction. Some students found that updating of some courses for remote delivery was rushed, incomplete, or not even attempted. A few students received syllabi that included details such as which office to drop off assignments. Students felt some courses focused on finding online technology to replace the in-person learning but did not rework the experience for a remote environment.

Some students struggled with keeping track of course requirements and expectations for the remote delivery of courses, wishing that this information was better organized

and communicated in one place. Organization of course material in a single course was a problem for some, and the differences between different instructors' course designs, including how information was organized and stored, was a problem for others. The lack of consistency between courses made it difficult to find and keep track of important course information, especially when changes occur in a course.

Students felt that the transition to remote learning resulted in less communication with instructors and fellow students, leading to feeling overwhelmed with the course material. Students also describe that they were not prepared to quickly adjust to online instruction and would have appreciated more help in the transition.

Technology, scheduling and time management, adjusting to the workload, and self-teaching were all challenges mentioned by students stemming from adapting to remote and online delivery.

The syllabus and course instructions were not simplified for online learning. Instructions remained the same as they'd been for previous years. Many aspects needed to be changed in order to facilitate completing assignments online and they were not. This created a lot of confusion for students.

Course and Class Scheduling

Students suffered from a degree of scheduling conflicts in the fall semester that were unlike conflicts they had experienced before. Synchronous sessions and assessments were scheduled at the same time across different courses. A number of students mentioned that instructors were scheduling their synchronous sessions outside of the listed time in course listings, which resulted in conflicts. Assessments were also scheduled outside of scheduled times, resulting in missing other assessments, or synchronous class time in another course to participate in assessed work.

Having classes or assessments scheduled outside of listed class times affected work/life/school balance. Students commented on having to skip work shifts in order to attend class or complete an assessment. Students in other time zones experienced difficulties with classes and assessments scheduled for the early hours of the morning in their local time.

Some courses released content on a schedule or as it was produced, but this did not allow students with tight schedules to get ahead in the content. As a result, students in these situations reported feeling as though they were always trying to catch up. Students in a few courses also mentioned that they had limited or late access to course syllabi, restricting their ability to plan for the semester or to purchase textbooks and other resources. A few students proposed to have a central calendar that combines deadlines and important dates from all their courses into one place. Brightspace already offers this, when all course-related dates are added on a per-course basis. Few instructors, however, seem to be using the calendar tool within

Brightspace to achieve this. In order to reduce the per-week workload, some students suggested extending the regular course work into the exam period.

I had initially been taking three courses (which is what I usually take during a semester) and had to drop one because the workload was far greater than expected. The professor had also labelled this course as "online", but then surprised our class with mandatory weekly lectures whose times conflicted with the scheduled lectures of my remote classes. It would be nice to have more clarity provided on the distinction between "online" and "remote" classes.

i have a clash of 3 course which are on the same time frame, and ended up having the same synchronous sessions on the same day. which is leaves me debating for which class to attend. because while registering it had a normal schedule that had different class times spread across the week. but all the mandatory synchronous courses on the same day and same time frame.

Assessments

Closely related to increased workload is the challenge with assessments. Completing only online or remote assessments contributed to test anxiety and stress over falling student grades. Students felt that grading was tougher given that most assessments were now potentially open-book. Some assessments were made more difficult by increasing questions or reducing completion time. When instructors added online invigilation technology, like ProctorU or Webex, students reported having difficulty participating or completing the assessment due to technical or internet problems. Other students did not welcome online proctoring, and thought it invaded their privacy and increased test anxiety. Students also struggled with the scheduling of assessments and would like more flexibility in assessment time slots to reduce the conflict with other courses, their careers, their personal lives, and to work around their time zone.

The lack of being able to navigate through an assessment (e.g. see more than one question at a time, move forward and back through an assessment) removed some key test taking strategies from students, including not being able to scan the assessment to plan out their time; not returning to check on previous answers that they could not recall in the moment (resulting in more guesses at answers); and not being able to markup tests to work on problems or keep track of their progress.

The timed quizzes online were very challenging because some of them you can not go back to not answered questions once you have moved on. As well, finding it super hard to find time to actually learn material

this semester, it is more like learning enough to get the assignment/project done before the due date.

Lack of Access to Communities and Classmates

Students struggled with a lack of access to their classmates and other peer communities throughout the university. These may be social groups or study groups that students typically rely on for learning and university life. This caused an increase in stress and negatively impacted mental health. Not being able to regularly interact with their student cohort reduced their motivation and engagement with their course work.

Students reported feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers. They have little time, opportunity, or ability to collaborate with their classmates or those in the same program. The lack of connection also makes group work very challenging and it is difficult to coordinate with students and their schedules. The lack of interaction with classmates, whether in class, in labs, or on video conference calls makes collaboration more challenging than face to face discussion. This semester, students found it more difficult getting to know their classmates and making social connections. First year students feel as though they're missing out on the first year university experience. Some requested more opportunities to meet online, and possibly in-person safely.

Losing access to the community that I used to rely on for support in subjects I do not know. Now that Memorial is online only, every conversation is a scheduled meeting with prepared questions and if anything is forgotten in the meeting it either requires another meeting, or an explanation via text which makes it so much more difficult to understand. I also lost access to the industry community that is so closely linked to my faculty which makes me extremely worried about finding a job.

Collaboration was very difficult. Whether that be through labs and assignments, but it was even worse for trying to learn course concepts. Collaborating with classmates makes learning a course that much easier and more importantly, more enjoyable. I was beginning to not enjoy my degree and going online, having to do everything alone, made me really not want to finish a degree that I am only one semester (winter 2021) from finishing.

OTHER THEMES

Study Space

Students struggled to find appropriate spaces for study. At home they do not necessarily have a quiet space or dedicated room for their study. Students may also lack appropriate technology to complete studies. Depending on the number of people within the household, access to space, technology, and quality internet are all impediments to effective learning.

Asynchronous and Synchronous Learning

Some students signed up for what they thought was an asynchronous course and it was delivered synchronously, while other students had the opposite experience. Many students feel that both methods of delivery need adjustments to be more effective for remote instruction. Some synchronous sessions were very long (3 hours) and “boring” (e.g., no webcams, presentation, or questions allowed), and students had trouble learning from these experiences. Other students faced technical problems during synchronous sessions and because the sessions were not recorded, they lost out on the opportunity to participate and engage in the learning experience. Students struggled with asynchronous learning because of course layouts in the learning management system that were poorly organized and provided no student guidance towards completion, or instructional media was poorly designed and ineffective.

Other Themes

Some students in lab courses struggled with online labs and found it difficult to conduct the lab without hands-on experience. Others found online labs consumed more time than traditional in-person labs.

Students commented that they lacked access to academic help centres either due to the centres operating at a reduced capacity, or not operating online at all. Some students had similar challenges connecting with university support services such as the Blundon Centre and academic advising. Some students struggled to find a work term for their program.

Students struggled financially this semester. Ranging from new costs like enhanced internet packages, new computing hardware and accessories (scanners, printers, webcams) and more traditional costs like textbooks and lab resources. Financial difficulty significantly contributed to students' stress during this time. Many students felt they should not be paying the full price of tuition if they are not receiving a full learning experience, or able to use the facilities of the university.

Several students said their grades were lower this semester compared to previous semesters. Course time that would normally be devoted to learning coursework was spent on learning new technologies. The high workload, difficult assessments and lack of interaction with instructors and classmates are contributing factors to lower grades.

NEXT ACTIONS

This report will be circulated to academic units through the CITL Advisory Council and the CITL website to aid instructors in the design and delivery of their learning experience for the winter semester. CITL will also work with administrative support units on designing and promoting strategies that will enhance student success in the winter semester.

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