THE USE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS IN ONLINE EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF UKRAINE

UTILIZAREA PLATFORMELOR DIGITALE ÎN EDUCAȚIA ONLINE: EXPERIENȚA UCRAINEI

Iryna MATSYSHYNA,
D.Sc. in Political Science.
Vasyl' Stus Donetsk National University, Department of Political Science and Public Administration. Ukraine
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2988-620X

Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine changed the educational approach in Ukraine. It became clear that life is more important than studying. Therefore, the first days were in a state of shock and panic. Then came the understanding that knowledge and skills can be a weapon against the enemy. And then we returned to online learning, which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I want to dwell on some fundamental points of study that have their own peculiarity at the Vasyl Stus Donetsk National University. Official training at the university is currently taking place in a mixed format. According to a survey, only first-year students are studying in offline format. All other students, from the second year of bachelor's programs to postgraduates, are learning online. All communication with students, the educational process, grade journals, meetings, and lectures occur on the Microsoft Teams platform.

This platform is convenient as it allows for organizing the learning process in a virtual environment. At the beginning of the academic year, each student receives their corporate email and connects to each course. Classes are held according to a stable schedule. Lectures can be planned in advance or started immediately. The integrated calendar helps schedule classes and reminds about important events. If desired, lectures can be recorded. Additionally, any representative from the university administration can easily see when a class took place, how many students attended, how communication occurred, what tasks were assigned, and what grades the students received. This eliminates concerns about total oversight of classes and control over the educational process by the institution's leadership. Everything is transparent.

Teams integrates easily with other Office 365 products, such as Word, Excel, and OneNote, simplifying access to documents and collaborative work. Teachers can

create their own online classes for group work, where students can exchange ideas, files, and work on projects together. For example, in the summer of 2023, I worked on a joint project focused on media literacy for journalists. A separate group was created for meetings, where we uploaded specific folders with working video files and student projects. Another working group could upload videos created by my team and then distribute them on social media. This allowed us to stick to the schedule and avoid unnecessary file transfers.

Teachers can create assignments, set deadlines, and evaluate submissions, making it easy to track student progress. Additionally, each student can see their assignments in a timely manner, along with the assessment criteria, deadlines for completion, and final grades. They also have the option to send private messages to the teacher. We place great importance on communication culture, so from time to time, we have discussions with students about respecting the teacher's time outside of working hours and on weekends.

This platform can be installed separately or simply launched from the official website. There is also a mobile app that allows users to join classes conveniently. Considering that some of our students and teachers are abroad, this is the right solution for collaborative learning and working together in the context of war.

For beginners, the interface can be complex, and it may take time to master. Additionally, in some regions, there may be access issues due to unstable internet connections, especially after shelling when internet service may be disrupted. During classes, when there are alerts about shelling, sessions are suspended. This is a university rule, and both the teacher and students must prioritize safety.

Since Microsoft Teams is a paid platform and the university holds a license for it, communication among teachers and university administration occurs on this platform. Teams provides a high level of data security, which is important for educational institutions.

Given the current trend of combining mini-lectures with interactive student work, each teacher also uses additional digital platforms during their classes. Interactive learning fosters the development of both subject-specific and general learning skills, promotes life values, creates an atmosphere of cooperation and interaction, and enhances communication skills. Online technologies involve simulating political situations, using role-playing games, and collaboratively solving problems and tasks.

The main feature of this teaching methodology is that the use of online platforms occurs in a collaborative activity under a horizontal structure of "teacher – student", which provides more space for expressing one's opinion or demonstrating unconventional approaches to solving course-related problems. At the same time, this

format requires a high level of knowledge about online platforms from the teacher to understand how they can assist, what skills students will acquire, and how this will contribute to further learning.

Today, the market for educational digital technologies for distance learning offers a wide range of opportunities. The intensive development of online learning platforms will help preserve and enhance the intellectual potential of higher education students. Personally, I use three platforms for teaching: Padlet, Miro, and Excalidraw. Here's a brief overview of these platforms.

Padlet is a multimedia resource for creating, collaboratively editing, and storing information. It serves as a virtual wall where you can attach photos, files, links to web pages, and notes. This can be a private wall project, a moderated wall with multiple participants contributing information, or a space available for reading and editing by any user for information sharing. To create a post, simply double-click on the board. In the pop-up window, you can enter your name, insert your photo, and leave a comment. The board allows for collaborative work, so the creator can send invitations to other project participants by entering their email addresses and granting them permission to write on or moderate the board.

On Padlet's online boards, brainstorming sessions can be organized, knowledge can be summarized and systematized, and individual posts, notes, files, and links can be left, commented on, and rated.

Padlet enables users to host a variety of content types: making text notes, uploading files (Word, PDF, JPG, PNG), placing hyperlinks (links) found directly in the built-in search engine, taking instant photos (Snap), recording and uploading video and audio notes, adding hand-drawn annotations, finding and adding points on a map (Padlet includes access to Google Maps), and if needed, sharing a direct link to another Padlet board.

One particularly interesting feature is the built-in screen recording tool, which allows users to create a short screencast and immediately upload it to the online board. Additionally, creating a Padlet board can be a self-assignment. You can offer course participants the choice to create a report, presentation, interactive poster, mind map, or Padlet board. The resulting board can be embedded in external resources.

Some teachers use the interactive board Miro – a virtual equivalent of a traditional board that teachers use during lectures to explain new material to students. It allows for writing, drawing, adding files, and sharing comments. This tool is indispensable during distance learning when the lecturer conducts classes online. The service enables instructors to visually present topics to students, engage in teamwork, visualize processes, and hold video conferences.

Moreover, this resource can be integrated with Microsoft Teams, where online classes with students and meetings with colleagues take place. The Miro interactive board facilitates effective collaboration among group members while working on a shared project, conducting brainstorming sessions, drafting action plans, or organizing workflows using digital notes. The tool provides simultaneous access to a single project, allowing for division into blocks and areas of responsibility, ensuring that each participant has their own role in the collaborative effort.

Today, I personally use artificial intelligence platforms that actively enhance my work, such as Excalidraw. It is an intuitive platform for creating visual notes, allowing me, as an instructor, to draw diagrams, charts, and illustrations in real-time. It is particularly useful for teaching, as it helps visualize ideas and concepts. Here's a detailed overview of its main features, advantages, and disadvantages.

This platform has a simple interface, and anyone with the link can join and collaborate. Users can see the changes made by other participants in real-time and can also make their own edits to others' work.

Excalidraw utilizes vector graphics, which maintain high-quality drawings even when scaled. The platform offers a variety of templates and shapes that can be used to create diagrams, saving time and effort. Once the work is complete, users can export their creations in PNG and SVG formats, as well as import images for further editing. Currently, it is available as a free version, making it accessible to a wide range of users. Personally, I replace some of my presentations with it, as it allows me to involve students in interactive work during classes.

In my opinion, Excalidraw is an ideal tool for group projects and learning. An additional bonus of this program is that all notes and collaborative works are saved, which can serve as an important course summary.

In addition to these platforms, I use specific platforms for each course that relate to the subject and tasks. For example, I work with journalists on Powtoon to create animated videos and presentations. For visualizing and generating ideas, I use AI Comic Factor, which can be a valuable tool for teaching dialogue writing and developing storylines. This can be particularly helpful for those looking to improve their screenwriting skills.

With political scientists and master's students in journalism, we focus on data visualization to create analytical materials. Here, Flourish Studio assists us in making attractive graphics, charts, and tables, while Datawrapper is used for creating data visualizations, diagrams, and maps.

Today, there are several useful digital platforms that can be employed in both

online and offline learning. In Ukraine, training sessions are being conducted for educators on how to utilize new opportunities in teaching.

After the war in Ukraine concludes, the use of digital platforms in education will continue to evolve. The country is already moving toward hybrid models of learning, where education can be received both in classrooms and remotely. Access to online courses, webinars, and educational resources is increasing, allowing students to learn at their own pace. Programs are being developed to support mental health, taking into account the experiences of war. Thanks to digital platforms, educational institutions are actively establishing partnerships with international organizations and educational establishments for the exchange of experiences and resources, as is currently happening with Moldova.