



Elsa Skënderi Rakiplari

PhD in linguistics

University of Tirana

Tirana, Albania

ORCID ID 0000-0002-5739-9097

elsa.skenderi@fhf.edu.al

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION “STUDENTS OF COVID-19 ERA”

The present paper aims to analyse the discursive construction *students of COVID-19 (era)*, which has been broadly used as a label to refer to all the students, who were shifted to online education due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation. Following the critical discourse analysis theoretical approach, we examine the discursive planes that have built and reinforced this discursive construction. The paper focuses on three main areas that have reinforced this discourse construction: the science (s) plan, (online) media plan, and everyday life plan. The scientific discourse on education has emphasized the detrimental effects the pandemic has had, and is expected to have on learners. Moreover, traditional, online, and social media have continuously pointed to the negative impact of the pandemic on the academic performance of students. Especially social media has been using a very powerful tool to convey this kind of discursive stance, i.e., memes. The everyday life plane has also played a role in the discursive construction of *students of COVID-19 era* by bringing up and building upon the real-life experiences of the learning loss that students have been facing. The paper analyses representative discursive fragments from all the above-mentioned discourse planes, to shed light on the discursive construction “students of COVID-19”, as a pathologizing label used for a whole generation of learners affected by COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; discourse; discursive construction; learning loss; students.

1. INTRODUCTION

The education process of about 1.5 billion students around the world was affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, according to the reports of UNESCO, UNICEF, and World Bank. On a global scale, two-thirds of the higher education institutions moved on to online learning due to the pandemic (Marinoni et al., 2020). Whereas according to the European University Association (EUA) 95 % of the European universities switched from classroom teaching to distance and/or online learning. During the time of online/ distance learning, numerous reports from around the world reported that students faced technical, academic, and psychological difficulties. As it was foreseen and now somehow proven, the pandemic has had detrimental effects, as many students faced learning disruption which has led to learning loss (Bielinski et al., 2020; Engzell et al., 2021; Harme & Moss, 2021; Kolomiiets et al., 2021; Middleton, 2022; Patrinos, Vegas & Carter-Rau, 2022). Evidence of learning loss has been reported not only by researchers, but also by teachers, lecturers, and students themselves. All these instances have somehow reinforced, what we consider in this paper *students of COVID-19 era* discursive construct. In their paper, Jen et al (2021) call upon Critical Analysis of discourse to analyse several discursive constructs that have arisen during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Among these pandemic-related discursive constructs, they point at the discourse of learning loss, which they consider “a well-intentioned yet pathologizing narrative that may label an entire generation of students as deficient. The deficit-based lens is reinforced and extended by the disproportionate labelling and exclusion of students of colour, evidenced by rates of school discipline and special education referrals. Such discourses bolster hegemonic whiteness and an oppressive and punitive school structure”.

The negative effects of this pathologizing discursive construct might be noticed in long terms because discourses function as “flow of knowledge” (Jäger, 2001) stored in the societal collective memory. Thus, the label *student of COVID-19 era* and all the negative connotations accompanying it, is already shaped as a discursive construct embedded in the collective knowledge and itself might be considered as the last, but not the least negative effect of the covid-19 pandemic on students’ lives. The aim of the present paper is to examine the discursive planes that have contributed to the rise the learning loss narrative and reinforcement of *students of COVID-19* discursive construct. For that we draw upon the theoretical considerations of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) by focusing specifically on those concepts relevant to analyse the fore-mentioned construct.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

From the perspective of CDA, all events are grounded in the discourse, and the discourse itself significantly shapes the way reality is perceived. In terms of CDA, the COVID-19 pandemic must be considered as a discursive event. Jäger (2001) emphasizes that a discursive event is considered as such, whenever it is “emphasized politically”, receives extensive media coverage and “as such events they influence the direction and quality of the discourse strand to which they belong” (p. 48). Considering the huge of media coverage, political relevance and pervasion of COVID-19 infection cases reaching the pandemic scale, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic fulfils all criteria to be regarded as a “mega” discursive event, which brought significant changes to social practices and public discourses in almost every part of the world. Jäger (2001) when describing the constitution of discourse, argues that discourse planes could also be called the societal locations from which ‘speaking’ happens”. Some discourse plans, where discourse strands are elaborated, are science (s) plan, politics plan, media plan, education plan, everyday life, business life, administration etc. (Jäger, 2001, p. 49).

Science plan – body of research focusing on learning loss of students of COVID-19 discursive construction. The text fragments that fed this plane were scientific texts, such as research papers and Policy Research Working Paper.

Media plans – media coverage of learning loss. Media framed continuously the learning loss phenomenon, whenever reporting about school closures and/or online classes. The media plane had threefold sources of information: i) the scientific plane and disseminating scientific research results on school closures and learning loss; ii) everyday life plane, by reporting everyday experiences of families whose children were attending school and/or everyday experiences of students and teachers affected by school closures, due to Covid-19 pandemic. A special influence on constructing the media discourse had one sector of the media plane, which is social media. The existing body of research on COVID-19 and social media discourse has been mainly oriented toward Twitter (Damiano & Catellier, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Schweinberger et al., 2021). Since Twitter is considered to provide researchers the opportunity of studying the role of social media in global health crisis (Chen et al., 2020; Lecompte-Van Poucke, 2022), but also there are several research papers which focus on social media plane in general (Gupta et al., 2022; Han et al., 2020).

Especially through memes, social media has shaped the negative discourse construction *students of COVID-19*. Memes have already been the object of scientific inquiry, for

example, in terms of COVID-19 and ageism (Chen et al., 2020; Jimenez-Sotomayor & Gomez-Moreno, 2020). Internet memes were designed to effect social change during the pandemic, and they are considered as “the ways a society expresses and thinks of itself (Denisova, 2019, p. 2). Particularly during the lock down, when the time spent online increased significantly the number of memes encountered on the internet also increased.

Everyday life plan. The everyday life plan has also played a crucial role in the discursive construction of *students of COVID-19 era* by bringing up and building upon the real-life experiences of the learning loss that students have been facing due to educational institutions closure. Relevant data from everyday life students’ experiences that shape the everyday life plane, might be collected from interviews, media reports of such interviews and/or surveys reported in scientific journals or white papers. For instance, a report of European Youth Forum, entitled *Beyond lockdown – The ‘Pandemic scar’ on young people* revealed that 65.3 % of students surveyed, indicated they were learning ‘significantly less’ or ‘slightly less’ since the start of the pandemic (Moxon, Bacalso & Şerban, 2021, p. 19), whereas the students in marginalised situations reported higher learning loss. The mass of students, educators and their families have been circulating the “flow of societal knowledge” (Jäger, 2001, p. 34) about their everyday life experiences of being a student during the pandemic, thus building on the discursive construction *students of COVID-19*.

As it will be seen, given the all-encompassing size of the discursive event at stake, the above-mentioned discourse planes have generated discourse threads that are thematically related to COVID-19 pandemic and *students of COVID-19* discursive construction.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

In this paper we follow CDA qualitative method, as we analyse discourse fragments corresponding to the discursive planes we mentioned before. The discourse fragments chosen are representative samples of the discursive threads they belong to. The discourse fragments in CDA tradition tend not to be very large, because as Meyer (2001) points: “Many CDA studies mostly deal with only small corpora which are usually regarded as being typical of certain discourses” (p. 25). Discourse fragments used include Scientific reports, Policy Research Working Paper, Media reports on everyday life experiences of students, social media memes on online class, which point to online class experiences and learning loss.

Following a linguistic approach, indispensable for CDA (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 139–141), at a lexical level we perform a metaphor identification and an analysis of cognitive metaphors and in a grammatical level, we focus on agency, focusing specifically on those cases in the discourse fragments, where students appear to be mentioned explicitly as agents and then in other discourse plans, where their agency fades due to syntactic transformations and metadiscourse devices (Hyland, 2005) used to hide agency and mitigate responsibility of learning loss during online classes. Fairclough (1995) emphasizes that “social agents are not ‘free’ agents, they are socially constrained, but nor are their actions totally socially determined. Agents have their own ‘causal powers’ which are not reducible to the causal powers of social structures and practices” (p. 22). Being considered as subjects of certain sentences, often places responsibility on these actors, i.e., students.

In analysing internet memes, we follow the multimodal discourse analysis method (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), which considers visual aspects co-occurring with language in a specific context. Communication itself happens as Kress et al (2001) note through all modes, thus these modes all contribute to the knowledge flow. As Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), emphasize, discourse includes language, nonverbal communication, and visual images, which are semiotic elements belonging to social practices. the case of internet memes about online classes and students’ behaviour during remote learning the visual communicative mode is accompanied with the textual mode of short either informative or

humorous string of texts (p. 38). The procedure for finding relevant memes was that of convenient sampling.

For the everyday life plan, taking into account the pandemic time, we collected data from the press and not from direct interviews with specific students. Specifically, we exploited 25 testimonies published by the learning network, “*What Students Are Saying About Remote Learning*” in *The New York Times* journal.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Constructing students of COVID-19 (era) in the Science plan

Most scientific reports and papers that are part of the science plan focus on learning loss due to school closures. Patrinos, Vegas and Carter-Rau (2022) point that “the term learning loss is commonly used in the literature to describe declines in student knowledge and skills” (p. 2). Yet what we consider problematic is the fact that while discussing learning loss, in several discourse fragments students are grammatically framed as agents, which implies responsibility regarding the learning loss. The following excerpts are fragments that belong to the scientific discourse plane demonstrate the above features:

Excerpt 1.

University students from the lowest income backgrounds lost 52 % of their normal teaching hours as a result of lockdown, but those from the highest income groups suffered a smaller loss of 40 percent, revealing a strong inequality occurring in higher education (Major, Eyles & Machin, 2020, p. 2).

Excerpt 2

Of the studies that included this measure, 11 documented greater learning losses for students at lower levels of academic achievement, while 3 documented greater learning losses for students with greater past academic achievement (Patrinos, Vegas, & Carter-Rau, 2022).

Excerpt 3

In the educational world, students have also experienced deficits in learning as a result of new approaches to teaching that were implemented. In numerous online surveys conducted since March, teachers have consistently indicated they were not prepared to teach online and that a significant percentage of their students did not even log in to complete assignments (Middleton, 2020, p. 42).

Texts from the scientific discourse plane, indicate that learning is metaphorically conceptualized a journey and learning loss as a symptom or as some kind of illness. The conceptual metaphors LEARNING IS A JOURNEY and the LEARNING LOSS IS AN ILLNESS, are encountered in the scientific discourse plane through catchwords and phrases such as:

- *Students falling behind, students of color faring worse* (Patrinos, Vegas & Carter-Rau, 2022),
- *learning progress suffers* (Dorn et al., 2020),
- *Covid-19 learning shock* (Kaffenberger, 2021),
- *education scarring effects* (Major, Eyles & Machin, 2020),
- *to prevent this generation of students from suffering permanent losses in their learning; girls faced compounding barriers to learning; accelerate students’ learning recovery* (*The World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, 2021*) etc.

The scientific discourse fragments were often cited in media discourse and contributed greatly to the discursive construction Students of COVID-19, by reinforcing the stigma

related to learning loss and thus lack of academic and professional competence in the future of the so called Covid generation (*see the term* Major, Eyles & Machin, 2020).

4.2. Constructing students of COVID-19 (era) in the media plan

Discursive construct students of covid-19 frame learning loss and imply students as more responsible of the learning loss, due to their lack of discipline during online classes. In discourse fragments below (excerpt 4, 5) extracted from CBC news and New York Times, learning loss is constructed partially because of cheating students missing classes.

Excerpt 4.

“We see a lot of absences. We see a lot of black rectangles [on screens] ... and we know students aren't listening,” he said. “They’re probably in another room playing video games. It's hard for me to blame kids for that though.” [...the academic losses are significant. We're seeing in some of the research on learning loss from different parts of the world it can be 15%–20 % in math ..., in reading] (Bobby Hristova, CBC News, 2021).

Excerpt 5.

But a majority of his students have not consistently engaged with remote assignments. They are not receiving traditional grades, and some have parents who are working outside the home or who are not tech-savvy, and are unable to assist with online schooling (Goldstein, New York Times (NYT), 2020).

Excerpt 6.

‘A lost generation’: Surge of research reveals students **sliding backward**, most vulnerable worst affected (WASHINGTON POST (WP), 2020).

Excerpt 7.

As the coronavirus pandemic persists through this academic year, McKinsey said, losses will escalate. “I think we should be very concerned about the risk of a lost generation of students” (WP, 2020).

While reporting learning loss, journals cite as reliable sources white research papers or scientific papers, part of scientific discourse plane. In the media plane, the most prominent conceptual metaphor related to students of COVID-19 discursive construct, is LEARNING IS A JOURNEY, LEARNING LOSS IS AN ILLNESS. We might see these conceptual metaphors in the following wording and catchphrases:

LEARNING IS A JOURNEY

moving backwards (WP)

students sliding backward (WP)

lost generation (WP)

educators can try to mitigate the gaps
(WP)

*students regressed because of lost
classroom time* (WP)

how much regression took place (WP)

*students need radical solutions to catch up
post-COVID* (Ft, 2021)

*encourage girls to return. This starts with
removing barriers* (TT 2020)

LEARNING LOSS IS AN ILLNESS

how American children can recover once the pandemic is over (WP)
girls' education will disproportionately suffer (TT 2020)
black and Hispanic students appear to be suffering the most (NYT 2020)
Some supports in place to help students recover (CBC, 2021)

4.2.1. Constructing students of COVID-19 (era) in the social media

As one might notice, the conceptual metaphors employed in scientific discourse plane are quite like those employed in the media discourse plane. Next, we will examine how social media, specifically Instagram memes helped reinforce through humour and irony the discursive construct *students of COVID-19*, as a label of less responsible and professionally ill-prepared individuals. The memes encountered in social media (mainly Instagram and Facebook) could be grouped as follows:

- (a) memes expressing lack of attention (as in Fig. 1)
- (b) memes expressing lack of technical expertise (Fig. 3)
- (c) Memes expressing technical difficulties (Fig. 2)
- (d) Memes expressing lack of efficiency during online classes (Fig. 1, 4, 6)
- (e) Memes expressing learning loss and the detrimental effects of online classes (Fig. 5, 6)



Fig. 1, 2, 3

"How was the online class? What did you get from it?"

Me:



Fig.4

Me: Successfully becomes a doctor after cheating in online school patients in 2040:



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Knobel and Lankshear (2007) emphasize that memes “are perceived as cultural information that move from one person to another and could shape our mentality, influence our behavior, and our social group's action [...]” (p. 10). In terms of Critical Discourse Analysis, cultural information is the flow of knowledge that shapes discourse and is also shaped by discourse. Thus, all the information flow on online classes and remote education during the pandemic, points at restrictions, deficiencies and learning loss, by reinforcing the discourse construct *students of COVID-19*.

4.3. Constructing students of COVID-19 (era) in the Everyday life plan

Testimonies of students and their families, affected by remote learning due to the pandemic, reported in most popular media outlets are relevant to gather a better understanding of the discursive construct “students of COVID-19” in a large, world-wide scale. We are aware of

specificities this discursive construct might have in various countries, yet we believe, and research indicates it has emerged as a global discursive construct affecting all people receiving formal education at the time of the pandemic outbreak. Let's see some discourse fragments:

(1) *There's no structure, which is making it hard to get up and be productive.*

Overall, online school makes time management extremely difficult, and I feel like I'm not even learning in some of my classes. *Riley S, Brooklyn, NY.*

(2) Everyday my motivation to do my work decreases and recently all my assignments have been turned in late causing my grades to drop. *Adriana Segura.*

(3) There also seems to be a lack of motivation for me now to accomplish tasks because at school, we were given an hour and a half each day to get work done in class but now I keep pushing assignments back until the last second. This definitely won't be beneficial to my work ethic in the upcoming senior year for me. *Owen Midgette.*

(4) Though my new schedule is beneficial, I find it impossible to actually learn anything new through the distance learning. It's easier for me to get distracted and be lazy with my work, so I'm starting to hate the daily mundanity of distance learning. *Cali, King of Prussia, PA.*

Almost 80 % of the students sharing their experience with *The New York Times*, reported difficulties that implied learning loss and lack of concentration, procrastination etc. What is quite interesting in these discourse fragments is the way students do not claim agency in their sayings, and they tend to depict themselves as semantic patients. Through syntactic transformations they hide or downgrade agency of specific actions. Blevins (2006) argues that from a syntactic point of view the active construction detransitivized yields a passive construction, which may be used for the purpose of inverting the prominence relations of the active. In the case of students' responses about their everyday life during online classes, less agency is noted in the discourse fragments, as it is illustrated below in Table 1:

Table 1 – Syntactic transformation and metadiscourse devices

Excerpts	Annotation
There's no structure which is making it hard to get up and be productive.	Wh-cleft structure [I find it hard to get up and be productive because there's no structure].
recently all my assignments have been turned in late	Passive structure [recently I turned in late all my assignments].
Everyday my motivation to do my work decreases.	Using a deverbal noun <i>motivation</i> as the subject of the sentence [Everyday, I have less motivation]
There also seems to be a lack of motivation for me now to accomplish tasks.	The use of the hedge <i>there seems to be a lack of motivation</i> , used to decrease the level of certainty. The real agent of the sentence I, seems to have been disguised in all that syntactic transformation. [... I lack motivation to accomplish tasks].
Though my new schedule is beneficial, I find it impossible to actually learn anything new through the distance learning.	The use of the booster <i>actually</i> as a device to emphasize certainty, although the main clause of the sentence is in a rhematic position.

Elsewhere, agency is hidden or made less obvious by metadiscourse devices such as hedges. Mostly students tend to hide responsibility for their lack of performance during distance learning, although as the last example demonstrates, this is not always the case. Yet, taking responsibility

about the lack of productivity, does not imply the opposite of what we have been arguing so far. The everyday life discourse plan has contributed to shaping and reinforcing the learning loss and the discursive construct student of COVID-19 (era).

5. DISCUSSION

If we recall the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis toward a discursive event, in terms of Fairclough's (1995) communicative event, what the analyst should focus on are the "three dimensions or facets of that event [...] text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice" (p. 57), where discourse practice refers to both text production and text consumption. Media discourse practice facilitates text consumption due to large audiences, thus reinforces the patterns of knowledge flooding from scientific discourse plan on learning loss and COVID-19 students' discursive construct.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND SCOPE FOR THE FURTHER RESEARCH

In this paper we argued that discourse planes despite of being diverse, do interact and that we may conclude that through the knowledge flow from one discourse plan to the other of the discursive construct "students of COVID-19 era", has become more prominent and therefore a stigmatizing label to mark a whole generation. The student of COVID-19 was reinforced through several discourse planes, mainly the media discourse plan. Yet the effects of this discourse plan might have deteriorating effects on the image of the so-called COVID-19 generation. Since stigma of learning loss and learning progress suffering may accompany those students in long terms. Educational professionals emphasize that "the problem with the learning loss narrative is it is premised on a set of racialized assumptions and focused on test scores". Also, emphasizing the learning loss of COVID-19 generation implies that students failed to learn at all during the online education, which, of course, may not be the case for everyone belonging to the discursive construct *student of COVID-19*.

The scope for further research lies conducting detailed quantitative analysis in the area under study.

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Ельза Скандері Ракіпларі. КРИТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ДИСКУРСИВНОЇ КОНСТРУКЦІЇ «СТУДЕНТИ ЕПОХИ COVID-19». Ця стаття має на меті проаналізувати дискурсивну конструкцію студентів COVID-19 (ери), яка широко використовується як ярлик на позначення всіх студентів, які були переведені на онлайн-навчання через ситуацію з пандемією, спричиненою COVID-19. Дотримуючись теоретичного підходу критичного аналізу дискурсу, ми досліджуємо дискурсивні площини, які побудували та зміцнили цю дискурсивну конструкцію. Стаття

зосереджується на трьох основних площинах, які посилюють цю конструкцію дискурсу: площині науки, площині (онлайн) медіа та площині повсякденного життя. Науковий дискурс про освіту наголошує на шкідливих наслідках пандемії для студентів. Крім того, традиційні, онлайніві та соціальні медіа постійно вказують на негативний вплив пандемії на успішність студентів. Особливо соціальні медіа використовують досить потужний інструмент для передачі такого роду дискурсивної позиції, тобто меми. Площина повсякденного життя також відіграла важливу роль у дискурсивному конструюванні студентів епохи COVID-19, спираючись на реальний життєвий досвід втрати навчання, з яким зіткнулися студенти. У статті аналізуються репрезентативні дискурсивні фрагменти з усіх вищезгаданих площин дискурсу, щоб пролити більше світла на студентів дискурсивної конструкції COVID-19 як патологічного ярлика, який використовується для цілого покоління студентів, які постраждали від пандемії COVID-19.

Ключові слова: COVID-19; дискурс; дискурсивна конструкція; втрата знань; студенти.

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