# Large interactive touchscreens as an opportunity for hybrid teaching during COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

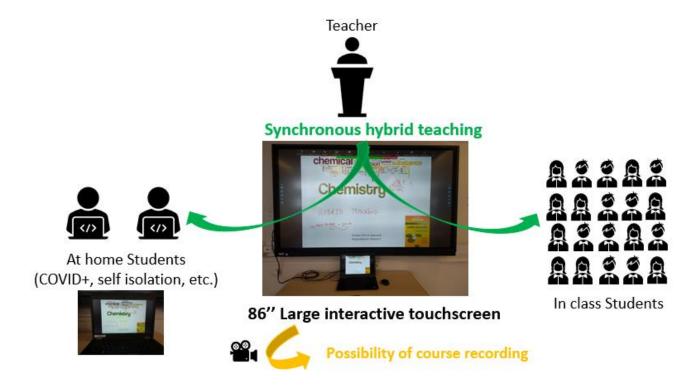
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## **ABSTRACT**

The year 2020 will be remembered as the year of COVID-19 and its subsequent lockdowns. This pandemic has profoundly changed the way we teach by forcing many institutions to offer their courses online. The time to come back to face-to-face teaching has arrived, but the shadow of the disease still hangs over teachers, students and society more generally. Disruption in teaching can still occur for students, or even teachers, if they are either diagnosed COVID-19 positive or contact case and forced to self-isolate. In order to limit the impact of self-isolation on learning, hybrid teaching (i.e. teaching face-to-face to students in a classroom and to online students at the same time) was successfully implemented owing to the combination of a videoconference software and a large interactive touchscreen. The set-up presented in this paper allows to broadcast courses to at-home students (i.e. voice, visual pedagogic support and, more interestingly, indications handwritten by the teacher) while simultaneously teaching face-to-face to students in the classroom. It also allows to self-isolated teacher to teach tutorial from home to students in the classroom. This paper focuses on the use of large interactive touchscreens for hybrid teaching. In order to evaluate this pedagogical approach, a questionnaire was completed by students and results discussed.

## **GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT**



Keywords: General Public - Upper-Division Undergraduate: - Graduate Education / Research - Chemical Education Research - Internet / Web-Based Learning - Distance Learning / Self Instruction.

#### INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic of COVID-19 has profoundly changed the way the entire educational community teaches. In France, as in other countries, students and teachers at university have been particularly affected, notably by successive lockdowns and the impossibility of face-to-face teaching. However, the educational community has been able to react and innovate to switch from face-to-face to distance learning in record time, as evidenced by the richness of the special issue "Insights Gained While Teaching Chemistry in the Time of COVID-19" published in September 2020 in this journal.

All over the world, teachers have embraced digital tools like Zoom<sup>2,3</sup>, Google Classroom<sup>4</sup>, Rain classroom and WeChat<sup>5</sup> or even social media like Facebook<sup>6</sup> or Instagram<sup>7</sup> to offer students educational continuity with synchronous and/or asynchronous<sup>8–10</sup> online courses. Solutions were also found to allow students to acquire practical skill, normally dispensed in a laboratory, by providing lab kits<sup>11,12</sup> or by designing

lab activities with daily products and kitchen utensils<sup>13–15</sup>. Even if the coronavirus has enabled a dramatic breakthrough in the development of e-learning<sup>16</sup>, the time to come back to face-to-face teaching has arrived. However, if strict lockdowns seem to be ruled out for the moment, we have to adapt to the absence of students (and teachers) when diagnosed COVID-19 positive or contact cases that are forced to self-isolate for 7 to up to 17 days (in France). So, in these conditions, how can we enable these athome isolated students to attend classes so that they are not penalized in their learning, without creating an extra workload for the teacher? We present in this paper the strategy implemented at the chemistry department of the University of Littoral Côte d'Opale (France) with the use of large interactive touchscreens for hybrid teaching, i.e. teaching face-to-face to students in a classroom and to online self-isolated students at the same time.

#### **TEACHING APPROACH**

With the return of face-to-face teaching and the growing threat of students being absent due to COVID-19, thought was given to how best to ensure educational continuity for students who are affected but able (physically and mentally) to attend classes. Although the possibility of using a simple computer connected to a video-conferencing software (Zoom, Teams, Google Meet etc.) simultaneously broadcasting the course material (mainly PowerPoint or PDF files) in the classroom and online was considered, this solution is not relevant from the point of view of interactivity. Indeed, by this means, it will be possible to discuss the course material, but it will not be possible to provide to online students handwritten supplements to the course, nor to teach the tutorials to both face-to-face and online students at the same time. The use of a graphics tablet could satisfy this task, but this would require the teacher to sit in front of the computer to use it and would break the dynamic of the course. The choice was therefore made to experiment hybrid teaching using large interactive touchscreens. This teaching approach was experimented in 2021-22 with 4 promotions of students in chemistry, ranging from second year to master degree (68 students).

# **EQUIPMENT**

Following the COVID-19 crisis, three classrooms were equipped with large interactive touchscreens (~3-4 k€ each / 2 different models) in 2020 and 2021 in replacement of traditional video projectors (Figure 1).

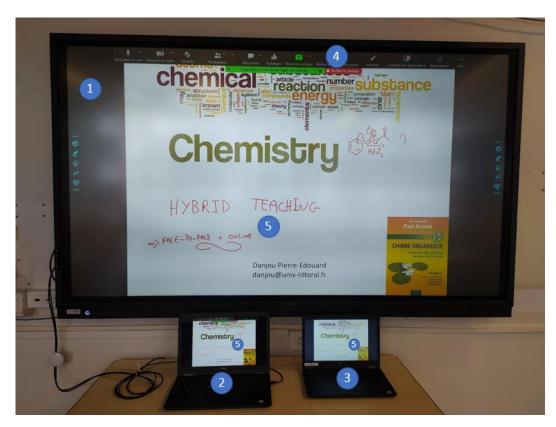


Figure 1: illustration of the hybrid teaching set-up: (1) large interactive touchscreen (2) teacher's computer (3) "at home" student's computer (4) Zoom environment (5) handwritten annotations.

The devices are 86" Interactive 4K LCD Touchscreen that can be used autonomously thanks to an Android environment able to connect to the internet, play videos, read common files (PDF, word processing, spreadsheet, presentation etc.). There is a built-in white board that allows teachers or students to write by hand as would do on a chalk board, which is particularly useful for tutorials.

More interestingly, the touchscreen can be connected to a laptop via HMDI or VGA cables like traditional video projectors. Connection to the laptop of an extra USB cable is required to send touch information from the screen to the computer. This feature allows the teacher to use the large interactive touchscreen as a big graphic tablet and to visualize the handwritten notes directly on the laptop screen. The combination of the large interactive touchscreen with a videoconference software like Zoom is an

interesting solution for hybrid teaching, since it allows students in the classroom and at home to see explanations handwritten directly on the board (Figure 1) and by the way to take the courses.

#### DISCUSSION

Since 2021 and the return of face-to-face students to the universities, four cases that could lead to difficulties in teaching have been identified and experimented by the teaching team. These cases are listed below.

- Case 1: Teacher and students are face-to-face in the classroom; one or more students are at home (tested positive to COVID-19, contact case, etc.) and able to connect to videoconference.
- Case 2: Teacher and students are face-to-face in the classroom; one or more students are at home and unable to connect to videoconference.
- Case 3: Teacher is in self-isolation or childcare due to COVID-19 (or injured) at home and able to teach via videoconference. Students are in the classroom or online.
- Case 4: Teacher is in isolation due to COVID-19 with symptoms and therefore unable to teach.

Case 1 is a typical case of hybrid teaching in its simplest definition, i.e. with both a face-to-face and an online audience. In this case, the teacher can teach in the traditional way, except that his computer projecting his documents is connected to a videoconference software and also connected to the large interactive touchscreen. He is therefore able to interact with the group of students in front of him, to provide handwritten clarifications, while allowing remote students to take the courses with the same level of information.

Case 2 can happen when one or more students are ill (COVID or not), injured, or just unable to attend the course (family reason etc.). In this case, the use of a large interactive touchscreen coupled to a videoconference software allowing the recording of the meeting can be of great help since it allows teachers to record the sound and the screen of their lectures or tutorials (including handwritten notes). The record can then be uploaded to an online platform (YouTube, Moodle, Facebook<sup>6</sup>, Instagram<sup>7</sup> etc.) in order to be asynchronously accessible to students. This strategy of 24/7 access to course content was previously found to be of great interest for students, <sup>6</sup> with only a modest increase in teacher effort. <sup>10</sup>

This method could also be interesting for students at home with a bad internet connection limiting the data flow and the understanding in live.

The third case identified is where the teacher is unable to go to the classroom (COVID, injury, contact case, childcare of contact case child etc.). The latter case has been experienced on several occasions by different members of the teaching team. The presence of the large interactive touchscreen in the classroom allows students to propose solutions to exercises set by the teacher and write them on it. The teacher is able to see from home what the students are writing on the large interactive touchscreen and guide the students either by voice or by interacting directly with the students' writing using the mouse or a graphic tablet.

Regarding case 4, no solution can be proposed since the teacher is the central part of the teaching.

The experience gained between 2020 and 2022 in hybrid teaching with large interactive touchscreens make it possible to evaluate this system through the following SWOT matrix (Table 1)

Table 1: SWOT analysis of using an interactive touchscreen for hybrid teaching

## Strengths

- Continuity of teaching despite the health crisis (hybrid teaching)
- Few constraints for the teacher
- Autonomy
- Use of the teacher's PC or Mac computer (software, courses)

## Weaknesses

- Different ergonomics between the boards
- The size of the screen is not compatible with large amphitheater.
- Quality of computer sound recording

# **Opportunities**

- Non-pandemic: Take distance learning courses, take/give courses in other universities
- Opportunity to attend classes in case of injury/illness
- Offer asynchronous content easily (recording)
- Enable continuous learning (asynchronous courses for workers)

### **Threats**

- Unwilling teachers
- Student access to a computer
- Price of interactive TVs limiting their deployment.
- Stability of the internet connection (in class
  - + remote; proximity of Wi-Fi terminals)

The system described and the associated synchronous hybrid or asynchronous teaching practices represent a real asset for educational continuity, whether in times of health crisis as we have experienced, or in the face of individual student difficulties. One of the major strengths of this device is that it does not drastically alter the teacher's pedagogies or the way students receive the course, leaving both audiences in their comfort zone. This device works similarly to a video projector and does not require additional staff to connect remote students with participants in the classroom, thus offering great autonomy to the teacher.

Among the weaknesses identified are the difference in ergonomics between the different large interactive touchscreens from different suppliers. This can easily be solved by using the teacher's personal computer, which will use the large interactive touchscreen as a screen. This use of the computer allows for easy connection to video conferencing software, but also to the teacher's own software for demonstrations. It emerged from our experience that this instrument was not the most suitable for teaching in front of a large student audience in a lecture theater for example. However, the interactive nature of the screen means that it is mainly intended for use in smaller rooms with a capacity of around 40 students. During our tests, especially when uploading videos recorded with this set up to YouTube, we realized that the sound captured by the computer could be of uneven quality, as regularly reported in the literature<sup>17</sup>, this is why an external microphone was used to record courses. Nevertheless, the sound quality is sufficient to catch up on a lesson that would otherwise have been lost to the student Threats to this educational practice have also been identified. One of the biggest obstacles to the growth of this kind of hybrid teaching, apart from the price of the device, is the unwillingness of teachers to broadcast their course content live over the internet even with restricted access. This may be due to the fear of judgement by peers or the desire not to distribute a course that has taken years of work. This lock can only be lifted with the goodwill of teachers and a change in mentality. The other threats are technological ones. Indeed, the pandemic has taught us that students are unequal in terms of access to a laptop or a reliable internet connection<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the opportunities offered by large interactive touchscreens, they can allow us to evolve our pedagogical practices, notably by facilitating access to courses given in other universities, whether synchronous or asynchronous. Another opportunity for teachers could be to teach a course to students enrolled at a foreign university, in the case of joint degrees between several universities. Hybrid teaching will also ensure that students do not have a break in their learning in the event of injury, illness or any other event that prevents them from coming to the classroom. We also hope to have the opportunity to use this set up to provide courses to practicing workers (continuing teaching) who wish to take up a university course and validate their professional experience with a degree while continuing to be employed.

Following this 2-year test, a questionnaire was sent to the 68 students of the 2021-22 classes. The anonymized responses (63% response rate) were compiled in Table 2 using a 5-point Likert scale. Students were also asked to write freely about the positive points and areas of improvement of hybrid teaching with large interactive touchscreens.

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Responses to the Questionnaire (N = 44) in Percentages

Entry	Affirmation	Totally agree	Somewhat agree	No opinion	Rather disagree	Totally disagree	mean
1	It would have been better not to set up hybrid teaching	6,8	15,9	13,6	40,9	22,7	2,43
2	The introduction of hybrid teaching has enabled you not to fall behind in your lessons	27,3	36,4	27,3	9,1	0,0	3,82
3	It is more interesting to take the courses remotely than to catch up on it alone.	56,8	31,8	4,5	2,3	4,5	4,34
4	Hybrid courses are of the same quality as 100% face-to-face courses	2,3	6,8	13,6	38,6	38,6	1,95
5	The possibility of conducting hybrid courses should allow the teacher to choose whether or not to come to the university in person	4,5	9,1	11,4	29,5	45,5	1,98
6	The possibility of conducting hybrid courses should allow students to choose whether or not to come to the university in person	6,8	18,2	2,3	29,5	43,2	2,16
7	The image quality was good	25,0	54,5	15,9	4,5	0,0	4,00
8	The sound quality was good	18,2	59,1	9,1	13,6	0,0	3,82
9	When take the courses remotely, it is important to see the presentation that the teacher projects	95	5	0	0	0	4,95
10	When take the courses remotely, it is important to hear the teacher's explanations	98	2	0	0	0	4,98
11	When take the courses remotely, it is important to see what the teacher writes	91	9	0	0	0	4,91
12	When take the courses remotely, it is important to see the teacher	25	18	34	20	2	3,43
13	It would have been interesting to record the lectures and make them available to students via YouTube for example.	43,2	29,5	6,8	18,2	2,3	3,93

It is interesting to note that about 21% of students would have preferred not to follow hybrid teaching (entry 1) but only 9% of them disagree that this teaching approach allows not to fall behind in their lessons (entry 2) and 5% of them seems to prefer catching up on course on their own rather than following them remotely (entry 3). These results are in favor of the implementation of hybrid teaching, but are tempered by the answers to questions 4, 5 and 6. Indeed, three quarters of the students found

the courses to be of lower quality than face-to-face courses. Some explain these responses by the lack of training of teachers, who sometimes struggle to solve connection problems and juggle the different windows in Zoom. These elements tend to slow down the course and alter its fluidity. With the increasing experience of teachers, the quality of hybrid courses should improve in the very near future. Students are also in favor of deploying hybrid teaching only when it is absolutely necessary (illness, injury, etc.) and of not making it a personal choice to come to the university at the discretion of students or teachers (entry 5, 6). This idea was frequently encountered in the students' free responses part of the questionnaire. These responses are consistent with the students' need to be in a group, especially with their experience of 100% distance learning courses in previous years. From a technical point of view, the students judged the image and the sound to be of good quality (entry 7, 8), although the mean score for the sound was slightly lower than for the images. These responses tend to show the effectiveness of the system for hybrid teaching, allowing online students to benefit from the same visual and audio quality as their face-to-face peers. Some students wrote that this system allows them to not miss any content, explanations or debates. Concerning what is important to consider when following a distance learning course, all students agree that it is important to see the teacher's support, to hear the teacher's explanations and to be able to see the teacher's handwritten indications (entry 9, 10, 11, mean >4.90). On the other hand, although seeing the teacher seems relatively important (entry 12, mean 3.40) it appears to be much less important than the previous points. Without surprise, most of the students found attractive the possibility to record the lectures (entry 13, mean 3.93) to make it available asynchronously to students via YouTube. This point is under progress, but it mainly depends on the goodwill of teachers. All the above elements support the idea that the integration of large interactive touchscreens in classrooms represents an opportunity to support the learning of students with difficulties in getting to the university.

# **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the chemistry department of the Université du Littoral Côte d'Opale (France) experimented between September 2020 and June 2022 with the use of large interactive touchscreens to ensure pedagogical continuity in the face of the health crisis that has affected us. It emerged from this hybrid teaching experience that the combined use of videoconference software and large interactive

touchscreens could allow for pedagogical continuity in several identified cases: i. if a student is able to attend class, but must stay at home ii. if a student is not able to attend class iii. if the teacher is able to give the class but is unable to come to the university. In the opinion of the students, this method of distance learning is more interesting than having to catch up on a course alone. However, it should only be used when absolutely necessary and should not become the norm.

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#### **NOTES**

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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