EMERGENT TRANSITION FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO ONLINE LEARNING

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Abstract: Many universities have been forced to transit from face-to-face to online learning (e-learning) as a result of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Various challenges hinder disadvantaged students from realizing the full potential of e-learning. This study draws on a two-year postdoctoral qualitative research project conducted at university to explore students' experiences of the transition from face-to-face to e-learning. Twenty-six students completing a curriculum studies program were purposively and conveniently sampled to generate data using reflective activity, Zoom group meetings and a What's App one-on-one semi-structured interview. Findings articulate the digital divide as a hindrance to students realizing the full potential of e-learning, yet lecturers still want students to submit assessment tasks and engage with course activities on the Moodle learning management system.

Keywords: face-to-face to online learning, full potential of e-learning, one-on-one semi-structured interview, to realize e-learning.

Since the beginning of higher education, from the time of colonization to the era of decolonization, almost all universities have been dependent on face-to-face learning (Cuban, 1986; Mgqwashu', 2017). Jansen (2004) argues that face-to-face learning is believed be traditional and excludes students' experiences, because it occurs in the presence of a lecturer depositing knowledge for students in a demarcated classroom, using traditional methods (lecturer-centered) and traditional resources like textbooks, chats, chalkboards and others. However, these demarcated physical classrooms are not accessible in the case of challenges ranging from student protests to pandemic outbreaks. Face-to-face learning provides real-time contact with resources and others, takes place within a specified contact time, and provides prompt feedback to students

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(Black and Wiliam, 2006; Waghid, 2018). That said, e-learning is education that takes place over the Internet is alternatively called online learning, and it is an umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance and not in a face-to-face platform (Anderson, 2016; Mpungose, 2020a). Furthermore, Choudhury and Pattnaik (2020) affirm that, e-learning definition evolves with the evolution of Web from Web. Thus, "the world was introduced to Internet-based learning with Web 0, which was a read-only site. This suggests that students have freedom to access course information/content anytime and anywhere, irrespective of challenges such as the pandemic outbreak—provided they have access to hardware and software resources.

Nevertheless, there are compelling conditions that can make students choose online over face-to-face learning; this may include violent student protest, pandemic diseases like COVID-19 in the context of this study, and others. According the World Health Organization-WHO (2020), COVID-19 is a new strain of viruses discovered in 2019, which cause illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases that can lead to death. They are transmitted between animals and people. Common symptoms of infection include respiratory symptoms, fever, cough, and shortness of breath. As at 31 March 2020, statistics stay at 33 106 deaths globally and in Africa is currently 60 deaths. In other words, this pandemic poses a threat to the face-to-face learning context globally, including in our country.

In addition, the digital divide—the gap between those who have and do not have access to computers and the Internet—seems to be a huge factor limiting the feasibility of e-learning in university context (Van Deursen and van Dijk, 2019; Warschauer, 2002). These latter studies further assert that issues such as socio-economic factors, race, social class, gender, age, geographical area and educational background determine the level of the digital divide in a university context. Research shows that various programmes and policies have been developed and implemented to remedy this challenge; hence, universities provide students with free laptops and Wi-Fi (wireless network commonly allows technological devices to interface with internet) access inside the university and residences (Rodrigues et al., 2019;

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Schofield, 2007). The rapidly evolving technological landscape in the 21st century has meant that university lecturers "have been forced to adapt their teaching approaches without a clear roadmap for attending to students' various needs" (Kop and Hill, 2008, p. 2). As a result, connectives is the promising initial lens through which to conceptualize learning in this digital age, because of its varying attributes from face-to-face to e-learning. Thus, Siemens and Downes (2009) see learning as the process of crossing boundaries by creating connections or relationships between human and non-human nodes through the setting of an interconnected network. Connectives learning draws much from available Internet and technological resources to make an effective network that will maximize learning. As a result, connectivity seeks university lecturers to consider the possibilities of Internet access and other technological resources for effective learning, so that each individual student may gather and share information irrespective of challenges (the digital divide) faced (Bell, 2011; Kop and Hill, 2008). In other words, for effective e-learning to occur even if students are at home, access to the Internet and technological resources should be made available so that they may make connections amongst themselves and the lecturers, irrespective of hindrances faced. Review of research done by Damşa et al. (2015) on quality in Norwegian Higher Education, outlines dichotomous aspect of F2F learning and e-learning. Consequently, in the past two decades universities have begun to integrate modern physical resources into the curriculum for effective learning (Khoza, 2019a; Mpungose', 2019a). This suggests that students should be provided with relevant technological devices, which may include but are not limited to netbooks, iPods, webcams, laptops and desktop computers, mobile phones and others. These kinds of new technology have made life easier for students, because they would find notes and all course information stored electronically and easily accessible (Amory, 2010; Waghid, 2018). Moreover, a recent review conducted by Manca (2020) on the integration of social media sites into learning, revealed that both Twitter and Facebook are the most used social media sites in higher education, compared to Instagram, WhatsApp, Pinterest, Snapchat and others. In addition, social media sites content is

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easily accessible because it is compatible with both computers and mobile devices, and this makes life easier for students (Clement, 2020; Dlamini and Nkambule, 2019).

However, I sought to use an inductive process to recapture the remaining codes, which were not deductively analyzed during the prior analysis, to form categories. After using these processes as a guide, categories were focused and sharpened to form three themes, as indicated in the findings section Two research questions were unpacked, namely: what are students' experiences of the transition from face-to-face to e-learning and why their experiences are in particular ways when learning online. The first question gave answers to the first objective of the study, which is to understand students' experiences of the transition from face-to-face to e-learning, and the second question addresses the second study's objective, which is to find reasons that informs students' experiences. This is elaborated in findings and discussion section in order to propose alternatives that can assist or allow students, particularly disadvantaged students, to realize or enjoy benefits of e-learning. Similarly, Student 17 said, *"This shutdown will affect me because I am staying in remote areas away from campus and do not have funds to access Wi-Fi hotspot spaces like community libraries ... and there are no funds provided for to support us…"* While the shutdown demands all lectures to be online and universities are also demanded to put measures in place for effective e-learning, but failure to provide all necessary resources to students can bring more frustration in the process. Evidently, Student 11 shared the same sentiment with other international students *"I will be suffering to find the transport to go and come back from home ... Shutting down face-to-face lectures causes chaos since I do not have necessary equipment for learning"*.

Most students did not have laptops, even though these were provided free of charge by the university (many had been sold for personal benefit). They preferred to use mobile phones with free network data bandwidth for communicating amongst themselves. In other words, the use of modern physical resources provides an easy way to ensure e-learning, because it provides access to recorded lectures and electronic resources like videos, but it needs good planning (Keengwe et al., 2008;

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Mpungose', 2019a). In other words, the use (ideological resources) of any available physical resources is not a problem to students (digital natives) in a digital age—the problem is the affordability and availability of those physical resources for e-learning. In addition, free monthly Wi-Fi data bandwidth should be provided to students so that they may access e-learning, since this seems to be the main challenge to achieving e-learning in the Asian context. It is also imperative that university-wide teaching and learning pedagogy, instructional designers and e-learning policy consider the potential benefits and challenges when encouraging the use of e-learning. Within the Asian context, there is a critical need for increased investment in upgrading resources, both in universities and at community level, because of the digital divide. While there is still a need for further research, this article emphasizes the both practical and theoretical alternative pathways that can be used to enable university students to realize the full potential of e-learning. **References:**

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