Evaluation of the Use of Various Media Platforms for Learning and Teaching During the Time of COVID-19 : A Case Study of Walter Sisulu University

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Abstract

This study seeks to evaluate the use of various media platforms for learning and teaching during the time of COVID-19: At a case study of Walter Sisulu University.The study seeks to critically evaluate the role played by selected online platforms in universities and the impact it had on students. Some of the topics discussed in this research include the background of Walter Sisulu University as far as e-learning is concerned and the advantages and disadvantages of e-learning. Researcher deployed qualitative methods and non-probability sampling. This study's aim is to uncover how COVID-19 has impacted the ways in which students in higher education learning during a time of crisis.

Keywords: COVID-19; Virtual engagement modalities; Collaborative learning; Social media; E-learning

Introduction

The Higher Education community has been immensely challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic especially with the need for face-to-face university courses to be instructed online. This follows the lockdown regulations that the Government introduced which aimed to lessen the spread of the virus by limiting social contact. Zhang et al, [1] stated that COVID-19 epidemic forced universities to continue lecturing students remotely to restrain the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, there was a difference of opinion when it came to what the lectures had to teach the students, the workload the lectures and students had and the styles of lecturing. In this research, we use a case study of Wlater Sisulu University to uncover how various media platforms were used for teaching and learning purposes in order to adjust to the new normal.

Background

There has been a significant shift from our ordinary lives to our learning environments due to COVID-19 and this has brought a lot of challenges as it requires both students and lectures to be computer and techologically literate. The use of certain applications for presentations and submission of work has been crucial during this time, but the lack of access to technology and data proves to be more of an obstacle. The pandemic has enforced universities to move from having one-on-one interactions to online learning as means to save the academic year.

Adjusting to online education has been problematic and students struggled to use ICTs due to the lockdown measures that the government initiated. Adedoyin and Soykan [2] clearly state that e-learning is reliant on teachers, learners, and high-tech devices in order to have better access to online education. The obstacle concerning connectivity in universities is a huge problem that universities are facing. From a perspective of post-graduate students, the frequent use of ICTs during the pandemic has been challenging and limiting at the same time. Students have not gotten a chance to do their practical work. This has led to a lack of immediate feedback from lecturers who have not been able to assess students's practical knowledge during online learnig, as these require face-to-face interactions.

With the replacement of regular teaching, universities have found other alternatives such as Zoom, Teams and WhatApp in order to communicate with the students, this was the first step in creating an effective communication between students and lectures. Sobaih, Hasanein and Elnasr [3] conducted a study that showed media platforms being regarded as productive towards performance of learners and the ability to have effective interactions with learners. In the mean-while, Walter Sisulu University students have been undergoing the same measures of using various online platforms to communicate with lectures

for the academic year to progress. The university is known for its strong training program in medicine and media department, but due to the current situation they find it difficult for some learning activities to be carried out such as going to the science labs and computer labs. Postgraduate students at their level are meant to be doing practical work but due to COVID-19 things have been put on hold. When it comes to the issue of using various online platforms it is not all bad. One of the leading platforms was Teams, Blackboard and WhatApp which have been of great help and have provided good communication platforms between the students and lectures.

Social Context

COVID-19 and digital-learning platforms at Walter Sisulu University

COVID-19 has been one of the most problematic diseases in recent years and has spread rapidly across the globe. The spread of the pandemic has become unstoppable having infected more than 100 000 people in 100 countries. The virus broke out in Wuhan, China, which would later spread in a rapid speed and cause a serious economic, social, and political disruption. This has caused millions of people to be at risk of suffering from COVID-19 related illnesses, while being forced to remain in their homes without any source of income. The sudden change due to the pandemic forced the government to instruct lockdowns, people to work from home and a large population to get tested. Many people refused to come into terms with the new normal of the world and this meant that the government had to take drastic measures in saving people's lives. But on the other hand, the return of students in residents was proving to be difficult because universities had no knowledge as to how to deal with the virus and with those students that do not follow the rules set by the president which led to many universities in the country opting to suspend their face-to-face classes.

In the meanwhile, media platforms used for teaching and learning increased quickly, and ways of interacting with students also evolved rapidly. The aim of media platforms is to create relations and also communication with people [4]. Mulenga and Marbán [5] argued that it was mandatory for lectures to make use of media platforms to be able to teach students. Mulenga and Marban [5] furthermore state that COVID-19 has become a catalyst to rising digital devices, online resources, social media technology and e-learning activities. The students were orientated on how to register and get access to online learning with the aim to make sure that they participate in learning. Walter Sisulu University has about 31,500 students and four campuses situated in Mthatha, Butterworth, East London and Komani. It has about 175 academic programs which are accredited.

The current situation we are facing has made it so difficult to continue with the practice of how things are done. The university offers tutorials for students who are academically challenged to deal with their studies. The students join small group sessions under the management of trained tutors. Blackboard is one of the platforms that Walter Sisulu University students were used to but that had to change due to the pandemic. The challenges that came with e-learning have been difficult to the students and has caused some to deregister.

Literature Review

Student fulfillment and university brand image

The way a university brands itself plays a critical role in prompting a learner's choice. The university's branding, is used to get students involved, attracted, and to put the institution in a position of competitive advantage in relation to its competition. Azoury, Daou and Khoury [6] states that higher education institutions are striving to build a distinct image to maintain their competitiveness in the market. "There is a necessity of branding of university image in this highly competitive age for applying strategies regarding the branding of image" [6]. Nevertheless, the satisfaction of the students may be disrupted due to online meetings instead of physical classes due to COVID-19 . The institutions have now started online classes for learners that not only can disrupt the learning of the learners but also can affect their satisfaction level regarding the brand image of the university and that of the teaching and leanring project of the institution.

Advantages and disadvantages of e-learning

The new normal in teaching is the improved use of high-tech devices. The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered new ways of teaching and learning and has also posed some obstacle. Melicheríková and Bušíková [7] state that the disadvantages of online learning are that scholars often look for the responses to the the problems at hand on the Internet and often come up with untrustowrthy solutions and assumptions. People can learn a lot from being around other people with whom they share similar challenges. Nevertheless, while an e-learning environment demands interaction between the learner and lecture, it is known to bring an intellect of isolation for the learners. E-learning offers lectures an effective way to deliver lessons to learners. According to Gautam [8] e-learning has numerous tools and lectures can use all these tools as a way to teach students. Remote learning has proven to be key to the continuity of the academic year. Melicheríková and Bušíková [7] agree and state that online learning is a more effective for learners to learn and caters for their needs. An additional advantage of online learning is that it allows learners to attend classes from any location of their choice. Gautam [8] argues that it also allows institutions to reach out to a more extensive network of students, instead of being restricted by geographical boundaries. Furthermore Gautam [8] alludes that "online lectures can be recorded, archived, and shared for future reference. This allows students to access the learning material at a time of their comfort."

Financial impact on students and universities

Since the start of the virus, there have been fears about the virus' economic impact on both universities and learners. Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence [9] affirms that

as institutions lose parking fees, dining outlet sales, and other supporting revenues, they also face unexpected expenses, including partial refunds on fees, room, and board, and the need to scale virtual engagement modalities. Furthermore, Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence [9] states that if scholars are not able to go to colleges and universities, they could face unsuspected and important attrition from learners who are unhappy with remote learning experience. There is also an issue of students that study abroad such as medical students who have fallen victim due to the virus. It has put everything on hold and affected so many things including the fact that students provide a large and increasing share of income, this is due to the higher fees they pay and their increased numbers [10]. Hubble [10] furthermore argues that colleges gain a left-over or 'profit' on educating learners from overseas which benefits to fund important 'loss making' activities such as research.

Effectiveness of the various media platforms used by teachers during the pandemic

With so many online platforms that play a significant role for lecturing learners under these conditions, one must ask about the effectiveness of them all. Online learning has demonstrated itself to be useful during this COVID-19 virus. Many students have chosen other e-learning platforms for learning during COVID-19[11]. Lectures have made it a point to make sure that they teach the students through video calls. Media platforms are essential tools during this time where face to face contact is not permitted. Ngalomba [12] states that digital platform that is considered to be under-utilized and which can provide new impetus for digital education in Africa is WhatApp. WhatApp is a primarily a communication application but shares several features with other social media applications. Universities need to evolve constantly to cope with the rapid development of digital technologies.

Theoretical Framework

E-learning theories

There are countless different meanings of "learning" and many Theorists have come up with various definitions. Mayes and Freitas' [13] point of view of learning are assumptions underlying e-learning designs. Harasim [14] states that e-learning is a new theory that that focuses on collaborative learning, knowledge building, and Internet use to reshape formal, non-formal, and informal education for the Knowledge Age. The history of distance learning through online tools dates to the late sixties. As a result, tertiary education was among the first to begin discovering the benefits of these newly emerged media and technologies.

Research Methodology

Research approach

The researchers have chosen to use qualitative methodology to assess the role played by various media platforms for learning and teaching during the time of COVID-19 . Njie and Asimiran [15]

define qualitative research as a way of connecting an informative, accurate method to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers learn about the 'natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret trends, in terms of the meanings people bring to them'. Furthermore, qualitative research contains the gathering of a divers materials that define routine and difficult moments and meanings in individuals' lives. Qualitative researchers are concerned about how people are logic with the world and their understanding of things that happen [16].

Sampling strategy and size

The Scholars have chosen the non-probability sampling and have also used the judgement sampling method. According to Showkat and Parveen [17] "non-probability sampling technique uses nonrandomized methods to draw the sample. Non-probability sampling method mostly involves judgment. Instead of randomization, participants are selected because they are easy to access". The scholars realized that on the research the main victims that were affected greatly by the pandemic where the students and lectures. The new normal has been difficult on everyone but not as compared to the lectures who had to improvise on how to teach the students under strict conditions. This meant that an adjustment had to be done quickly and the students had to find ways to fit in in the difficult schedules of the lectures. The list of challenges faced by the students is endless such as lack of data and resources in completing assignments. The method that will be used to conduct the research is judgement technique. The judgment sampling is a careful choice of an interview because of the abilities the interviewer has. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants [18]. This will permit the researchers to gather adequate data for the research.

The scholars decided to interview participants, which comprised of students from Walter Sisulu University. The scholars saw it essential to interview the students to get a better understanding of the impact that the COVID-19 had on the teaching and learnig project of the institution.

Data collection

The data collection method that was used is one on one in-depth interviews and focus group interviews. One-on-one interactions have been used for many years to source information and to conduct research [19]. It is of importance to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of one-on-one interviews. According to Wilson [19] the aim of one-on-one interview is the gathering of information and a better understanding, and the person being interviewed to give detailed answers. Its disadvantages are that participants can give unfair and bias answers and conducting these interviews can waste time [19]. The one-on-one interviews are of help when the purpose is to get sensitive information. Wilson [19] stated that face-to-face interviews can either be in person or via a cell phone in order to get a greater understanding of the answers being provided.

Data analysis

Below is an analysis of the face-to-face interview questions. These interviews were conducted with the people residing in the Eastern Cape who are students at Walter Sisulu University. These questions will bring a lot of clarity to unanswered questions pertaining to this research project.

The participants were be both males and females. The researchers did not want to be biased. The ages range from 22 years to 27. Some of these participants are first year students and others are postgradute students.

Findings

Which medium of learning do you prefer: E-learning or face-to-face?

The common answer of the participants was of the view that face-to-face lectures are more productive, and they are conversational. They found it easier to focus in class when they saw the person they were talking to. In a classroom setting, distractions are limitted as compared to online learning, for example, when using a cellphone or laptop notifications from social networks just appear and you can login on Instagram while you are in class during online learning. A lot of the participants stated that there have been many times they have not attended class due to lack of connectivity or due to depletion of data. They feel that face-to-face classes did not carry so many challenges, students missed classes because they were either sick or just ran late to attend.

How prepared where you when e-learning was introduced?

The participants' views were that they were never prepared at all in such a way that some of them needed time to be assessed on how to use the systems. They mentioned that the pandemic was really challenging to them, all the classes had to be conducted *via* social networks and some of them are first time users of these tools and it felt like everything was moving in fast pace. The participants revealed that this move to online learning also took a toll on their health. According to Ngalomba [14] his health became a serious problem due to not resting enough and drinking lots of energy drinks. To him it was all about meeting the deadline but never truly learning anything.

How did you cope with e-learning?

The responders made it clear that when it came to e-Learning they could not cope at all. They spoke of how some of them fell into depression because of the work load they had, some were taking pills for stress or headaches because it became too intense and majority of them were living at home which meant that it was very hard to do house chores while focusing on school work. This to them was extremely difficult because they could not focus on schoolwork plus doing house chores. Time management was also a problem because studying at school is more effective and all the resources you might need are available but at home the time is always cut short.

State the issues you had with e-learning?

The common answer was that the use of these online platforms became a challenge to them and they had no idea how they where used. The issues of connectivity, some days they would experience bad network coverage to an extent of being disconnected from class. Data is also a contributing factor on the set back associated with the use of digitals during this time of COVID-19 . They also explained that to be connected in class one needs enough data of which for most of them is challenging. "For instance, there are months that the university does not send us data" said one of the participants. They also spoke of the lack of suitable materials for learning, the lack of involvement in classroom during e-learning and failure of self-discipline in the online space. For example, the would-be messages sent on WhatApp by mistake which would disturb the class. Finally, the limited learning environment at some of their homes during self-isolation.

Effectiveness of online platforms?

The use of these mediums came with both positive and negative outcomes to their use. These online platforms were very much effective when learning during this period of COVID-19 as they allowed them to communicate with the lectures and be able to receive and submit the tasks. They also said that it was a bit disadvantaging because some of the online platforms where difficult to operate.

Conclusion

The study has deduced that the evaluation of the use of the various media platforms for learning and teaching during the time of COVID-19 has been a huge challenge to the students. The way students are being lectured due to COVID-19 needs to be critically analyzed as some have trouble trying to meet the deadlines of submitting work. The study also concludes that the use of these media platforms must be user friendly for everyone. The workload is overwhelming for students and they need help in order to try and cope with depression, anxiety and trouble remembering important thing such as deadlines, class times and hoe to navigate these new e-learning tools.

Recommendations and Limitations of the Study

Students need to be taught on how to use the online platforms and provided with study materials by lectures. Various online-learning types can be also endorsed to the students and lectures, they could get online-training to use various learning methods such as knowledge-based training. The pandemic situation demands tech-savvy and highly skilled lecturers. This means that lecturers should improve their knowledge and skills that are required for the usage of technological devices, e-learning tools, and educational apps. Due to the pandemic, it was difficult to do face-to-face interviews, but improvisation was done with the use of Teams. This is an app that allows one to do video calls and to send information.

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