

# INSIGHTS ON TEACHING DURING A PANDEMIC: THE CASE OF THE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS COURSE AT ONE UNIVERSITY IN ZIMBABWE

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## Abstract

*As suggested in the title, this is a conceptual paper that discusses the issues on teaching and assisting students to learn during the novel COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health issue, but it is also a social and economic phenomenon. This paper seeks to interrogate how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted teaching and learning in one university in Zimbabwe. The COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications caught the global community unawares, including the higher education community which had to quickly shift from face-to-face lectures to online teaching and learning by an unprepared faculty and to an equally unprepared student body. The pandemic, therefore, ushered in a new 'normal' where lecturers and students are required to adapt to online teaching and learning using different platforms as dictated by the available resources. The paper will reflect on the challenges and opportunities for online teaching and learning in the university during the COVID-19 era and beyond the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic is a new phenomenon which is still unfolding and hence no firm conclusions can be made yet. The methods that were employed in this paper are insights by the researchers who are the lecturers of the Professional Communication Skills course, which is a university-wide course. This paper is relevant insofar as it will provide evidence-based information on the disruptions to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic which will be useful for informing future strategies and measures for online teaching and learning.*

**Keywords:** Teaching, Insights, COVID-19, Pandemic.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a global health issue, but it is also a social and economic phenomenon. The paper seeks to present insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted teaching and learning. The pandemic ushered in a new 'normal' where lecturers and students are required to adopt and adapt to online teaching and learning using different platforms as dictated by the available resources. The pandemic reorganised higher education in that it altered how lecturers teach and how students learn. The norm was that students would meet face-to-face with their lecturers and they also had the opportunity to interact with their peers and perform collaborative activities in pairs or groups. The resultant discourse from the pandemic became that of online teaching and learning.

Higher education globally is in a state of change which was brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has not spared any sector so higher education is no exception. The traditional methods of teaching and learning have been replaced abruptly by 'online' methods as the higher education sector tries to adjust to the new reality. The case study university is no exception and lecturers and students were forced to shift from the traditional modes of teaching and learning to using what Wilson, (2001) refers to as online learning and networked learning. As aptly pointed out by Shaba, (2000), the case study university and the majority of universities in Zimbabwe are not yet experienced to use e-learning and other teaching and learning technologies. It is against this backdrop that online and networked learning became the *modus operandi* for teaching and learning after the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teaching and learning in universities in Zimbabwe are predominantly face-to-face with space for tutorials and practicals. These face-to-face interactions are conducted over a fixed period followed by end of semester examinations. The period of teaching would normally consist of several activities that include assignments, in-class tests, individual and group tasks and oral presentations. All students would have had exposure to these teaching and learning activities. Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) addresses the

issue of quality education with target 4.3 speaking to the imperative of equal access and affordability of higher education for everyone. What this means is that all students in universities and tertiary institutions are afforded an equal opportunity to access quality education as well as have equal access to the knowledge commensurate with the course. In addition, affordability is also paramount if all students are to access higher education. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, resulted in the closure of higher education institutions globally and alternative strategies of teaching and learning had to be sought. This scenario resulted in unique challenges to the higher education system and has ushered in equalities that may make the attainment of SDG4 difficult if not impossible because of the myriad of challenges that students have faced while learning from home via the online mode.

Equal access and affordability may be a pipe dream for some students who may not have the requisite gadgets for online learning. Further, the cost of data in Zimbabwe is high to the extent that it is beyond the reach of both students and their lecturers.

Simon, (1956) coined the term 'satisficing' to refer to the principle of seeking a solution that is 'good enough' for a particular purpose, but which solution can be 'optimised'. This is akin to the response of higher education institutions in the face of COVID-19. A new heuristic in the form of online teaching and learning was implemented and both lecturers and students had to quickly adapt and use whatever methods, resources and gadgets that work under the given circumstances; methods that are 'good enough' and which suffice.

## **2. The Professional Communication Skills course**

The paper is a case study of one university in Zimbabwe where the Professional Communication Skills course is offered to second year students in preparation for attachment and the world of work. The course learning outcomes are hinged on students being able to apply the course content to real life situations. The course incorporates skills in technical writing as well as presentation skills, among other generic topics taught in Communication Skills in universities in Zimbabwe.

The current class consists of 25 students (16 males and 9 females; 11 from a rural setup and 14 in urban centres). These students were in engagement with the authors online for more than four months during the 'temporary' closure of the University. The insights which informed this paper are the authors' observations and experiences as practitioners of the course as well as the feedback received from students during the lockdown period.

These students were away from the University due to the COVID 19 lockdown and restrictions, but were expected to continue learning and attending to their assignments. The authors gained insights on students' online learning during this pandemic through observations and experiences basing on students' feedback during the period under review. The practicing authors and students were communicating online via email or social media platforms to send lecture notes, submit assignments, send back marked assignments, and holding discussions on their experiences.

The teaching and learning process began with a myriad of online activities facilitated on the class social media platform. On this platform, the authors were participant observers, engaging with students on different levels and on a range of the Professional Communication Skills course issues. Lecture notes on the course topics were forwarded to students by email. During the observations, the authors monitored and recorded, through note-taking, how students intermittently shared their online experiences. The authors concentrated on emerging patterns, trends, phenomena and student experiences that hinged on the Connectivism Learning theory proposed in this paper.

### **3. Theoretical and practical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning**

One of the prevailing theories of learning, Connectivism, propounds that learning takes place both inside and outside the learner (Namon, 2015); students connect to various gadgets as tools for their learning (Siemens, 2005); students should be able to network, communicate and collaborate among themselves as part of their learning (Wijarn, 2012). Knowledge is built through computer networks and social networks. The computer networks entail using technology to access knowledge; the social networks are the connections amongst students who are studying similar programmes and thus share common interests. Through these social networks, students share and exchange ideas and resultantly build communities of learning.

The Professional Communication Skills course offered to second year students by the case study university trains students in persuasive communication, argumentations skills, technical writing, among other competencies. These competencies, though they can be taught online, are best nurtured when students interact with their peers and learn from one another. Hence, the forming of social networks among the students was disrupted as each student was now accessing learning and attempting to apply the knowledge to the real world of work in isolation from the rest of the group. The setbacks caused by the disruption in students forming communities of inquiry was witnessed when the students were given an assignment which required them to demonstrate one of the skills that had been imparted during two online lectures. The submitted work was far from satisfactory as each produced what they thought was correct as they did not have recourse to group discussions and other interactions that allow the cross-pollination of ideas. The new 'normal' as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic is that students were now learning across time and space boundaries and were resultantly disconnected from their peers.

The computer networks espoused by the Connectivism learning theory are supported by previous findings on the opportunities of ICT integration in higher education which include student-centred learning (Capper, 2003; Cradler and Bridgeforth, 2005); enhancing

teaching and learning through active learning (Davis and Tearle, 1999; Capper, 2003); developing and enriching students' skills (Davis and Tearle, 1999; Capper, 2003); and enhancing student motivation (Cox, 1997). However, a myriad of challenges of integrating ICT in teaching and learning in higher education institutions are cited in the literature. These challenges include the shortage of trained staff to cope with the tasks and responsibilities of designing relevant content, resistance from staff and reluctance to be retrained/reskilled, insufficient funds for developing and implementing ICT (UNESCO, 2011; Stensaker, 2007). In developing economies such as Zimbabwe, the most cited challenges were the issues of insufficient resources and skills (Tibebu et al., 2009). A universal problem highlighted by the UNESCO Report (2011) and Andrews and Tynan (2011) is the failure by universities to exploit ICT in enhancing teaching and learning quality by continuing to use technology to deliver teaching content rather than utilising it to support and foster student engagement. The effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning in universities is that ICT is now the sole mode that is being used to deliver content, support teaching and learning and at the same time foster student engagement, yet previously it played a complementary role to face-to-face teaching.

#### **4. Insights on online teaching and learning**

Online teaching and learning encompass a range of technologies such as the worldwide web, email, chat, new groups and texts, audio and video conferencing delivered over computer networks to impart education (Dhull & Sakshi, 2017). It can be viewed as a form of the e-learning model covering a range of applications, learning methods and processes (Algahlani, 2011; Rossi, 2009).

Globally, this form of distance learning or distance education has recently been blended with the traditional face-to-face classroom participation and scaled up with the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. A cross-cutting course such as Professional Communication Skills was taught and learnt online in the midst of this pandemic.

The Professional Communication Skills Course has a mandate to equip students with abilities to use in giving and receiving different kinds of information (Pineteh, 2012). The

learnt skills can be used to communicate ideas, feelings, tasks and events. Thinking about what to say, working out the best way of saying it, finding the right words, making sure the other person understands and understanding everything one says in reply are all vital stages in communication (Wambui, Kibui & Gathuthi, 2012).

It is therefore against this background that the teaching and learning of the Professional Communication Skills course has to be relevant to student and industry needs by offering well-designed course content, interactive and motivating instruction, and diverse course assessment approaches (Pineteh, 2012). Research has shown that most of the university academic courses, Professional Communication Skills included, which were previously taught by the face-to-face method in the classroom switched to online learning system in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic which has negatively impacted the world of education (Allo, 2020). However, despite the fact that education systems have gracefully embraced this computer-mediated online teaching and learning, which is mostly the *asynchronous* type of interaction, research has confirmed that the approach has generated myriads of interpretations globally. It has also been received with mixed feelings in many African universities (Pineteh, 2012). Both lecturers and students have been confronted by an unanticipated educational environment where they are expected to remain at home and still carry out their duties and responsibilities (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014; Allo, 2020).

Many universities have adopted the *asynchronous* online mode which allows students to discuss with the lecturers as well as among themselves over the internet at different times (Algahtani, 2011). This mode of learning seeks to give students the opportunity to take ownership of their own learning (Pineteh, 2012). Whilst this online mode appears convenient for students in diverse geographic sites and allows them to gainfully interact with peers within and beyond the classroom space, the development of certain specific communication skills is hampered. Persuasive and oral presentation skills which students are likely to gain by participating in debates and role-plays seem to be downplayed by online learning. A student participant argued that “*teaching is a personal, face-to-face communication channel where students are addressed directly, and their responses can be assessed*”. This student opinion exemplifies that online teaching is not suitable for all

topics in the Professional Communication Skills course. Online engagement seems to neglect the non-verbal transmission of message through face-to-face interactions.

The above assertions and arguments tend to be closely interlinked with the propositions of the Connectivism learning theory which emphasizes the desire and creation of a knowledge-based society focusing on fundamental, personal management, and teamwork skills which are required in the world of work (Herlo, 2016). The social environment trends, educational life, and the new needs of learning which this theory advocates for, are the basis of major topics in the Professional Communication Skills course. Professional Communication Skills lecturers should therefore, be closely guided and directed by this learning theory in trying to blend the two approaches (traditional and online), especially in cognisance of the challenge's universities, lecturers, and students are encountering (Pineteh, 2012).

## **5. Opportunities for online teaching and learning**

Despite the highlighted challenges of the online teaching and learning model, research has shown that this technological approach to education especially in the midst of the COVID 19 pandemic, where social and physical distancing are now the norm, has created a number of opportunities (Allo, 2020; Eldeeb, 2014, Pineteh, 2012; Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014; Dhull & Sakshi, 2017).

Online teaching and learning has presented lecturers of the Professional Communication Skills course with opportunities of endless interactivity and the construction of virtual identities. There is development of a sense of community through shared experiences, unintimidated participation in discussion and knowledge exchange (Ng'ambi & Johnson, 2006). For many lecturers who are technologically incapacitated, the adoption of online learning has afforded them an opportunity to be intensively trained in teaching pedagogy and construction of learning experiences for different class cohorts (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Such effort is likely to promote effective sharing of good practice and lessons learnt among Communication lecturers' community which may assist them to concentrate on effective uses of technology and to avoid the unnecessary duplication of effort and expense (Kirkwood & Price, 2014).

For the students, the asynchronous online mode allows them to discuss with the lecturers as well as among themselves over the internet at different times. This encourages students to have ownership of their learning.

Online learning in the midst of COVID- 19, is likely to offer universities an opportunity to establish a vibrant high-quality faculty. This faculty will be responsible for affording lecturers a smooth transition into the online environment from the traditional face-to-face teaching model. The faculty would focus on professional development and sufficient professional training related to the online design and instruction (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). Such an initiative is likely to promote uniformity in quality of online activities which would be an advantage for the students in diverse sites.

## **6. Challenges of online teaching and learning**

In recognition of the changing teaching and learning models from face-to-face to online teaching and learning, all the key stakeholders are quite aware of the challenges brought along. The COVID 19 pandemic appears to have exposed the technological fractures in the university learning systems. Both lecturers and students are experiencing some challenges in online learning. Pineteh (2012) and Dhull & Sakshi (2017) confirm that the lack of human and material resources to effectively manage the barrage of online activities is a major challenge. A significant number of university students require the lecturer's guidance and coaching, allowing students to create their own meanings on academic online tasks (Ng'ambi & Johnson, 2006). However, research has shown that the online environment significantly presents challenges for many academic staff who increasingly require higher levels of technological competency and proficiency in addition to their regular academic workload (Gillett-Swan, 2017). This lack of lecturer technological competencies is likely to have a negative impact on the quality of the teaching and learning process. Quite often, students complain about their online tasks, hence, it should be noted that teaching with technology is not a one size fits all approach as it depends on the types of technology in use at the time and also the curriculum being taught (Orlando & Attard, 2015).

Other online challenges are student-oriented and personal, especially due to this COVID 19 pandemic which caused students to be far apart because of the national lockdown restrictions. Students experienced a lot of anxiety associated with using technology, being out of one's comfort zone, and inability or difficulty in peer interaction, thus causing them to become isolated learners (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Students accessing academic work online may lack motivation in the process of studying and easily get distracted. Some students have difficulty with time management and fail to meet deadlines of online assignments. Such students tend to benefit more from the traditional teaching and learning model (Dhull & Sakshi, 2017). All these factors lead to surface learning and not deep learning (Ramsden, 1992; Houton, 2004). The achievement of deep learning becomes debatable since the conditions under which students will be learning will not be conducive.

Lack of technological gadgets and poor accessibility in remote areas due to limited internet connectivity are some the online challenges which are beyond the control of both lecturers and students. A considerable number of university students cannot afford a laptop or a smart phone on which to access online learning activities. Charges for internet connectivity bundles have been hiked beyond the reach of many students. Gillett-Swan (2017) argues that most of the educational institutions tend to downplay connectivity costs when they suggest and adopt online learning over the traditional model.

## **7. A new heuristic for higher education in Zimbabwe**

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in unique challenges for the higher education sector in Zimbabwe in general, and more specifically, for the teaching of the Professional Communication Skills course.

The deepening educational divide between students who have the appropriate gadgets and are able to access the internet and those without appropriate gadgets and/or cannot afford the data costs has become evident. For instance, some students have phones that do not have WhatsApp hence cannot chat with fellow classmates and the lecturer.

The lack of resources particularly among the students presents new problems in higher education whereby the feasible mode for teaching and learning during the current pandemic is accessible to a minority of the students. This basically means that SDG 4 has been thwarted by the pandemic as it has brought out the inequalities prevalent in society, not only in Zimbabwe, but globally.

It is also imperative that there be a policy shift in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe which will ensure that information technology is taught and implemented across all the disciplines. In addition, the lecturers will need competencies in ICT through continuous human capacity development programmes. This policy shift may ensure an information technology competent future generation and enhance SDG 4. A new heuristic that encompasses the following strategies may be considered:

1. Capacity development of lecturers in the use of ICT;
1. Implementing online course design, teaching and assessment programmes for lecturers;
2. Strategic support on ICT through low-cost personal computing for lecturers and students;
  1. Google Apps for Education as a free scalable solution;
  2. Implementing professional development for ICT in education;
1. Building on existing open content;
2. Availing low-cost data through synergies with service providers.

### **3. Conclusion – the road ahead**

The paper has provided evidence-based insights into the experiences faced by students and their lecturers in their endeavour to learn, teach and connect during the COVID-19 pandemic. It would not be far from the truth to state that some students are facing extreme challenges in accessing online learning as a result of the challenges highlighted herein. The situation is compounded by the fact that no one knows when the pandemic will abate so that continuous face-to-face teaching and learning can resume. The road ahead is

therefore not clear but what is needed are future strategies and measures for online teaching and learning so that it becomes the norm rather than the exception. This will entail overhauling old and familiar practices and methods and embracing new methods. A mindset shift will also be imperative so that there is little resistance from all concerned parties.

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