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Navigating the Digital Classroom: A Comparative Analysis of Educator and Learner Experiences in the Transition to E-Learning

Raspal Kaur[1], Nirumala Rothinam[2]

Quest International University

[1]**Rashpal835@gmail.com**, [2]**nirumala.rothinam@qiu.edu.my**

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the perceptions of educators and learners at a private university regarding the transition to e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a quantitative approach, a questionnaire survey was conducted with 6 educators and 47 students. The study aimed to identify online platforms and tools used, challenges faced, and educators' experiences in adapting to e-learning. Results show that the Learning Management System was the primary tool used, followed by WhatsApp. Educators reported positive experiences in adapting their teaching methods but faced challenges like increased workload and lack of incentives. Students reported technical issues, heavier workloads, and difficulties with practical courses as major challenges. The study provides insights into the e-learning transition experience and offers recommendations for improving online teaching and learning practices. These findings can guide educational institutions in enhancing their e-learning strategies and support mechanisms for both educators and learners.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid shift to e-learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in teaching and learning approaches, course delivery methods, and the utilization of various digital tools and platforms. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of educators and learners during this transition is crucial for identifying opportunities, challenges, and potential areas of improvement in the e-learning environment.

Over the last decade, technology has played a significant role in how education is conducted (Almahasees&Jaccomard, 2020). While technology was being adopted slowly and progressively in education, the global COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant change in teaching and learning. The transition from traditional learning to distant online learning had to be quickly implemented without adequate planning or training for lecturers as well as students.

The impact of this shift has been felt by both lecturers and students. It has caused many to reconsider their current teaching and learning methods and raised questions about the effectiveness of virtual learning. Among the major concerns are incorporating multimedia effectively and carrying out assessments in e-learning. Boyles (2011) identified certain issues when it comes to these concerns, which are "technical issues, complexity, sequencing of activities and learning a new medium". These issues are equally applicable to educators and learners.

Implementation of e-learning in Malaysia has its own set of challenges. A study by Jafar et al. (2022) showed that students' overall capacity and effectiveness to participate in online learning programs were impacted by their living settings and geographic location. The study further showed that learners in rural areas faced more challenges compared to those in urban areas. This demonstrates how numerous factors impact online learning that cannot be found by one thorough research alone.

Therefore, understanding the perceptions of educators and learners is crucial for identifying the opportunities and challenges associated with the adoption of e-learning at Quest International University. Furthermore, investigating the specific context provides valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to improve their e-learning strategies and practices beyond the pandemic. The findings can guide educators and administrators in enhancing instructional design, technological infrastructure, and support mechanisms to optimize e-learning practices.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although evidence of the value of technology in learning has long been recognized, it has not been adequately utilized in the field of education (Kim et al., 2008). Many studies conducted prior to the pandemic have shown that teachers were still hesitant to use technology in the classroom. Based on the study conducted by Tallvid (2014), it was found that teachers "perceived themselves as lacking in technical competence".

On the other hand, students' aspects also need to be closely observed in online learning. Online education can be simple for some students and challenging for others. Zheng, Bender and Lyon (2021) found that "students had generally favourable attitudes towards online learning". However, numerous challenges were observed in their learning. Curelaru et al. (2022) observed challenges such as "low online social presence, decreases in the learning quality and efficiency caused by the sudden move to remote blended learning and the technical issues" among students.

Another major aspect that is often considered in learning is interaction. Evans (2020) described the critical role of interaction as such that it is "what is making this learning visible and therefore, effective". The reason it may be crucial to learning may be that social interaction "allows students to see their instructors and peers as real people" (Borup, 2013). Often, lacking real-life interaction in e-learning may result in the inability to perceive others as "human" in a virtual setting and hence, disrupting effective e-learning.

While many negative aspects were observed, positive attributions of online learning were also noted during the pandemic. Manea, Macavei and Pribeanu (2021) concluded benefits such as saving time, the possibility to review recorded courses, the comfort of working from home, access to educational resources, and the possibility to participate in online lectures from anywhere.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the online platforms and tools used by educators and learners during the transition to e-learning?
2. What are the challenges faced by educators and learners during the transition to e-learning?
3. How was the experience and adaptations of educators in delivering instruction through e-learning platforms?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected higher education globally, causing a sudden and unprecedented shift towards e-learning and remote teaching. Numerous studies have looked at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on institutions throughout the world. Shahzad et al. (2021) described a survey conducted by institutions in different countries showing 94% of respondents who were found to have turned to remote learning during the outbreak.

Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have played a central role in enabling access to online learning environments and managing assessments (Pilli, 2014; Subramanian et al., 2014; Turnbull et al., 2019). Moodle has been a prominent platform for conducting asynchronous learning activities, as evidenced in various studies exploring the utilization of online tools in specific courses and programs (Davies et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Lassoued et al., 2020; Rizun& Strzelecki, 2020; Terenko&Ogienko, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Zoom emerged as a popular choice for reenacting face-to-face instruction online. In the realm of English language education, scholars showcased how Zoom could be employed to conduct classes for students accustomed to traditional in-person teaching methods (Davies et al., 2020; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Ng, 2020; Todd, 2020). However, challenges such as poor internet connectivity and limitations in cellular data packages hindered a seamless deployment of Zoom.

Social media (SM) serves as a well-established channel for engaging with students, particularly those who are regular users of this communication platform. During the period of the pandemic, Facebook emerged as the most widely used social media platform for this purpose (Al-Balas et al., 2020; Kara et al., 2020; Lassoued et al., 2020; Rizun& Strzelecki, 2020; Uzzaman et al., 2020).

The technical challenges that students may encounter in online learning depend on various factors, including the quality of communication infrastructure and the availability of software and hardware tools to support their learning. Among the most significant barriers to the transition to online learning, as highlighted in various studies, is the issue of reliable internet connectivity (Chan & Wilson, 2020; Lassoued et al., 2020).

The significance of in-person interaction remained evident. While some instructors observed enhanced participation fluency and communication, nearly half of the teachers' expressed challenges in establishing genuine interactive connections with all students. They were concerned that students might not be actively engaged, particularly when their cameras were turned off (Niemi and Kousa, 2020).

Teachers' positive mindset significantly boosts their self-confidence, enhances academic achievement, and fosters social and emotional development in students. Teachers' attitudes toward transitioning to distance learning and their effective time management are key contributors to their enthusiasm for teaching (De Villa and Manalo, 2020).

Support from both peers and school administrators plays a crucial role and can offer viable solutions. Peer support encompasses providing psychological encouragement, technical assistance, and coordinating classroom materials (Rasmitadila et al., 2020; De Villa and Manalo, 2020; Aldin et al., 2021; Gao and Zhang, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a quantitative approach to carry out the survey. A questionnaire survey was conducted, with a total of 12 educators and 47 students responding. The study employs a random sampling approach.

The questionnaire was adapted-modified from Zalat, Hamed and Bolbol (2021) and had a Cronbach's alpha of >.70 for most scale items. It consisted of three parts:

1. Background information on respondents
2. Identification of online platforms and tools used
3. Experiences and adaptations of educators in delivering instruction, and challenges faced by educators and learners

The digital survey was created using Google Forms, and the researcher distributed the survey invitation link through email and various social media platforms, including department-specific WhatsApp groups, with the assistance of department coordinators.Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 statistical analysis tool to analyze and process the data collected from the questionnaire.

FINDINGS

Online Learning Platforms and Tools

The transition to e-learning has seen various online platforms and tools being adopted by educators and learners. A significant majority (61%) of respondents identified the Learning Management System as their primary platform for e-learning. Other popular tools included WhatsApp (15.3%), Zoom (13.6%), and Google Meet (10.2%). This diversity in platform usage indicates the flexibility and adaptability of both educators and learners in embracing different technological solutions for online education.

Educators' Experiences and Adaptations

Educators unanimously agreed on several aspects of e-learning. They all recognized the flexibility offered by online instruction and the suitability of theoretical courses for online delivery. However, they also strongly agreed that face-to-face contact with learners is preferable and that practical courses are challenging to deliver through e-learning platforms. Educators appreciated the ability to teach at their own pace but were concerned about the lack of interaction among learners, which they felt minimized the learning experience. Despite these challenges, all educators agreed that e-learning platforms promote asynchronous learning and improve their educational efficiency in delivering instructions.

Challenges Faced by Educators

Educators reported several challenges in implementing e-learning. A majority (75%) faced issues with insufficient or unstable internet connections at their residences. Many also struggled with the lack of computer labs in their area (66.7%) and inadequate technology for e-learning (58.3%). Technical issues were a common concern, affecting 66.7% of educators. Workload was another significant challenge, with 66.7% of educators feeling that online courses required more effort. Adapting practical courses to distance learning proved difficult for many (58.3%). Other challenges included longer preparation times, lack of incentives for internet use outside the university, and the home environment being unsuitable for e-learning. Notably, 75% of educators found e-learning less motivating than face-to-face classes.

Challenges Faced by Learners

Learners faced similar challenges to educators, but often to a lesser degree. Over half (55.3%) of learners reported issues with internet connectivity, and 57.4% experienced technical problems affecting their e-learning. Workload was a concern for 61.7% of learners, who found online courses more demanding. Adapting to e-learning was difficult for 61.7% of learners, and 70.3% found it challenging to apply distance learning to practical courses. Many learners (65.9%) reported needing to invest more time in preparation and learning. The lack of peer interaction in online classes was a significant issue for 65.9% of learners. Additionally, 57.5% of learners found e-learning less motivating than traditional face-to-face classes.

These findings provide a comprehensive overview of the experiences and challenges faced by both educators and learners during the transition to e-learning. They highlight areas of consensus as well as disparities in perceptions between the two groups, offering valuable insights for improving e-learning practices and addressing the specific needs of both educators and learners.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study align with previous research on the use of Learning Management Systems and social media platforms in e-learning. The preference for LMS as the primary tool for e-learning is consistent with studies by Pilli (2014), Subramanian et al. (2014), and Turnbull et al. (2019), which highlight the central role of LMS in enabling access to online learning environments and managing assessments.

The positive experiences reported by educators in adapting to e-learning are encouraging and align with findings from De Villa and Manalo (2020), who emphasize the importance of teachers' positive attitudes in enhancing academic achievement and fostering social and emotional development in students.

However, the challenges faced by both educators and learners, such as increased workload, technical issues, and difficulties with practical courses, are consistent with issues identified in previous studies. For instance, the technical challenges reported by students align with findings from Chan & Wilson (2020) and Lassoued et al. (2020), who highlight reliable internet connectivity as a significant barrier to online learning.

The difficulty in establishing genuine interactive connections in online learning, as reported by educators, echoes the findings of Niemi and Kousa (2020), who noted concerns about student engagement in online environments.

Based on these findings, several recommendations can be made:

i. Continuous professional development for educators in online pedagogy and educational technology

ii. Provision of technical support and resources for both educators and learners

iii. Development of strategies to enhance interaction and engagement in online learning environments

iv. Adaptation of assessment methods for online learning, especially for practical courses

v. Implementation of workload management strategies for both educators and learners

Enhancement Of Institutional Support For E-Learning Initiatives

In conclusion, while the transition to e-learning has presented numerous challenges, it has also offered opportunities for innovation in teaching and learning. The insights gained from this study can guide educational institutions in refining their e-learning strategies and support mechanisms to enhance the online learning experience for both educators and learners.

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