

Lecturers' Online Instructional Experiences during Post-COVID-19 in Selected Universities in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract**Original Research Article**

Most public and private schools suffered unprecedented challenges during COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was caused by an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). It disrupted contact among people and more so delivery of education. The experience exposed a serious lack of preparedness and crisis in delivery of learning, forcing schools to adopt online modes of instruction. It became clear that most lecturers were not prepared for online education. Therefore, there is need to look critically into the experiences of university lecturers during and after this period so as to inform policy in education. This study was carried out to reflect on this phenomenon with a view to drawing valuable lessons from the lecturers who taught online at the time of the pandemic. The specific objectives of the study were: to undertake a reflection on how COVID-19 influenced lecturers' mode of instruction; to establish the attitudes of lecturers towards online instruction as new normal, and to explore lecturers' experiences of disruption by COVID-19. The study used a qualitative approach called Hermeneutic phenomenology, an interpretative method that puts together several activities in its data analysis. To begin with, a narrative design was used to generate primary data. Here, data was collected using face-to-face interviews with 20 lecturers from 3 selected universities in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Participants were asked to read and comment on the items of interview to ensure everything was clear. The process of data collection took place from February and March 2023. All interviews took not more than 30 minutes. The findings were coded by experts in qualitative research and themes identified. Narrative description has been employed to present the findings.

Keywords: Online Instruction, COVID-19, Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

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INTRODUCTION

The study sought to critically interpret the phenomenon of COVID-19 as it relates to educational experiences that came with it. It examined lecturers' lived experiences of teaching online in selected Universities in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. The implication of having online instruction was also examined in the study. In keeping with phenomenological approach, data was interpreted to arrive at qualitative themes. First, the study examined lecturers' feelings and confusion in dealing the new normal in class. With such confusion came the need to adapt and be relevant in the middle of a generation of young learners who adapted more quickly to online learning than their lecturers. Secondly, online instruction engendered some pedagogical challenges never

experienced before due to adjustment in the mode of content delivery. The teacher had to deal with rising anxieties, confusion and thirst for information during the period. Since COVID-19 came with fake news at times, lecturers were then required to be ahead of the learners in searching for credible sources of knowledge, information and direction. The third theme examined in this study related to content knowledge, which concerns distinction between truths, untruths and half-truths about the pandemic. Learners and lecturers were bombarded with information from multiple sources, some of which were misleading. The period of COVID-19 further made education difficult since learners is no longer a *tabula rasa* of Aristotle, a jar to be filled. The modern-day learner is a participant in the learning process with the mentor.

The new normal of COVID-19 therefore demanded creative ways of teaching and learning. It was also a period that granted greater autonomy to the learner in the instructional process. The distance between the learners and instructor has been bridged with the evolution of online learning technologies such as google meet and zoom among others. During and after COVID-19, many scholars underscored the need for educational institutions to embrace online teaching and learning [1]. The studies that have been done so far provide inspiration as regards opportunities and challenges of online educational platforms. Therefore, this phenomenological reflection documents COVID-19 experiences of lecturers in order to unravel issues that may inform policies and practices in adoption of online learning in higher education. COVID-19 has prepared lecturers globally with the necessary strategies to deal with challenges of such magnitude should they re-surface. As such, this study is important for stakeholders and policy makers in making online instruction fruitful for both learners and lecturers. This philosophical reflection also contributes to the ongoing studies on the impact of COVID-19 within the learning environment. It further provides direction on the gaps yet to be covered in the area of phenomenological inquiry into lecturers' self-efficacy.

The objectives of the study were to: reflect on the influence of COVID-19 on lecturers' mode of instruction; establish the attitudes of lecturers towards online instruction as the new normal, and to explore lecturers' experiences of disruption by COVID-19.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot has happened since the advent of COVID-19 in respect to online teaching. Reviews and analysis of documents from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology; COVID-19 guidelines applicable to education; the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) COVID-19 pandemic mitigation documents; education-related legislation and policies; Kenya Gazette notices; directives of the President and the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Science and Technology; reports of international organizations, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [2] and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian reflect the seriousness of the period and interventions desired. The Government of Kenya and education stakeholders stood strongly to provide direction on ways to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, including through technology-based solutions [3]. This is because, in the pre-COVID age, lecturers had sufficient time to prepare their teaching approaches, materials, and assessment. However, little time and minimal resources were available for them to teach in the virtual environment during or after the pandemic.

Lecturers who lack online teaching experience are more likely to deliver their online teaching using mentor-centred rather than learner-centred approaches. A study was conducted to identify weaknesses of online teaching during COVID-19 [4]. Challenges reported were centred around technology, distractions, confusion and difficulty in physical interaction. In Kenya, glaring challenges to online teaching and learning include digital illiteracy, digital divide, poverty and poor infrastructure [3]. From these challenges, the pandemic underlined the need to build dynamic and resilient education systems that expand access to quality education at lower cost. Learning in future will continue to rely on technology that allows students to learn anywhere at any time, meaning that lecturers should deliver individualized mentorship. Technology approaches increasingly form a very important part of an education system that connects them with the world. What this means is that lecturers must be able to draw lessons from their online experiences, more so finding new learning experiences as they interact with learners. Some scholars define such online interactions with learners as emergency remote teaching (ERT) since they contrast with planned online learning practices [5].

In general, although lecturers experienced "forced readiness", their responses reflected optimism and willingness to review their teaching and learning ideas to cater to the use of technology at the time and beyond. The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to new trends in digital technology, active-based learning models, and lifelong learning [6]. Studies on online instructional practices during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic have documented several significant findings, including hurdles accounted for by lecturers with the Internet connection, technological equipment, time taken to develop their teaching activities and at times anxiety [7-9].

Although many studies have been done on COVID-19 pandemic, not much has been done to reflect on lecturers' teaching experiences during and after the pandemic. Are lecturers progressing well? If yes, how? If not, why? What can be done to help them learn from past experiences and cultivate better experiences going forward? Understanding lecturers' teaching experiences would be a solid basis to understand their adaptation of teaching patterns to teaching and learning, and how they can best respond to future situations of such magnitude as COVID-19. Therefore, this study was propelled by the motivation of lecturers to continue teaching during the pandemic.

A study was undertaken to determine lecturers' thoughts regarding the use of online platform for instruction. The study focused specifically on the motivation of lecturers to use online instruction tools [10]. From the findings, lecturers cited three factors that can demotivate the lecturers in using online instructional

tools, namely knowledge, perception and skills. No particular motivation model was used to evaluate these factors in the reviewed study. In the present study, hermeneutic phenomenology is used to interpret the raw experiences of lecturers and attempt to give meaning to such experience. Apart from motivations, lecturers should adopt suitable online instructional platform to do teaching and mentorship. Another study in Kenya also revealed that apart from online resources required, lecturers' readiness, confidence, student accessibility and motivation play an integral role in boosting the use of online platform [11]. This is a critical finding especially for policy makers and institutions of higher learning.

UNESCO indicates that despite the weakness and challenges that came with the pandemic, online instruction proved instrumental in meeting educational goals for various countries [2]. Therefore, UNESCO advises the need for instructors and mentors to acquire the necessary knowledge about online instruction. Indeed, it is a requirement for professional preparedness. As such, a reflection on lecturers' teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is critical to inform policies and practices for preparation of university dons for online teaching.

METHOD

The study used a qualitative research approach and a narrative design. Narratives reveal unique perspectives and understanding of a phenomenon under study. They record the lived experiences of individuals usually through interviews captured and transcribed to bring out meaningful themes [12]. From the stories narrated by interviewees through to other visible aspects such as observations and documents, the researcher manages to collect qualitative data. Ways of analysing data varies basing on purpose of the research and more so research questions. Therefore, in this study, the lecturers provided their responses through face-to-face interviews. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from 20 purposively selected lecturers from universities in Uasin Gishu County, Kenya. Bernard explains purposive sampling as a technique used in qualitative research to recruit participants with requisite knowledge about a phenomenon under investigation [13]. The lecturers chosen for the study were drawn from the faculties of education and business in the selected universities. These lecturers shared their experiences on digital instruction from their respective institutions.

RESULTS

Five major themes emerged from the findings of this study, namely: lecturers' perception of online classes; lecturers' readiness to adapt to the new normal way of instruction; challenges and implications related to online classes; coping mechanism related to challenges

of online classes, and students' ability to fit into online instruction.

For most of the lecturers, online lessons were not a replacement of traditional face-to-face instructional methods but rather a temporary measure perhaps until after the pandemic. This perception was in line with the argument that such classes are not effective since students struggle with digital issues [1]. A study carried out during the period following COVID-19 also indicated that some learners were not interested in joining online classes due to sudden shift into virtual learning [15]. In fact, this tallies with the reasoning that there is a significant difference when face-to-face classes are compared to online one, since learners hardly get much in online classes compared to on-site ones [4]. Most of the lecturers felt that in online classes the non-verbal language of learners could not be captured due to distance involved. Irrespective of these challenges, lecturers are obligated to prepare and embrace online systems of education.

The second finding was that online teaching represents a new way of doing things. This indeed should be part of daily lives and educational experiences everywhere [4]. Therefore, to benefit from the digital revolution, in learning and instruction, lecturers need to be educated on basic ICT skills to communicate virtually with learners. The study findings revealed that some of the lecturers were ill prepared or inexperienced in the online teaching space. As such, at the onset of the pandemic, and to some extent during and after the pandemic, many lecturers were not ready for the sudden shift into online classes. According to a previous study, learners were also slow to transition into online learning because of inadequate resources and skills in this space. Lecturers and learners needed adequate time to train as well as resources to match the shift [1]. As Wekullo *et al.*, observe, most developed nations found it easy to move to online learning due to availability of digital facilities.

The third finding related to challenges of online classes. Lecturers were not quite familiar with internet connectivity. In other studies, similar findings have been reported in which lecturers and learners in remote areas faced huge difficulties related to poor internet connection [6]. Most of the respondents revealed that poor connectivity was a major challenge to online education during COVID-19. This study exposes some common challenges faced by both the lecturers and the learners. They included loss of internet or data during lesson time, difficulty in loading content and poor audio delivery in class. In most cases, lecturers covered several miles looking for spots with strong internet connection to attend lessons. The research also noted that learner-centred approaches to learning through discussion, presentations, seminars, and group work were fairly done online. This affirms the view that the use multiple

methods to conduct online instruction has produced good fruits [6].

The study further found that lecturers developed some coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges they faced with online teaching. Most lecturers said they exercised flexibility during online lessons to make them effective. They therefore increased their level of commitment towards the learners. This was in line with the view that a flexible teaching approach is important not only for learners but also for lecturers' professionalism [14]. Wekullo *et al.*, support this position urging that when lecturers become flexible in the teaching process learners believe more in their inner capabilities to deliver and hence become better mentors [1]. Learners are also given space and time to be creative and innovate. As such, flexibility in the approach to teaching yields an advantage for learners and minimizes pressure due to class work.

Implications

Adedoyin and Soykan reviewed challenges and opportunities brought about by COVID-19 into higher education [4]. They argue that the pandemic provided an opportunity to move from traditional learning methods into digital learning. This study sought to contribute to better understanding of lecturers' teaching experiences after the COVID-19 pandemic. It was evident that the participants in the study embraced the transition more thoughtfully after authentic experimental ground during the initial online practices. Nevertheless, the sudden transition during the initial stage of online learning left educators with little choice. While they faced some challenges acquiescing to this new mode of teaching, many lecturers respond purposefully by seeking solutions to strengthen the effectiveness of virtual teaching and learning. As per the year 2023, when the study was conducted, lecturers seem more confident in the post COVID-19 years to embrace online teaching.

The lecturers project high hopes of mastering and appropriating new instructional approaches. They seem prepared to face challenges as they adapt to the online environment. With higher self-efficacy, lecturers have improved greatly in their instructional practices. They are comfortable to try and build relationships with learners. Earlier studies on teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that many lecturers experienced a decrease in efficiency due to stress and burnout. However, this phenomenological reflection provides a glimpse of positive attitudes and higher hopes towards online teaching. Readiness to use online platforms flows from stages of preparation into online teaching and instruction *per se*. This means that sufficient time is spared by the mentor to design and innovate online instructional practices in order to become competent and self-confident. Their positive attitudes, commitment and initiative have resulted in

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological inquiry looked into lecturers' experiences during the shift into digital teaching. From the findings, it is clear that opportunities for an authentic experience with online teaching appears are so beneficial in developing online teaching pedagogical skills. The findings point to endeavours in fostering educators' competencies when it comes to online learning and not confined to general technological skills.

More studies involving different perspectives and contexts ushered in by the period of the pandemic should further develop knowledge on how lecturers respond to changes caused by crises even in future. Researching an ongoing pandemic is not limited to certain time. By the time this phenomenological inquiry goes into publication, the realities of the world will have transformed drastically. What this means is that quality research of any sort takes time and resources. Lastly, this philosophical inquiry has its limitation, which other researchers may want to address in future studies. A large-scale survey or a mixed-methods approach from different places in the globe may be undertaken to reflect the scenario of how lecturers should actually deliver their mandate well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further research in the area of phenomenology is required to look extensively into how lecturers in other schools other than science and education behaved towards online lessons. Of particular interest are those in the school of business. The government should facilitate lecturers in their quest to embrace the new normal by ensuring reliable internet connectivity and subsidising training needs. As developed nations are advancing into 5G, that should be the direction adopted by the developing economies. Additionally, deliberate efforts are needed to train lecturers in the area of technology applications in pedagogy. When lecturers are well trained, their levels of confidence grow and so does their teaching efficiency.

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