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## THE 'REVOLUTION' ON TEACHING AND LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN AFRICA

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### ABSTRACT

*Painstakingly, the outbreak of SARS-COV2 (COVID-19) pandemic has grossly disrupted the global health, economic, social and education systems. The World Health Organization projections indicate that Africa as a continent is likely to suffer the most in all spheres of development. By implication, new social challenges have and shall continue to emerge. These challenges will test the preparedness and training of social workers in Africa in responding to new and unprecedented crisis. Through qualitative research approach the paper explored the dynamics of remote online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key findings revealed that resources such as internet connectivity, availability of electricity, and devices were lacking among the rural-based students. Further, both the students, lecturers and the institutions' management were not well prepared in implementing a fully pledged online learning system. Moreover, the institutional traditional models, and students' and lecturers' negative attitudes towards online learning was evident. These inadequacies hampered effective response to new teaching and learning needs. The paper concludes that the remote online teaching and learning has serious implications for social work education and practice, as set of new skills is required. The opportunity to redesign training and assessment of social work trainees has been presented by COVID-19 learning crisis.*

**KEY TERMS:** COVID-19, institutions of higher learning, online teaching, preparedness, remote learning, social work, South Africa

### KEY DATES

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Indeed, one thing a crisis offers is the opportunity to rethink a fresh. Irrefutably, the outbreak of coronavirus pandemic has presented such an opportunity in all sectors of human activity at the present and for the future. For example, the implementation of health safety guidelines such as social distancing and lockdown regulations has led to closure of schools in many African countries (African Union and Centre for Disease Control, 2020; OZili, 2020). Consequently, this resulted into an emergency online teaching and learning (EROTL) in institutions of higher learning, a phenomenon that can be termed as 'a revolution in teaching and learning' in the world. This paper focuses on the dynamics of emergency remote teaching and learning as a result of coronavirus pandemic using South Africa as a case study. The implications for social work education and practice are synthesised based on the findings. The paper reports on the preparedness, resources, institutional models, and attitudes and experiences of both the learners and the teaching staff towards remote online teaching and learning. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to characterize the institutions of higher learning response to learning and teaching during the COVID-19 crisis and its possible implications.

### Remote online learning and teaching: Conceptualization and contextualization

Conceptually, remote online learning and teaching is synonymous with distance learning, distributed learning, blended learning, and mobile learning (Downes, 2010; Hodges et al., 2020). However, simply taking the materials and module content meant for contact teaching method and uploading or sharing them via electronic methods does not necessarily equate to online learning and teaching (Zimmerman, 2020). Notably however, online learning and teaching connote a computer-based distance education delivery model (Czerniewicz, 2020; Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020), which provides flexibility in teaching and learning in multiple environments and times. Online learning provides learners with virtual interface to share information, read and review instructional materials, undertake tests and do assignment in their own spaces. However, despite this flexibility, concerns on its implementation remains a bone of contention during the coronavirus crisis.

The uncertainty of resuming a normal life due to coronavirus pandemic has been a thorny issue. To ensure learning continues, colleges and universities as guided by the ministries of education have been seeking for best ways to keep students engaged academically (Zimmerman, 2020). Since COVID-19 is an infectious disease that spreads from one person to another (WHO, 2020), the need to keep students and staff safe was primary. Therefore, a majority of the institutions in Africa as in other continents opted to cancel all face-to-face classes (Hodges et al., 2020). This caused the disruption of traditional classroom teaching and learning in African institutions, which primarily depends on face-to-face pedagogy (Czerniewicz, 2020). Consequently, therefore, alternatives had to be sought for a continued learning and teaching process. This culminated to the emergency remote online teaching and learning witnessed in many institutions currently.

However, to incorporate the components of online teaching and learning in the curriculum, adequate time for planning, designing, testing and implementation is required (Hodges et al, 2020). Thus, remote online teaching and learning (ROTL) is complex, as each discipline requires experts to develop its own approach to teaching. Apparently, under the crisis of COVID-19, such processes were not undertaken and if they were, they lacked adequate systematic preparations and could lead to serious implications for practical courses such as social work. Research evidences that effective online teaching and learning results from careful instructional design and planning, where a systematic model is adopted in designing and developing learning systems (Hodges et al., 2020). This imply that the process of designing and developing a learning system impacts on the quality of the output.

Arguably, the alluded careful designing process and decision making at faculty and departmental levels was seemingly lacking in the current shift to remote online teaching and learning for many institutions in Africa. According to Means, Bakia and Murphy (2014), the following dimensions are key when designing an online learning systems. These includes modalities, role of online assessments, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, instructor and student role online, online communication synchrony, and source of feedback. To effectively capture all these components, adequate time for planning, preparation, and resources to support the implementation are necessary. Therefore, in the crisis of COVID-19, it is impossible for every lecturer to become an overnight expert in online teaching and learning and deliver quality results.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Connectivism

There are various theories that explain how students make meaning of information. In this paper, connectivism learning theory provides the basis for understanding dynamics within online teaching and learning. Primarily, the theory postulates that one's capacity to learn resides with the connections with people and information, which are mediated by technology (Siemens, 2005; Duke, Harper & Johnston, 2013). In essence, learning is a social aspect

and embraces a component of interdisciplinarity. Connectivism provides that learning is multimodal and involves exchange of texts images, videos and multimedia across digital platforms (Goldie, 2016). Further, the theory emphasizes that learning is personal, and information is available, but students have to be skilled to identify quality information (Goldie, 2016). This is what Siemens (2005) refers to as supplementing the know-how and know-what with 'know-where', which is the understanding of where to find the knowledge needed. Therefore, knowledge and learning resides in and is distributed across networks, which in this context could be network of students and educators.

Reasonably, learning takes places when one is able to construct and traverse the available networks of information. This is because learning is self-directed through networked nodes, that is, content, people and groups. According to Downes (2010), a network is made of nodes of varying size and strength and depends on the concentration of information and the 'human traffic' navigating through a particular node. Thus, learning, according to connectivism is cyclical, where learners connect to a network of learning to share and find new information. In the process of these interactions in the community of network (nodes), they modify their beliefs on the basis of new learning, and consequently continue to connect, share and practice new realizations. Perceptibly, this is the likely outcome of the newly implemented remote learning, as students may be influenced and get tempted to apply technology in their respective areas of practice. This undertaking shall potentially revolutionize education and practice in future in many disciplines, social work notwithstanding.

## METHODOLOGY

Informed by qualitative research principles, this paper utilized heterogeneous sources of data. The data was gathered through desk top research, which was corroborated with informal community engagement conversations. These methods enabled the researchers to explore the dynamics of remote online learning and teaching at institutions of higher learning in some African countries. The paper analyzed data from institutional emails, trainings and workshops, minutes of meetings on remote learning and teaching and students' and lecturers and commentaries from informal conversation and networks. Further, the data was drawn from platforms considered as public such as institutional updates and social media platforms where students engage with their lecturers. The rationale for using these sources of data was to capture both the institutional and personal (students and educators) stand point on the remote learning, the challenges experienced and the likely impact on their academic progress. Notably, most of the data was drawn from South African context, where majority of the universities adopt the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning model. The content of this data was analyzed inductively and findings presented thematically.

## FINDINGS

The key findings reported in this paper relate to availability and affordability of resources to support online learning and teaching, preparedness and response, institution models, and attitude and experiences.

### **Availability and affordability of 'must be' resources**

There are a 'must be' resources to have a successful and quality online teaching and learning, such as computers, reliable network and internet connectivity, electricity, and human resources. These were found to be the core resources to embark on remote online teaching and learning. The available data suggested that these resources were available and affordable at different levels by students and institutions. The difference was attributed to the inherent inequalities in African communities as well as institutions.

#### *Network and internet coverage*

The data showed mixed reactions with regard to availability and affordability of internet. The rural-based students reported network challenges which hindered regular access to online lectures. There was total to partial lack of connectivity due poor and weak network coverage in the rural areas. This was further worsened by the lockdown regulations which limited movement and closure of business such as cyber cafés that would have served as alternative source of internet. The poor network connectivity made access to internet expensive for students to afford.

To the contrary, the urban-based students did not have a challenge with network connectivity, and would attend online classes with ease. Nonetheless, all the students and the lectures reported the high cost of data to access internet. The majority of the students and staff (where the university did not supply data) were unable to afford internet data costs. The following extracts illustrates this challenge.

Personally, it's very challenging because I live in deep rural area and it is very difficult to stay connected at all times due to network problems. In addition, one needs to adjust to this fully [online learning], which

is challenging as our learning styles are completely different. E-learning will favor some individuals and disadvantage others (First Year Male Student).

For me, I'm in deep rural area - *Engcobo*. There is no network and I struggle to communicate due to failure of network connections. I even struggle to communicate with my research group. Sometimes I receive some messages on the following day due to network failure. So, it will be more difficult for me when writing tests online (Fourth year Male Student).

From the extract, poor internet connectivity and affordability undermined the prospects of having effective remote online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 crisis.

#### *Electricity*

Basically, online remote learning is supported by electricity powered computer systems. Again, the rural-based students reported lack of electricity to power their devices and attend online classes. Further, restricted movements due to lockdown regulations worsened the situation. To illustrate the state of desperation, a student responding to the lecturer's follow up on progress with regard to accessing the online materials averred that:

Honestly, on my side, network is a big challenge. Besides, I'm still in the middle of nowhere [sic] where there is no electricity with poor infrastructure in rural areas. But I'm willing to do anything, even to leave my home if I can get a laptop and data. I will change this place and stay somewhere (Fourth year Female Student).

Unequivocally, unavailability and affordability of electricity weakened the ability of students from poor households and rural communities from accessing online classes. This raises the concern of equality and progress for all students. Perhaps, these are the reasons that prompted ASASWEI 2020 to challenge the continued online teaching citing issue of equality of students.

#### *Infrastructure and devices*

The study established that the vast majority of the home environments were not conducive for online remote learning for many students. This was more glaring for students from informal settlements and rural areas who live in single rooms. Moreover, some students did not have computers and other smart devices to facilitate online learning. This resulted into universities in South Africa promising to procure laptops for needy students, so that they could not be left behind. Other countries such as Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Uganda to mention but a few, student had to find their way out to purchase the devices. The implication is that not all students could afford the devices, hence being left out. This is likely to affect their completion rate and quality of skills obtained.

#### *Human resource and relevant experience*

The study established that, despite the fact that the lecturers had experience in teaching on face-to-face platforms, a majority of them, especially the aged professors were experiencing challenges with online remote teaching demands or have been resisting the new change. Across many universities that adopt traditional face-to-face interface in learning, there was little experience with online teaching. This raised the concern of effectiveness and quality of learning outcomes.

Moreover, although campus support personnel and teams were usually available to help lecturers learn and implement online teaching, a small pool of lecturers was interested in teaching online. Notably also, the support teams were not able to offer the same level of support to all lecturers within the short preparation period. This resulted in some lecturers improvising quick solutions such as using WhatsApp, and emails to deliver class notes, a cumbersome as well as a stressful process.

Notably, the support team members were also inexperienced in issues of online teaching needs. They had experience with computers or maintaining the systems and not actual online teaching. This caused delays and discouraged students and lecturers in using the universities official online learning management systems.

### **Preparedness and response**

The study suggested different levels of preparedness for the institutions, lecturers and students, in terms of resources and psychologically. The preparedness referred in this context is however more of preparation to respond as opposed to preparedness before the pandemic struck.

#### *Personal preparations*

- Students

The study established that students were not prepared at all for remote online learning. The students had no opportunity to learn about online systems that could be used as an alternative to traditional face-to-face methods. Inopportunately, failure to train students, and more especially the first-year students could lead to little or no activity in online learning systems. This would undermine the efforts of some institutions in effectuating learning during the COVID-19 period. The students' lack of preparedness is illustrated in the following extracts:

For me, this online business is driving me mad. This is because I'm not good with computers. I have never used one before. I live in the outskirts of *engqamakhwe* where there's no electricity. We go to town once a month because it is too far. MNA [myself] I'm starting to lose hope and I'm always stressed and feeling lost (First Year Female Student).

Being concerned with students' preparedness to take online classes, a lecturer inquired the following:

Are all our first-year students familiar with this Blackboard? If not, how are they going to be able to access and navigate this platform or we are also expected suddenly to be computer gurus also by teaching them before we teach them the course content? (Senior Lecturer).

These concerns among other highlight the gap in preparing students for the new teaching and learning development.

- Lecturers

The lecturers were also not adequately prepared for remote teaching. Even in the institutions where blended or technology enhanced learning takes place, the lecturers were still not fully equipped to engage in full online teaching. To capacitate lecturers on online teaching, institutions embarked on workshops and online training on online learning systems such as Blackboard, Google class, among others.

#### *Institutional response*

The study identified presence of institutional goodwill in supporting online teaching and learning. Some universities in South Africa endeavored to purchase laptops for students and provision of internet data for both students and lecturers. This involved budgetary adjustments and fundraising in order to meet the expectation. The government of South Africa has been instrumental in financing some historically disadvantaged universities to meet the cost. Figures 1 and 2 below evidences some of the effort made by one of the South African university in providing laptops to students. However, the communication in the figures two and three also shows that the university was caught unprepared.

Figure 1: University communicate on provision of student laptops

LAPTOP AND DATA PROVISION TO STUDENTS TO ENABLE REMOTE E-LEARNING

The University [redacted] is embarking on a large-scale project to make available laptops (with modem) and data to our students as a necessary response to the disruption of the academic programme caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We foresee continued and sustained disruption to normal University functions. We therefore have to incorporate online and remote learning modalities as one of the delivery strategies for our programmes during this period as well as post-lockdown to recover the academic year. For this reason, the University will be requiring each student to have a laptop.

Figure 2: University's update on online teaching

Laptops will be made available to students who do not yet own a laptop on a loan-to-buy scheme. The cost of the laptop will be debited to students' fee accounts.

Further details will be communicated to students in due course.

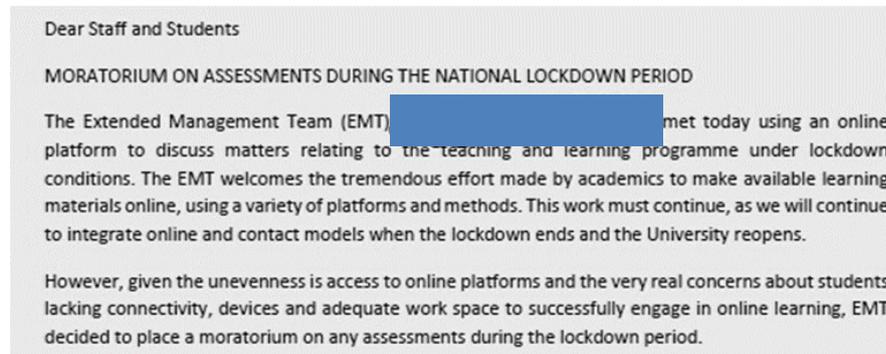
In addition, the University will provide students and staff with monthly data.

This is a challenging time but also an opportunity for the University and our students to make a significant shift to technology-supported learning. We are well aware that this will not solve all the difficulties our students are encountering during this unusual time. However, this shift will equip our students with new skills and flexible working and learning practices and will help to catapult the University into a new dispensation.

#### **Institutional Models**

Available information suggests that majority of the universities in Africa use face-to-face model where the students and lecturers are not obligated to use online learning and teaching systems. This presents an institutional paradox on learning ethos and principles during the COVID-19 crisis. The paradox is further manifested, where some universities had placed a rigid moratorium towards conducting any assessment during online teaching. This was due to the fear that some students were not ready for online pedagogical process. This presents a mirage revolution on teaching and learning in COVID-19 epoch. This raises the concerns on the suitability and essence of online teaching if examinations and assessments cannot be conducted.

Figure 3: Assessment Moratorium due to lockdown



In addition to the above observed scenario, in some universities, classes were conducted 'online', that is sharing materials through emails, blackboards, and social media applications such as WhatsApp, but examinations were administered through the traditional methods. It is under these circumstances that questions surrounding the modalities of implementing online learning rises, and how these variations are likely to impact on practice in future.

#### *Dissemination of information*

The modalities for online teaching was not established to determine the extent to which online teaching and learning could be. For instance, issues related to either fulltime online, blended or otherwise was not defined. The primary activities to take place online were not defined causing confusion for both the students and the lecturers alike. This complicated the pedagogical nuances as to whether the teaching is expository, practice, exploratory or collaborative.

#### **Attitudes and Experiences**

The data revealed that both the lecturers and the students approached online learning and teaching with an attitude. This was evidenced by sense of fear expressed by students and lecturers on adjusting to the new developments on remote online teaching and learning. This is because over years they have relied on face-to-face teaching and learning methodologies. Notably, a number of students especially those with no prior computer knowledge and experience were appalled by the demand to adopt remote learning. Undeniably, the negative attitudes towards the new developments hindered students and lecturers from objectively utilizing online learning system. Reportedly, some had to do so for compliance only. Therefore, this compromises the quality of education and training during this period of COVID-19.

The following extracts illustrates the fear alluded herein.

My fear is being failed on things we have no control over. With regards to remote learning, I'm in favor of it if it will facilitate saving the academic year 2020. However, all that needs some orientation to the new approach to learning. My fear is uncooperative teachers whom will put us under serious pressure because we are from different backgrounds and the way of adapting vary (First Year Female Student).

The negative attitudes and experiences culminated to resistance in support the new online teaching and learning initiatives.

#### **DISCUSSION**

The institutions of higher learning capacity and the strength to handle health and learning crisis has profoundly been tested by the novel coronavirus pandemic (Harding & Brodie, 2020). Regardless of the institutional financial and academic stature, their modus operandi during and post COVID-19 will never be the same. In South Africa,

for example, the Council for Higher Education supports the notion of moving ahead with online learning to salvage the academic year with institutions that are ready to move on, while other strategies can be devised to cater for those that are left behind (Shay, 2020). Since COVID-19 crisis has presented a state of 'desperate times calls for desperate measures', emergency remote online teaching and learning was adopted to save the 2020 academic year (Czerniewicz, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020). However, despite the goodwill in salvaging the academic year in many institutions, the realities on the ground are wanting as exemplified in the findings.

The normalized abrupt shift from traditional classroom teaching to online teaching and learning methods leaves a lot to be desired. As noted by Duke, Harper and Johnston (2013), the agenda of remote teaching and learning in African universities has been hurriedly and euphorically implemented against the context and realities of the majority (educators and learners).

Evidently, remote teaching and learning presented serious challenges to both the students and educators, with practical modules proving to be arduous (Hodges et al., 2020). Although the strategy is a feasible one in this epoch, lecturers and students seem to have been forced to adapt to new teaching approaches without a clear roadmap. The findings showed unpreparedness for both the lecturers and the students, a state that may cause friction between them and the university management. This is because remote teaching and learning presents a completely new experience for traditional model universities, and therefore requires a new set of skills altogether for both lecturers and students. This requires a proper planning and design to suit the needs of particular courses or modules. Thus, the common adage of 'one size fits all' is a miscalculation or over ambition for current remote online teaching and learning especially for practical courses.

Given adequate timing and resources, technology-based and blended-learning can equip both the students and the educators with a new set of skills (Seimen, 2005; Hodges et al., 2020). The skills related to working online are invaluable in the modern knowledge and digital economy. According to Goldingay and Boddy (2017), technology enhanced learning is important in preparing social work graduates for digital practice, such as online counselling, online supervision and online case management. Therefore, a well-planned online teaching and learning could accrue meaningful skills and experiences for both the learners and educators. Therefore, post the coronavirus crisis, colleges and universities should endeavour to develop and maintain digital supported learning at different levels. However, the inequalities embedded in African universities and societies (Zimba, Khosa & Pillay, 2020) stifles effectiveness of online learning and teaching and its concomitant benefits. Thus, remote online teaching and learning is business unusual in African context and it vital to interrogate its implications. The crisis has provided an opportunity to rethink education in a decolonized and indigenized manner (Amukowa & Ayuya, 2013). Moving forward, institutions must undertake decisions to invest widely in different systems to ensure varying solutions for challenges head.

While the findings show institutional goodwill and support in providing resources, the scale and speed of change being required will stress the current institutional systems and most likely will surpass their capacities (Hodges et al., 2020). This is because the current remote online learning was hurried with bare minimum resources and scant time for mobilizing more resources. The gaps in preparations, differing experiences and attitudes of various stakeholders are likely to generate differences in institutions and class rooms, particularly as aged lecturers do not always feel comfortable with the new and emerging technologies. Perhaps, this is because they tend to value education that is grounded in traditions of the past, and in values that have been developed over centuries (Downes, 2010). Efforts to support and train such cluster of instructors during the COVID-19 is vitally necessary.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATION TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Incontrovertibly, the COVID-19 pandemic impacts on development programmes, indigenous systems, education activities, human rights, governance, culture and spirituality, shall linger for some decades in African communities. These changes shall present pernicious ramifications economically, socially and health wise in Africa. This prompts the concern on what could be the implications of these impacts on African social work education and practice at present and in future. Shall the reactionary teaching and learning modalities and measures to salvage the 2020 academic year in higher education prepare social work graduates to deal with such changes? While the idea that online learning can reduce costs the professional dictates of social work being a practice-based profession (PBP) demands more human interaction (traditional teaching) between the lecturer and the student, as they role play social work intervention in real time. Thus, for social work education and training, there is need to redesign training during and post COVID-19 crisis in manner that meet the needs both digital savvy and non-digital clients. This has to begin with the model of instruction at the university level to ensure equipped professionals to deliver services in African context where human-to-human interaction are fundamental element if the society. Therefore, composite skills are needed as guided by the traditions of the practice and theory as well as the emerging digital ones. This way, social work education shall be able to match the needs of both the old and the new generations in life-changing approaches.

Due to the ethical implication embedded in the use of technology, the digital remote learning presents the students with an opportunity to learn and practice attributes such as honesty, confidentiality, and professionalism in online working systems. Opportunely, new learning environments are informing present and future trends from which both instructors and students stand to benefit. Moreover, the global networks and communities of interest as espoused by connectivism theory are currently developing through emerging technologies. This will encourage young people to develop new, creative, and different forms of communication and knowledge outside formal education system. For example, the social work students that are expected to complete their social work field practise, the requirements of field practise can be tailored in line with students' experience in providing psychosocial support interventions and educational awareness pertaining to COVID-19 pandemic and its ramifications. Therefore, the students can be graded on the impact of his/her work in his/her community through community engagement as it is very necessary at this time. Moreover, social worker students should be creative change agents and aid reconfiguring the communities' access to services, where human-to-human interactions are impossible.

## **CONCLUSION**

In assessing social work students during COVID-19 crisis, the student's application of knowledge and skills from their various social work courses in creating impact in a community rather than depending solely on remote teaching and learning as the only learning platform. Indeed, a paradigm shift in radical discontinuity and radical emergence of education systems is occurring. The digital experimenting during the coronavirus crisis play such an important role in the development and emergence of new pedagogies, shifting the power from the lecturer to increasingly more self-directed learners.

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