

Chapter 16

Distance and Blended Learning: A Troubled but Necessary Pedagogical Terrain in Zimbabwe in the Challenging Context of the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The upsurge of the coronavirus disease has prompted a pedagogical paradigm shift from the traditional face-to-face to distance and blended learning for all institutions of learning worldwide and Zimbabwe in particular. The chapter focuses on the best practices in distance and blended learning in Zimbabwe in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter argues that educational institutions be creative and come up with best pedagogical practices appropriate to distance and blended learning models. This chapter is informed by insights from David Kolb's experiential learning theory that privileges learner-centered approaches where learners draw from personal experiences in the learning process. It has emerged that the outbreak of the COVID-19 has negatively impacted on educational practices globally and Zimbabwe in particular. COVID-19 has ushered in a novel pedagogical trajectory that could benefit the educational future globally and Zimbabwe in particular.

INTRODUCTION

The speedy spread of the new COVID-19 pandemic across the globe forced the World Health Organisation (WHO) to proclaim it as a world-wide pandemic. Similarly, the Zimbabwean government declared the coronavirus disease a national disaster. This pronouncement subsequently resulted in the sudden closure of schools, colleges and universities and an instantaneous removal of students from their halls of residence. The rapid spread across the globe had severe impact on educational delivery and practices.

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Distance and Blended Learning

The surge of the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a pedagogical paradigm shift from the traditional face-to-face to distance and blended learning for all institutions of learning worldwide. In Zimbabwe, learning was severely disrupted and educational institutions kindergarten to university level were forced to adapt to a complex, unfamiliar and troubled terrain of distance and blended pedagogical approaches. In Zimbabwean educational system the K-12 that refers to from kindergarten to 12th grade in the Western education system is equivalent to pre-school up to first year university levels where students are around 17 years of age. This study forces on advanced level and first-year university education. The chapter seeks to explore and argue that it is fundamental for institutions of learning from kindergarten to the university level in Zimbabwe to understand that the coronavirus pandemic generated a significant adaptive and transformative environment that demands academics and institutions to be creative and come up with best pedagogical practices appropriate to distance and blended learning models. This research is guided by the following question:

- What contributions did distance learning make to Zimbabwean education from 1980 to 2019?
- What prompted pedagogical paradigm shift from the traditional face-to-face to blended learning for the K-12 levels as well as university education?
- How do the insights of experiential learning theory inform the discussion of distance and blended learning in the context of COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe?

These and other questions will help to interrogate distance learning, pedagogical practices and the suitability of blended learning in Zimbabwean universities

The Experiential Learning Theory in the Context of COVID-19

The upsurge of coronavirus disease has impacted negatively on the pedagogical approaches that have been in existence for decades. COVID-19 pandemic provoked educationalists globally to reconsider and re-imagine pathways to weaken the challenges of the pedagogical approaches used in schools, colleges and universities in Zimbabwe during the pandemic. This study is informed by the insights from David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning theory to analyse the notion that academics and educational institutions should be creative and come up with best pedagogical practices appropriate to distance and blended learning models. Experiential theory is a conception of learning that is similar to andragogy. This theoretical perspective consists of three elements namely: (1) understanding of ideas, experience and details (2) previous information useful to the present, continuing actions; and (3) examination, assessment and analysis of the learner's activities contribute to individual growth and development (Cercone, 2008). These ideas are significant to experiential learning because they give the base of adult learning experience. Kolb (1984) is of the same view that experience is vital for adult education. The scholar further argue that "adult teaching should be grounded in adults' experiences and that these experiences represent a valuable resource is currently cited as crucial by adult educators of every conceivable ideological hue." What is important is that experiences should not exist in isolation but students should be able to link what they have learnt from their present, future and past experiences. In this study, experiential learning theory will be useful in being able to consider a needs evaluation which is based on the past experience. The students at both advanced and university levels possess prior educational experience that could be utilised to further develop their learning growth. This process is vital in this study because both the instructor and the learners should do assignments which allow students to utilise their experience

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