

Chapter 16

Making the Most Out of Video Conference Learning: Experiences and Lessons From a University in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

With rising Covid-19 infections and deaths, education authorities in Zimbabwe unceremoniously introduced online learning where Whatsapp, electronic mail, Facebook, video conferencing, and radio lessons featured most prominently. At university level, video conference learning was introduced amid much pomp and speculation with varying degrees of success. This study examines the experiences of first-year students at one state university in Zimbabwe. The study revealed that whilst first year university students benefitted from the rather new and emerging technology, some students were greatly affected by the digital divide which threatened their right to education. This mixed methods research used the exploratory sequential research design where students' qualitative responses were juxtaposed with lecturers' quantitative responses. The study proposed the Enhanced Tripartite Online Learning Support framework where universities, students, and parents collaboratively work together to make video conferencing more effective, more affordable, and more enjoyable.

INTRODUCTION

Modern information and communication technology is changing the way people live, behave and interact. It has permeated every facet of human activity, for example, business, education, sport and leisure. One such technology is video conferencing, a technology that was highly popularised in Zimbabwe's education system following the rise of the Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic in early 2020. The study examines prospects of video conferencing learning and its limitations on first year university students who were unceremoniously exposed to the technology before they even found their footing in university

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-8646-7.ch016

education. The study proposes a framework that can be adopted and used to support video conferencing learning amongst university students in general and first-year university students in particular.

Rop and Bett (2014) defined video conferencing as a method of communicating between two or more locations in which sound, vision and data signals are conveyed electronically to enable simultaneous interactive communication. Smith (2003) defined video conferencing as a synchronous audio and video communication system between two or more participants in different locations which uses specialized equipment through high-speed Internet connection. The technology allows people in different locations to see each other and communicate interactively and in real time. Probably, because of its interactive nature, educationists have roped in the technology to substitute the physically facilitator-students scenario in a brick-and-mortar classroom. It would seem the technology is a recent phenomenon. In reality, video conferencing was first introduced in 1964 in New York in the United States of America. The National Aeronautics Space Administration was one of the first organizations to use the technology as it introduced video conferencing as a form of communication between people in space and those on earth (Benedictus, 2011). There are many forms of video conferencing. Some of the commonest ones are Zoom, MS Teams, Webex and Blackboard Collaborate Ultra.

COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China in late 2019. The devastating effects of the disease, which was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, shook the whole world (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Zimbabwe recorded her first COVID-19 cases and casualties in March 2020. On 22 March, the Government of Zimbabwe imposed the first lockdown where people were ordered stay home to limit physical contact and so help to contain the spread of the virus (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Universities, colleges and schools closed. Only essential services were excluded from the lockdown. Closure of universities in Zimbabwe as noted by Manyuchi, Mutusva and Sukdeo (2020) was abrupt and it affected contact classes, and in some universities, graduation ceremonies when the COVID-19 knell was sounded loud and clear without question and compromise.

Closure of educational institutions was sudden, abrupt and unplanned. Nonetheless, the government through the permanent secretary for Higher and Tertiary Education, Science and Technology Development assured tertiary education institutions that the institutions would be adequately resourced in order to be able to continue offering online teaching and learning. It is at this point that this study comes in to assess experiences of first year university students at one state university in Zimbabwe regarding their use of video conferencing as a learning method. It must be noted that prior to the closure of universities, lectures in Zimbabwe's universities were largely offered physically in brick-and-mortar lecture theatres. Cases of online teaching were largely unheard of, except for a few cases involving higher degrees studies and university distance education learning.

Research Problem

Since the attainment of independence in 1980, Zimbabwe has respected the right to education. The country has done a lot to promote this right, for example, by making primary education free, building schools in remote and rural areas, establishing colleges and universities in different provinces of the country and subsidizing higher and tertiary education. The sudden, unplanned and abrupt closure of universities in early 2020 and the introduction of the largely unsupported home-based online learning threatened to eradicate the right to education as many university students failed to connect to "emerging" technologies which suddenly surfaced and trended. Except for a few cases, university students, especially the first-year students who were still to find their footing in higher and tertiary education, were hardest-hit. Instead

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