

Chapter 18

Navigating Through the Affordances and Challenges of Online Learning: Improving Future Modes of Pedagogies for First-Year Students

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ABSTRACT

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown, first-year university students have had limited opportunity to interact in person with peers and the larger university community. The mandated lockdown compelled universities to move to emergency remote teaching. This move led to an onslaught of epistemological, psychosocial, emotional, and economic obstacles for many first-year students. It is against this background that this chapter explores the affordances and challenges that first-year students at a university in Johannesburg, South Africa encountered with online learning. These experiences will serve as the foundation for a discussion of the types of pedagogical approaches that should be used in the future with first-year students.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will explore first-year student's experiences of online learning. Specific focus will be placed on what first-year students regarded as affordances and challenges with online learning during their first year at university. These experiences will be expanded on by noting what has made learning easy and challenging for students during their first year at university as they are adjusting to being at university as well as adapted to learning online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. These affordances and challenges can be accounted for from spiritual, social, emotional, intellectual, environmental, financial and occupational stances. The main aim of this chapter is to articulate what universities need to be cognisant about

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as they further explore various models of online learning. In the absence of having a phenomenological view of first-year student's experiences, university practices could perpetuate the further exclusion and alienation of many first-year students. This will ultimately increase the dropout rate of first-year students and or increase the failure rate of students which will impact on the throughput rates. A synthesis of students' experiences will be used to present a way forward for what future modes of pedagogies should include in order to ensure that all students feel empowered during their first year at university.

The chapter will begin with a detailed background of the implications that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on learning and teaching at universities and how this has affected first year students. This will be followed by a synthesized literature review in which the affordances and challenges of online learning will be explored. Thereafter the theoretical framework, context of the study, materials and methods, findings and conclusion will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), has dramatically changed our world (Grange, 2020). The pandemic has had a huge impact on the education system both locally and internationally (Daniel, 2020). The outbreak was first discovered in December 2019 in Wuhan, China (Omran, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). It is believed that the virus started to spread in China during December 2019, before moving to Thailand, Japan, the Republic of Korea, then to the United States, Vietnam, Singapore, and, at the end of January 2020, to Australia, Nepal, Europe, Malaysia, Canada, the Middle East, and other countries of the Western Pacific Region and South-East Asia Region, and onwards to Russia, Africa, and Latin America (Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomažević, & Umek, 2020). This led to countries around the world taking precautions to avoid the spread of the virus. One such strategy was a mandated lockdown and social distancing (Alfano & Ercolano, 2020) in order to control the transmission of the disease. Countries opted for various periods of lockdown with Austria, Portugal and Sweden having shorter periods of about 15 days and France, Italy and Spain for about 60 days (Coccia, 2021). The South African government attempted to control the spread of COVID-19 by also enforcing a mandated lockdown and prohibiting public gatherings, enforced social distancing and closing of schools and universities (Dube, 2020).

The onset of the COVID-19 mandated lockdown in 2020, resulted in first-year university students, nationally and internationally, having to develop two survival mechanisms within the first few weeks of being at university. The first was to mediate the expectation and challenge of transitioning from high school to university. The second, adjusting from face-to-face modes of pedagogies to emergency remote learning before they were fully familiar with the expectations of being at university. Universities also needed to find resourceful ways of ensuring that the academic project continues as they were required to close their physical premises and move to online learning. While online learning is a growing field in education, with some universities offering blended or purely online instruction prior to the pandemic, face-to-face learning was the primary form of delivery for many institutions. This was the case at the institution where this research was conducted, as all of the participants in the study were enrolled in a full-time face-to-face course. The first-year students who formed part of this study had been on campus for a total of six weeks before they were forced to work off campus when the COVID-19 pandemic struck South Africa. These students had to hastily learn how to manage their academics and online habits on top of the fact that they were still getting used to tertiary life, schedules, and expectations. Universities

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