Complications of Online Learning: International Students' Perspective, Huzhou University, China

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Abstract: *Owing to the outbreak of COVID-19, countless advanced educational institutions transitioned to online learning. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of a group of international students enrolled in online courses in Huzhou University, China. A mixed method approach (self-study and unstructured interview) was adopted for the data collection, and explanatory analysis was used to present the data collected and highlighted key findings. The authors with the help of other students identified some positive and negative perceived attributes of online learning. Five common challenges of online learning were documented: 1) problem with adaptation to an online environment, 2) technological complication, 3) restricted communication, 4) low intrinsic motivation and 5) low level of class participations. The authors then suggested that training be organised for both teachers and learners to make the online learning less problematic for learners. These findings could help improve online teaching practice and learning quality in future courses.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, Educational technology, interaction, assessment, Online learning adaptation.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Online learning is here to stay. With the outbreak of the COVID-19, nearly all of today's universities and colleges are engaged in online learning and nearly every university in China offers online courses. This new trend however did not come without setbacks. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, the number of online courses grew and continued to grow in higher education with many universities placing greater emphasis on intensifying admission to online education. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese universities have launched online education reforms to form an open education network based on information and network technologies. The drivers behind the fast growth of online learning are varied including, but not limited to increasing accessibility, advances in communication technologies, increasing student demand for online flexible or distance learning, institutional need to maintain a competitive offering of diverse learning platforms, and positive financial gains to institutions and students (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004; Muirhead, 2007). Due to the prevalence of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in China, following the government's requirements of "nonstop teaching and learning," online learning has emerged with identified positive and negative aspects from students' perspectives, such as flexibility, convenience, technical (Paechter, Maier, & Macher, 2010)

As with most transformational change events, the shift to online courses in education had not been without struggles. One of the primary challenges of this transition involved the willingness and capacity of the teachers to deliver instruction in this new format and of students to actively follow up with lessons online from home. According to Lederman (2020), due to the COVID-19 crisis, teachers and students both found themselves in the situation where they felt compelled to embrace the digital academic experience as the summum bonum of the online teaching-learning process.

The researchers who were also students of Huzhou university at the time of the outbreak and also at the time of the study, took part in many of the online classes which some were sometimes blended with offline classes (students who were on campus attended classes in natural classrooms whilst other students who happened to be out of campus at the time joined online).

However, many students lamented on the abstract nature of the online classes especially when taking classes on supposedly practical lessons. For instance, lessons on how to use the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) which formed part of a quantitative research course was sometimes solely held online and sometimes online blended

with offline. Sometimes, the attention of the lecturers was shifted from the online and students who solely focused on the online lagged behind.

This paper portrays a more than six months self-study of students who experienced the outbreak of the pandemic and difficulties they had in attending online classes.

Throughout half of the year 2020, students had been on campus and for one month, locked in their dormitories. In order to reduce physical contact and also to prevent spread of the virus on campus, the university resorted to organizing classes online. The researchers' lack of guidance or expectations for online classes, challenges from focusing, adapting and participating and complains from classmates prompted them to apply a self-study methodology and unstructured interview to examine the challenges students faced in attending online classes more systematically and critically. This research therefore sought to answer, what challenges do international students face in the online classroom?

1.1. Definition of Terms:
Transition
Transition is defined as the passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another. When a process is transitioned, it involves changing from what is already known to the unknown.
Digital/ Online learning
The use of a computer connected to a network, that offers the possibility to learn from anywhere, anytime, in any rhythm, with any means" (Cojocariu et al., 2014).Online learning can be termed as a tool that can make the teaching–learning process more student-centered, more innovative, and even more flexible. Online learning is defined as "learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices (e.g., mobile phones, laptops, etc.) with internet access. In these environments, students can be anywhere (independent) to learn and interact with instructors and other students" (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Adaptation;

An adaptation, also called an adaptive trait in biology is a trait with a current functional role in the life history of an organism that is maintained and evolved by means of natural selection. Adaptation refers to both the current state of being adapted and to the dynamic evolutionary process that leads to the adaptation. Adaptations contribute to the fitness and survival of individuals. Organisms face a succession of environmental challenges as they grow and develop and are equipped with an adaptive plasticity as the phenotype of traits develop in response to the imposed conditions. The developmental norm of reaction for any given trait is essential to the correction of adaptation as it affords a kind of biological insurance or resilience to varying environments, Webster Dictionary.

1.2 The Transition Process
For several years now, digital transition has been incorporated in higher education to aid lesson delivering and make education easily accessible to people. This transformation is not a novel phenomenon but the individuals involve are sometimes new to the transformation hence breaks and mends occur. According to Eden Webinar (2020), online and distance education is like a student sitting on a three-legged stool. The three legs are: 1. Learning Materials; 2. Logistics and Administration; & 3. Student Support. If any of these legs is weak the student will fall (fail):

Digital transformation of every Higher Education Institutions such as Huzhou university is a topical issue that cannot be miscalculated. Many students and even teachers faced technological problems at the initial stage of migration and this transformation had suggested the integration of sustainable management to be able to adjust to the modifications of curriculum to enforce the study of educational technology.

Students woke up to the news of transiting from print technologies to new working principles introduced by digital technologies. Different applications and social media such as wechat, dingtalk, zoom was announced as the new platforms for study. Students and teachers used the initial part of the semester debating on the apps to use for each class especially as many students were out of China. Even the time for the study was also another topic for debate.

We live in a digital world now and we debate "digital skills" and "digital literacy," Digital has become a buzzword to emphasize the transformation and learning but not everyone actually has the digital skills. Finally, students and teachers realized that resistance to change would not help in any way as they would be assessed on their pace to adapt to the changes in such a short period and their ability to learn and retain what is learned. After some time of adoption, the authors sought to study the extent to which the online teaching is different from the traditionally practiced face-to-face (FTF) teaching.

The researchers represent the range of international students of Huzhou university. Spotting that online teaching has come to stay and may continue till graduation, the authors delved deeply in the problems and the necessary remedies that could make the online teaching and learning as effective as FTF. The authors wanted to examine the integrity and rigor of the online courses with the intent of refining practice. A self-study method blended with interview and explanation was adopted for the research. Whitehead (2004) suggested that at its core, self-study stems from the query,

"How do I improve what I am doing?" The researchers also wanted to broaden their horizon on online education beyond the anagogical and cognitive components to explore the emotional and psychological aspects of the online learning.

2. Objectives :

This study had three main objectives: (a) to explore students' perceptions of online learning (b) to understand the student experience of learning online, and (c) to consider how the design of an online learning experience can overcome negative perceptions and meet or exceed positive expectations.

3. METHODOLOGY:

To get in-depth understanding of the problem learners face per online learning, the researchers implored a self-study method of research blended with unstructured online interview with other international students especially those who travelled out of China at the time of the research and used explanation and description to present data.

Self-study connects with action research, reflective learning, pragmatic evaluation of practice and lesson study (Boyd & White, 2017). But it is characterized by its focus on one's own practice and one's own role in it, and looking more deeply to identify motivations, beliefs, and concerns around an aspect of practice. Characteristics of self-study are: the involvement of critical friends (Schuck & Russell, 2005); the use of theory to help to gain wider perspectives on practice; and methodological rigour (LaBoskey, 2004). The reason for choosing self-study as an approach for this research related to the view the authors took to the role of the practitioner in the practice. Through self-study research, the practitioner can develop his or her 'wisdom of practice' (Schulman, 2004) or what Van Manen (1991) calls the 'tact of teaching', which is the sensitivity to act in an educative manner in context. Schulman (2004) stresses that the ongoing professional learning of the teacher is essential due to the contextual nature of teaching, where each decision for action has to be made in relation to a wide range of considerations and in a complex context with many learners. The multiplicity of the process was geared towards the enhancement of the validity of this self-study since it used multiple sources of data collection, collected in different times, and interpreted by the writers.

3.1 Data collection

The authors began discussing with each other their experiences in the online classroom. The following themes were taken into consideration; participation and feedbacks from both teachers and colleagues. At the end of every week, the researchers met to discuss with each other how they felt in the online classroom and also to bring to light some problems they faced and how they managed to cope with others. These meetings were held for 16 consecutive weeks in two semesters. Their discussions were tailored around the extent to which the courses outlined were covered, learning modules, assignments, online discussion, class participation, technical issues, time management, classroom management, student evaluations, language barrier and lots more. The researchers also recorded in detail for one and a half semester in the year how they spent time "taking" online courses.

Though this is a self-study, the authors interviewed two other students who travelled to their countries during the pandemic. The interviews were done on phone and audio recorded. The audio was then transcribed into text by experts and errors corrected.

3.2 Interviews
The first person interviewed was a student who travelled to Cameroon during the pandemic.
Interviewer: What are some of the challenges you face as you are not in China and still studying with us online?
Respondent: I just don't want to recount what I am going through here. It is an undeniable fact that the online learning is a very convenient way of studying for most of us who are out of the school's environs during this pandemic but there are multitudes of problems we face every day. In my own case, my computer literacy level is very low and it's a big problem for me. Sometimes, I try submitting my assignments and it takes so long for me to do that. If lecturers were to be using same platforms, we would have gotten used to it easier but this is a case where we use more than four different applications for lessons, it makes it so difficult. A student like me with a "traditional" mindset find it difficult to adapt; staying focused on lectures and sometimes blending it with other chores at home is a bit difficult.

Interviewer: How do you manage Adaptability Problem?
Respondent: Well, gradually, I accepted that the online learning has come to stay especially as the government of China has not yet decided when to allow students to return to China for normal classes to begin. So, I began to train myself and get use to the situation.
The second student interviewed was a Ghanaian student who also travelled to *Ghana during the pandemic.*
Interviewer: What are some of the challenges you face as you are not in China and still studying with us online?

Respondent: My biggest challenge is with time. China's time is ahead of that of my country with eight hours and sometimes, lectures start at 8:30am in China and that is 00:30 in Ghana. Just imagine how it is. One day, I slept off while taking examination online because it was around 1:00am in Ghana. Sometimes, we those who are outside China suggest that lessons are held in the evenings in China but those in China also complain they would like to sleep early. There's also lack of teacher-student communication in that you cannot raise your hand to get clarification or answer a question. Most at times when a question is post you need to type in your answers since you can't have direct contact with the teacher to communicate. Most times, the lecturers do not even see our questions or submissions. There is also, lack of class demonstration or practical presentation. My biggest challenge is with Technical Issues. The challenge of getting data frequently to login for the class or sometime we don't have the best of network and also due to the fact that online classes take a lot of data bundle since you have to be livestreaming to watch the teacher show an online video. Many of us students are not provided with the high bandwidth or the strong internet connection that online courses require especially with our service providers who are terrible...imagine I activated my internet bundle and it would take almost two days before it starts going through and this made me failed to catch up with virtual classes: Some of my mates don't even own computers and seek help from other people to do their assignments and it slows the learning process. Again, the used of apps such as the ding talk, wechat, and duifene which are all Chinese apps is complicated in that students needs to translate before becoming familiar with them. To add to is the lack of a conducive environment to attend classes. Sometimes, whiles having classes, your siblings and neighbours are noisy which makes it difficult to attend the class freely as compared to when it was in the traditional classroom.

Interviewer: How did you finally, adapt to the online learning?

Respondent: I have no choice than to cope with issues as and when they emerge. I had to buy wifi to reduce the spending of data. I educated my family members on the need for me to take lectures hence needed their cooperation. Gradually, though not completely, the noise making reduced. These are the ones that are within my power. As for lecturers and other students, I just have to cope with them.

4. FINDINGS - DISCUSSION:

After more than 16 weeks of consistent self-study, discussions, reflection, analysis, and critical examination, the researchers came to understand the complications encountered by international students in China in attending online classes with some at times merged with the offline classes. These self-study processes were somewhat indirect and covered a wide range of worries and questions, yet this theme prevailed and was evident in the observations and reflections right from the beginning. The researchers could now identify what was previously only sensing in their minds and experiences: the difficulties in how themselves and other students were receiving lectures, feedbacks from lecturers and submitting assignment and taking examinations in online courses.

The authors through the self-study and discussion sessions realized that the barriers to participation that online students may experience are particularly evident in collaborative learning tasks through group work, group presentations and group assessments. Although there were rare personal issues such as anxiety associated with using technology; being out of one's comfort zone; (perception of) inequity in assessment, particularly in "group" assignments; and, the (perceived) inability or difficulty in peer interaction, particularly in presentations, many other problems were universal. Notwithstanding the effort of the university authority to equip facilitators with the technical-know-how to deliver lessons effectively, many academic staff members felt apprehensive and not suitably equipped to teach via wholly (or mostly) online particularly as they themselves were still learning to use some of the platforms and this resulted in the used of variant platforms for lesson delivering as each facilitator used the platforms that he or she is more contented with. This left learners in an isolated place where they also had varying levels of competency and proficiency using different forms of IT and were therefore somewhat on their own when it comes to the online learning environment through different Learning Management Systems (LMS).

The authors through the active self-study realized that, though the online lessons were in a way beneficial to students as they could attend lectures anywhere without hindrance of distance, there were many challenges that could not be ignored. The following challenges were then highlighted as common challenges identified by the researches and other colleagues:

Adaptability Problems

From traditional classroom method and face to face instructor training to phone & computer-based training in a virtual classroom made the learning experience entirely different for students. They had never had this and somehow were resistant to change thus adapting to the online learning environment was problematic. While passive listening and notes taking are expected in a traditional classroom, online discussions or creating a wechat, dingtalk and zoom group and doing lectures on it demands so much patience to listen and follow the courses. Students with a "traditional" mindset found it difficult to adapt; Staying focused while trying to take a class from the kitchen or bedroom can be tough—and many students had learned this lesson over the course of the pandemic. Without teachers there to keep them on task,

television, video games, siblings, pets, food and household chores easily pull their focus, interrupting important online learning sessions and homework making understanding very difficult and courses not well digested.

Complex technology;

The researchers and many other colleagues found it difficult to adapt to the online learning especially at the beginning because of technological challenges. The computer literacy level of many students is very low. Manipulating the mobile phone or the laptop to take classes and also hand in assignments is a very tough situation for many of the students. Also, some types of phones do not support certain apps used in China so students who used such phones had no choice than to buy phones that could be used in China with littles stress. There were times wifi in almost every room in the dormitory building went off and students had to use their data to access classes and this posed much cost. Many students who travelled outside China had similar challenges. There were even cases where some lecturers found it difficult to operate the medium of instruction. Classes were postponed some times because of technical problems.

Restricted communication

It was difficult for researchers and other learners to communicative effectively with each other also with facilitators. Language barrier is already a big problem with studying in China for international students and the situation got exacerbated with online classes as many of the lecturers found it difficult to understand what learners said. In many instances where lectures could not express themselves fluently in the English language, the decided to type and translate and send to students. Then the lecture was done using text messages instead of video or audio.

Time difference as many students were outside China.

China is 7 or 8hours ahead of ahead of many African countries and some hours ahead of other countries where international students travelled to. This made it difficult for many learners to join lessons online as they were in their respective countries. This affects the efficiency of the classes. Sometimes, classes are held around 8:30am in China and that is around 00:30 in many African countries. This becomes more challenging when Apps that cannot save classes for replay are used and even when dingtalk is used, some lecturers do not know to set replay.

Low Participation

When students participate in class, it helps the teacher to know where and or when students do not understand and elaborate further. Many students complained that they only need to listen to the lecturer and if they have questions or submissions, they just write in the comment box. As students are many and they all think writing would show your participation, people turn to write many things most of which are not important and this makes the lecturers not to see the important questions.

Low Intrinsic Motivation

Countless students learn best when they interact with others during the lesson. In the traditional classroom, even if you do not feel like learning, as you observe your classmates participate in class, it motivates you to learn but the situation is not the same in the online classroom. Students need to find the motivation to follow the new educational trends and also properly equip themselves for future challenges in our education and careers since they have many tasks to accomplish in future. Master students are not supposed to be passive listeners to lessons.

5. LIMITATION.

This study was conducted on a smaller sample of students pursuing an under-graduate and post-graduate degree in Huzhou university in China using limited variables and tools, and hence the results cannot be generalized to a larger population

6. RECOMMENDATIONS: Future research should be done quantitatively to aid generalization.

7. CONCLUSION:

The authors conducted a self-study and unstructured interviews with other students to know the opinion of students in Huzhou university on different aspects of online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that the students considered online education a viable alternative under the current circumstances. However, they think there were lots of challenges which made the online study a troublesome situation for them. Some of the challenges mentioned were *adaptability problem, complex technology, restricted communication, ineffective time management, low level of intrinsic motivation and low-class participation*.

Educational technology has improved over the years. Today, there are several erudite online education platforms and many specialized educational resources for various courses. Some online educational tools also facilitate collaborative learning. However, self-reflection on the part of students is extremely important in online education. The authors and other students feel there is a need for periodic assessment to keep the teaching-learning process on the right track. Professors may use innovative tools and techniques for the same. Some empirical studies have revealed that

students are suffering from stress and anxiety during this pandemic. Professors should try to provide some flexibility to students attending their online courses.

Teachers could be trained by institutions who gained hands-on experiences. The differences between online and face-to-face mode of teaching could be deliberated during the training. It will be an arduous task for them to use new instructional strategy. To develop multimodal approaches to achieve course content objectives for better learning outcome can be a better idea to deal with the intricacy of online education. The management of the various departments must ensure the availability of reliable communication tools, high quality digital academic experience, and promote technology-enabled learning for students to bridge the disparities originated in the education system before and after COVID-19 catastrophe which is also inevitably necessitated for uninterrupted learning.

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