

Lecturers' Perceptions of the Switch from Teaching in the new normal to Normal in a selected university in South Africa

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Abstract; The announcement of the lockdown because of the pandemic by the South African President in March 2020 came as a surprise and shock to many academics. Universities in the country have no choice but to switch to virtual classrooms, termed “the new normal” A few months ago, the president of South Africa announced the removal of all restrictions and back to normal conventional classroom face-to-face teaching. The paper investigates the perceptions of the lecturer to ascertain the strategies used to cope and share their experiences. 8 samples were purposively selected in one of the historically disadvantaged universities. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. The findings revealed among others that virtually all the respondents have adopted one or two coping strategies with diverse experiences. The paper recommended that the lecturers should think outside the box and be 4IR compliance. They should be flexible to adapt to any situation and use blended approach pedagogy even in the normal stage.

Keywords: The new normal, Normal, Lecturers' perception, COVID-19

Introduction

The announcement of COVID-19 in late 2019 and the lockdown from the president of South Africa in March 2020 came as a surprise and shock to many lecturers. The pandemic brought about a paradigm shift in teaching and learning at all South African institutions. South African schools were forced to switch to virtual classrooms. Online teaching through different modes like Microsoft Team, Google Meet, zoom, Blackboard etc. took the stage in all institutions of learning not only in South Africa but throughout the globe. The unprecedented pandemic left a big gap between analogue and digital lecturers. The analogue which is also called conservatives finds it difficult to adjust to the virtual classroom. Every institution embarks on a series of training, in some universities, the training was weekly across faculties in the universities, this situation was called the “New Normal” that all academics have to adapt to.

The new normal also revealed many things, such as the weaknesses of some lecturers to cope, inability to use the laptops, internet problems, and lack of networks, to mention but a few. These challenges also affect the students, especially those living in rural areas where there is no electricity and network bandit becomes a problem and a big mirage. In South Africa, COVID-19 exposed inequality in terms of infrastructure as many students studying at historically

disadvantaged universities find it difficult to cope. Even though the government of South Africa bought laptops for all students, these laptops were useless due to the students' location ¹. South Africa is still a developing country that is ravaged by high unemployment, poverty, and inequality, many schools are bedevilled with poor infrastructures and lack good learning and teaching facilities. South Africa has 26 universities with many located in rural areas like those in the Eastern Cape province of the country where the samples for this paper are drawn ². Other challenges lecturers are facing are the issues of the application of 4IR, limited network and connectivity.

The fundamental challenge the new normal brought is a high dropout rate of students due to the inability to get connectivity and most of the students lost interest in learning, some students complained about the stress of staying at home all alone, which cause a setback because they miss their friends. Most parents live in rural areas and are low and middle-level income recipients, they could not provide for their children adequately, especially with electronic devices like functional laptops like in advanced countries where students hardly have books and written materials, they have only tablets, iPad, smartphones, computers and laptops. Teaching and learning in South Africa have been bedevilled with inequality and inequality has caused a crisis in the quality of education in South Africa. Now that institutions are returning gradually to the normal conventional style of teaching and learning, it is imperative to find out the feelings and experiences of the lecturers in this regard ³.

The new normal as a result of COVID-19 affects academic exercise a great deal. The distribution of learning materials is unequal, not all curricula can be moved online, besides, there is a need for curriculum review to meet the duration of the online teaching. The assessments were compromised, and there are a lot of moratoriums put in place over tests, assignments and continuous assessments, in addition, academic performance dropped and many students could not access online lectures. The country moved from one level of stage to another ranging from stages 1-5 where stage 1 is the least that encourages maximum interactions and promotes a large audience, encouraging some students in faculties of science, health sciences and agriculture etc. to attend classes physically observing COVID-19 protocols ⁴.

The new normal put the universities management on their toes by creating many COVID-19 teams, providing many COVID-19 materials and positioning them in strategic places within the campus for the use of the students and the lecturers, so that the spread may be reduced. The paper will not mention the loss of lives of many academics during this period especially those who are above 60 years of age and those who have a comorbidity, that is underline ailments and diseases. This led to more workload for lecturers with the accompanying stress and pains of virtual classrooms.

Moreover. COVID-19 took academics to the new normal and also affect academics' mental health especially when their neighbours or loved ones died in the process, their mental health was due to pressures, strains and changes in lifestyles. The new normal brought anxiety and uncertainty in academia, learning from home with a lot of disturbances from family members, and staying

¹ E O Adu, "Virtual Classroom: Prospects and Challenges of COVID 19 Pandemic in South Africa," *JOURNAL OF HUMAN ECOLOGY* 72, no. 1-3 (2020), <http://dx.doi.org/10.31901/24566608.2020/72.1-3.3280>.

² Yolanda Mpu and E O Adu, "Collaborative Virtual Learning in Education in STEM Education," *Management Studies* 8, no. 4 (2020), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17265/2328-2185/2020.04.005>.

³ Mpu and Adu, "Collaborative Virtual Learning in Education in STEM Education."

⁴ Mpu and Adu, "Collaborative Virtual Learning in Education in STEM Education."

before any device for many hours ⁵. The aftermath of this is that the same academics who serve as counsellors to students during the normal now need counselling themselves during the new normal, and their core teaching functions are now affected ⁶. The social aspect of university life was significantly affected, social interactions were limited, and stress, depression and social cohesion were dissuaded.

During the new normal, the readiness of lecturers is crucial to flag, many lecturers are not ready, and they are not familiar with the use of the facilities for a virtual classroom. Remember, you can only give what you have. A lecturer needs to be adequately prepared and think outside the box. The relationship between lecturers and students can facilitate effective teaching and learning and promote the achievement of the desired goals. Therefore, the sudden move from conventional face-to-face teaching and learning to online is indeed a mirage that academics must adapt and run with.

The importance of face-to-face teaching cannot be overemphasized, it promotes cordial relationships, enhances retention, and interaction among lecturers, students and peers are very valuable to the actualization of goals and learning outcomes. Teaching and learning are about a relationship. One of the fundamental reasons why face-to-face contact will always be preferred above virtual or the new normal is the ability to know whether your students learn or not and to see if there is a need for a tutorial as an intervention for their lack of understanding, secondly, some students who are doing science practical need physical contact to enhance their better understanding about the subject. Connectivity, Wi-Fi bandits' inadequate facilities like devices and stress as a result of speaking to a machine daily show the importance of traditional and conventional classroom teaching ⁷.

After a period of 20 months, South Africa returned institutions of learning back to the normal conventional teaching and learning. Which we refer to in this paper as “normal” where physical contact is allowed, and face-to-face lecture returns. The question now is if the lecturers have adjusted to normal.

Literature Review

This paper employs social constructivist theory which explains the construction of knowledge by interacting with others, to assess the perception of lecturers on the switch from the new normal to normal due to the end of COVID-19 in South Africa. According to the social constructivist approach, engaging students in social activities including interactions between lecturers and students in the classroom leads to better teaching. Approaches based on social constructivism can include cooperative learning, lecturers supporting their students, problem-solving evaluations, and a variety of other techniques that include learning from and/or with others

⁵ Babawande Emmanuel Olawale et al., “COVID-19 Induced Psychosocial Challenges in South African Higher Education: Experiences of Staff and Students at Two Rural Universities,” *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 6, no. 3 (2021): 179–193, <http://dx.doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2021.37>.

⁶ Olawale et al., “COVID-19 Induced Psychosocial Challenges in South African Higher Education: Experiences of Staff and Students at Two Rural Universities.”

⁷ Kristina Henry Collins and Javetta Jones Roberson, “Developing STEM Identity and Talent in Underrepresented Students: Lessons Learned From Four Gifted Black Males in a Magnet School Program,” *Gifted Child Today* 43, no. 4 (2020): 218–230, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1076217520940767>.

⁸. The socio-constructivist theory also states that because learning processes are socially and culturally constrained, knowledge, which is a construct of the individual, typically arises from social circumstances. Through social engagement and a blended learning strategy, the lecturer and students share their educational experiences while using online gadgets in the new normal. Based on language, culture, and knowledge, Vygotsky developed this hypothesis. The part that language and culture play in our cognitive development and how we see the world around us. Language and culture are said to offer frameworks for comprehension, experience, and communication throughout the transition to the new normal as well as in discussions between instructors and students about the world they live in.

Language: Language is the most important tool for regulating and functioning as a reflecting point for human thought. Vygotsky thought that it is proof of internalized language that directs our thoughts and behaviour ⁹. In the new normal, even in the normal, the language of communication is very important so that information can be disseminated so that students can understand the concepts being taught. Instead of focusing on some facts, students learn to give phenomena their unique meaning and relevance. In essence, it is thought that human social interaction and good communication are what lead to the development of language. It is a significant tool for connecting with the world community. The language used during and after the epidemic, which is the subject of this essay, is crucial for effective teaching and learning. When lecturers are speaking to a computer or other device for online instruction, many students find that using their mother tongue as the language of instruction helps them understand the material. Communication language is crucial for virtual learning ¹⁰. It's noteworthy that language is thought to have two key roles in the process of knowledge acquisition. Children receive knowledge from adults in a variety of ways. 2. the use of language as a strong and effective tool for intellectual adaptation in humans.

a) Culture:

According to Vygotsky, culture is the main factor influencing intellectual development¹¹. There is little doubt that changing the school's operating model and enhancing educational performance involves changing the school culture. The disadvantaged institutions in South Africa, especially where the samples were selected have a very strong culture that influences their operation during the new normal and after. Such institution has very strong dynamics that depict the type of reforms and transformation that take place. This selected university makes sure the students have access to laptops and data given to them (Adu et al., 2020). This example often explains the causes of academics' growing interest in the institution's culture and the necessity for improvements more generally. No attempt at change can be made without an institutional culture that supports improvement. The necessity for the lecturer and student to adopt a new culture that differs from the culture of the traditional school setting is

⁸ B A Segoe and J M Dreyer, "The Reliability of Mentor Assessments in Teaching Practice in an Open Distance E-Learning (ODEL) Context," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2015): 15–22, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09751122.2015.11917588>.

⁹ Harry Daniels, *Vygotsky and Research, Vygotsky and Research*, 2008.

¹⁰ Segoe and Dreyer, "The Reliability of Mentor Assessments in Teaching Practice in an Open Distance E-Learning (ODEL) Context."

¹¹ Lois Holzman, "On Behalf of Vygotsky," in *We Saved the Best for You: Letters of Hope, Imagination and Wisdom for 21st Century Educators*, 2013.

related to online education (the new normal) (normal). Therefore, the institution's philosophy will affect the new normal and digital philosophy is vital at this stage ¹².

b) Knowledge

The social constructivist theory portrays knowledge as the outcome of learning from one another. In line with this paper, during the new normal and transition back to normal the students stay together to acquire more knowledge. Learning and teaching can only take place when there is an interaction between lecturer and student likewise student to student. Teaching and learning take place through the efforts of others. The new normal and normal encourage cooperation and collaboration, which adds to the social side of the theory. Students learn from the lecturer as well as from their peers. Teaching with technology fosters cognitive ability. Since no one can claim to have a monopoly on virtual learning, the bond and relationship between the instructor and student are crucial. According to this view, knowledge promotes intellectual growth.

Method

Research Paradigm

Contrarily, interpretivism is linked to subjectivity and many realities. They frequently do their studies from the standpoint of personal experience. Their conclusions are frequently more specific to certain settings and conditions than generalizable to entire populations. They are frequently linked to the gathering of qualitative data that allows for numerous interpretations ¹³. Similar to positivists, the researcher first chooses a topic, studies the literature, plans the study, gathers qualitative data, analyses the data, and then further develops the underlying concepts and theories before reporting the results. Observations, document and narrative analysis, case studies, interviews, and audio-visual sources are all used by interpretivism to gather data. They discuss their findings in lengthy descriptions ¹⁴.

Research Approach

For this work, the researchers defined, recognized, and understood human phenomena, relationships, and discourse using a qualitative research approach. According to Lichtman, qualitative research enables researchers to gather, assemble, and extrapolate data from people through interviews and/or observations in their natural or everyday environments¹⁵. A systematic investigation of how a participant sees interprets, and experiences events differ from quantitative research, which deals with testing hypotheses using statistical tools, in that qualitative research

¹² Segoe and Dreyer, "The Reliability of Mentor Assessments in Teaching Practice in an Open Distance E-Learning (ODEL) Context"; Adu, "Virtual Classroom: Prospects and Challenges of COVID 19 Pandemic in South Africa."

¹³ Celia A Taylor, "Development of a Modified Cohen Method of Standard Setting," *Medical teacher* 33, no. 12 (2011): e678–e682; John. W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Methods: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage, 2013).

¹⁴ Taylor, "Development of a Modified Cohen Method of Standard Setting"; Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Methods: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

¹⁵ Richard Taulke-Johnson, "Book Review: MARILYN LICHTMAN, *Qualitative Research in Education — A User's Guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006. 249 Pp (Including Index). ISBN 0761929355 (Hbk); ISBN 1412937345 (Pbk) £39.95," *Qualitative Research* 10, no. 2 (2010): 276–277, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/14687941100100020903>.

focuses on exploring and understanding a social problem from an individual's point of view as it occurs in the natural setting.

Research Design

It used a phenomenological design. Investigating the qualitative design in which the in-depth of a program, process, activity, and individuals are referred to as a phenomenon, according to Creswell¹⁶. An in-depth analysis of one specific case study was used by Cohen et al. to succinctly illustrate a phenomenon¹⁷. Its purpose is to use a particular incident to demonstrate a more general idea.

Sample/Sampling Techniques

The participants who are purposively selected and 8 university lecturers who are permanent employees of the university have gathered much experience so that they can provide such experience during the face-to-face interview.

Data collection techniques

The instrument for gathering information from the participants was a semi-structured interview, which was chosen over other varieties of interviews. To determine whether there are difficulties or not during the post-COVID-19 pandemic, participants were asked about their perspectives regarding the transition from the new normal caused by COVID-19 to normal¹⁸.

Data trustworthiness

To produce the same results or outcomes in the future as they did in the past, qualitative data must be stable, predictable, dependable, consistent, and reliable. This is what is meant by qualitative data being trustworthy. The study adhered to the four qualities of qualitative research that Creswell¹⁹ identified dependability, confirmability, verification, and transferability. Trustworthiness is defined as findings that are worth paying attention to.

Data analysis

The themes derived from the study questions were used to analyze the interviews. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, as previously mentioned, and transcription of the data from the recorder was the initial stage in data analysis. This made it easier for the researchers to engage deeply with the data. The researchers' interpretation of the data was aided by the compilation of written transcriptions and first-hand accounts from the participants.

¹⁶ John W Creswell, "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches," *SAGE Publications* (2007).

¹⁷ Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, "Research Methods in Education (Eight Edition)," *Abingdon, Oxon* (2018).

¹⁸ Mpu and Adu, "Collaborative Virtual Learning in Education in STEM Education."

¹⁹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitatif, Quantitatif, Dan Mixed Methods Approaches*, Terj. Nur Khabibah (Jakarta: KIK Press, 2002).

Result and Discussion

8 lecturers were interviewed and coded as L1-L8. The themes and sub-themes were derived from the research questions and the responses of the participants as follows:

Theme 1: The coping of lecturers with the switch from the new normal to normal

All the participants were asked how they are coping when they were asked to return to normal conventional face-to-face teaching. Most of them said they are very used to the new normal because they thought they will never return to normal conventional teaching. They said they have created the space like an office in their homes and use to staying at home to face machines (Laptops, smartphones, computers, and tablets). However, some of them are very specific.

...you can say that again, I am not sure how long will it take me to cope with the normal teaching of face-to-face, remember, some of us have adapted to the new normal and gotten used to it and moving back now is another stress for me (L5).

I have customised and tailored my mind to indoor teaching I have changed my daily chores and household activities because of the new normal. Look, my assessment mode and teaching style have changed to the extent that I have forgotten the physical contact classes (L2).

I believe I will adapt slowly because the new normal is not up to 2 years, only that I never knew we can get back to normal face-to-face so soon like this. Now I am in the office still contacting my students online, even asking them if they prefer to continue with the virtual classroom (L1).

Similarly, other participants corroborate the views above, however, some participants have the following to say,

There is nothing much that has changed, I even love to be back in the office, I am positive in my thinking and I am very flexible and adapt easily to change. I am ready to show more support to my students and meeting them physically again is a good thing for me (L3).

Theme 2: The experience of the lecturers when returning to normal from the new normal.

As alluded to above, most of the lecturers sampled claimed that they never expected the return to normal face-to-face classroom teaching so soon. Some have the following to echo.

Elsh... I have to put my house in order, what I mean is that I have to change my weekly programme and amend my activities timetable. Look, during the new normal I am the one that takes my child to school, now I organise a special shuttle to take him and bring him back home. I do my domestic chores, now I need to employ the service of domestic workers not only to clean but to stay with my child until I am back from the office (L8).

Attendance in my classes is not encouraging, I have to use the social media platform to remind my students about the timetable for physical classes (L6).

Thanks for your interview question, I am now reorganizing myself and amending my learning guide and the contents of my module. Remember, this will also have implications for curriculum review or amendment (L7).

The coping strategies and the experience of the lecturers enumerated above show that there are diverse views about the shift from the new normal to normal according to Adu et al 2020 who think that the impact of the new normal on all lecturers can never be the same. Some are not ready while some could not easily adapt, and some adapt to changes quickly. However, they all agreed that they never thought it will be so quick, they have already adapted to the new normal

and gotten acquainted with the new assessments and mode of teaching, some of them passed through some stress and mental problems as part of the effect of new normal as alluded to by Olawale et al., discovered that the new normal affect academics' mental health²⁰.

Conclusion and recommendations

The paper revealed the coping strategies and experience of lecturers during the switch from the new normal due to COVID-19 to normal which is conventional face-to-face teaching. The two situations have left the lecturers and even students with many unprecedented experiences that have left indelible marks on academic exercise. Academics must incorporate the 4IR practices to be relevant. With or without COVID-19, there is a need for bridging the gap between global North and South with the use of sophisticated facilities. University lecturers should be flexible and ready for change at any time. Teaching and learning imply that the lecturer should think outside the box and leave their comfort zone, lecturers should undergo continuous professional teacher development (CPTD) regularly and practice blended approach pedagogy.

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