

Students' Online Learning Experience during the COVID-19 pandemic: A Case Study at Universiti Putra Malaysia

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Abstract: This study explores the lived experiences of students from one public university in Malaysia about online learning from home. This qualitative study aims to provide an analysis of students' personal experience in terms of the advantages and challenges of online learning during the national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected through students' blogs where they documented their expressions of their online learning experience for 12 weeks. Data were classified according to two main studied areas: advantages and challenges. Three themes emerged for advantages — flexible learning time, student-driven learning and positive learning opportunities while four themes emerged for challenges — poor internet connection, poor self-control, unconducive learning environment and feelings of helplessness and burden. The study provides some evidence that online learning is the best alternative during the ongoing crisis despite the challenges.

Keywords: Learning experience, online learning, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The sudden closure of all institutions of higher learning in Malaysia on 18 March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the lives of all students unexpectedly. This unprecedented move was taken to reduce the risk of infection transmission on campuses. To ensure continuity of lessons, all Malaysian higher institutions switched from the conventional face-to-face mode to fully online learning during the national lock-down otherwise known as the Movement Control Order (MCO).

Online learning at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) has been implemented more than 10 years ago where lessons are blended—students use online modalities to complete bite-size activities, take quizzes, receive course materials and submit assignments while being physically present in class with the course instructors. Given the worsening pandemic, UPM promptly responded by moving all blended learning lessons to be fully online. Face-to-face sessions were replaced with synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning. Given the aforesaid context, an unexpected opportunity for a case study arose when a blended learning undergraduate course — Educational Technology (FCE3401) was forced to go fully online just after two weeks of commencing the new semester. This opened up opportunities to the researchers who were also the FCE3401 course instructors to explore students' online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic when they were physically at home. The subjects of study are students enrolled in a teaching degree course at UPM.

2. Literature review

Recent studies related to online learning in the context of the COVID19 pandemic reveal students experience favourable yet challenging learning situations. Given the scenario where students learn online from home, they are no longer passive learners and instructors are no longer fully control of the class dynamics (Suliman, Abu-Moghli, Khalaf, Zumot & Nabolsi, 2021). Khalil et al. (2020) reported that students are receptive to the online modalities as they find online sessions to be time-saving which resulted in better performance. The study also found that students utilise the latest digital technologies for their online lessons which promote student-driven learning. Instruction through modern

technologies can be tailored to student needs by empowering them “to control their learning experience, including opportunities for repetition and deliberate practice with structured guidance” (Candler, 2007, p. 6). Video conferencing was preferred as students perceive it to be similar to face-to-face classes as it allows them to interact with their course instructors and provides them with nearness (Ramos-Morcillo, Leal-Costa, Moral-García, & Ruzafa-Martínez, 2020). Rizun and Strzelecki (2020) also reported the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness of technology was found to be predictors of students’ acceptance of shifting to distance online learning during the pandemic. At the same time, students were found to be quite favourable towards online learning as it enhances their productivity.

However, despite the aforementioned positive experience, the switch to fully online abruptly and unexpectedly has its challenges. The inequities of online resources have largely impacted low socioeconomic status students and those who live in rural areas from engaging in online learning effectively (Bdair, 2021). Poor and unstable internet connectivity disrupts learning — students face difficulties in attending online sessions, take quizzes and upload files (Suliman et al., 2021; Mahyoob, 2020). Noise and uncondusive learning environments also hinder students' online learning (Suliman et al., 2021). Lack of student interaction and feedback also restrain learning (Bdair, 2021). The lack of family support may also be detrimental to students learning online (Suliman et al, 2020).

3. Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is to explore the lived experiences of students about online learning from home. This qualitative study aims to provide an analysis of students’ personal experience in terms of the advantages and challenges of online learning during the first MCO in Malaysia that lasted from 18 March to 3 May 2020.

4. Course Description

Educational Technology (FCE3401) is a compulsory course for all Education major students. The course aims to provide students with fundamental knowledge and skills of educational technology. The students were exposed to a 2-hour lecture and a 3-hour laboratory session per week. In the lecture, students learned about the concepts, theories, principles, development and practices in educational technology. They also learned to evaluate instructional media. For the practical sessions, students learned to create instructional media. As mentioned early, lessons were conducted face-to-face for two weeks followed by fully online lessons for the remaining 12 weeks of the semester after MCO was enforced. Lectures were pre-recorded using the Loom app and shared with the students weekly and supplemented with interactions on Whatsapp and intermittent Zoom sessions. The practical sessions were conducted synchronously using GoogleMeet by following the original schedule before MCO.

5. Methods

5.1 Participants

A total of 36 Education major students participated in this study. At the time of data collection, they were in their fourth semester. All of them reported that they had no prior knowledge about educational technology before enrolling in the course.

5.2 Instrumentation and data collection

Blog text entries

Students documented their expressions of their online learning experience weekly throughout the remaining 12 weeks. Evidence was captured through a variety of materials such as text, videos and photographs. Only textual materials were utilised for this study. In other words, these personal expressions encapsulated their feelings and thoughts about learning online during the pandemic.

Data analysis

The first author reviewed rigorously all text entries in the students' weekly blog. Employing qualitative content analysis, the first author read and analysed the text to identify initial codes. All highlighted text was coded using the predetermined categories wherever possible. All the categories were then conflated into the relevant themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the second author was involved in further discussion with the first author until agreement was reached between the two concerning the coding of the text entries.

6. Results and Findings

Based on data comparisons and analysis, excerpts were identified for the two domains of the study—advantages and challenges. Three themes were identified for advantages and four themes for challenges.

Advantages

Flexible Learning Time

As the course instructors, we were aware that 30% of the students had poor Internet connections at home. To overcome this challenge, we pre-recorded our lectures, and students were given the link through WhatsApp to access every week. Students were able to access the video at their convenience. For example, students with a poor Internet connection could view the video recordings during off-peak hours. Two students said the following:

....for this course, the instructor had provided recorded lectures and uploaded the videos so that students with problematic Internet access could watch them at other times. I think this is a very good way so that they will not be left behind (Student # 3, AF).

I live in a very remote area at FELDA which is surrounded by forest and oil palm plantations. This makes it difficult for me to follow the online lessons. My instructor has taken a clever step by recording the lectures to ensure that those with poor Internet access can continue to learn (Student #27, NH)

Another student lamented about his poor Internet connectivity due to the bad weather but did not find it to be a major problem as he could rewatch the video recordings when the connectivity improved. He said that:

What I endure for FCE3401 during the pandemic is definitely the unsatisfactory Internet connectivity. This is due to the location and weather. I am using wifi at home and connectivity deteriorates when it rains. It is problematic when I am accessing the video recordings or when I am online for synchronous lessons. But it is not a difficult problem because I can rewatch the videos (Student #1, AF)

Student-driven learning

Students were able to reach a higher level of understanding of the lessons as they had better control of the learning environment. In other words, they had the opportunity to take learning into their own hands and gain better insights into the topic. The following excerpts reflect this:

Sometimes, there are topics that I do not understand. If I were in class, I could just ask my instructor. But learning by watching the video, I would repeat the video a few times so that I can understand better (Student #27, NH)

The experience gained while learning this course during the pandemic allowed me to be a self-directed learner. I could refer to the recordings for a better understanding.

For better reinforcement, other sources such as Youtube and related sites can be explored (Student #29, NS)

Positive learning opportunities

Several students also indicated that they unintentionally acquired new knowledge about digital technologies when their course instructor used such technologies to conduct their lessons. The following two excerpts captured the essence of their positive expressions:

During the MCO, my experience learning FCE3401 was through online. To do this, my instructor had used various platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, Whatsapp, Loom. In my opinion, this is the best method for now. Using these platforms was a new experience for me as I have never used them before. I have gained new knowledge through the use of online learning platform (Student #17, MAH)

My experience with technology during the pandemic is interesting. I got to know and use many apps for online learning. My relationship with technology has become closer but deteriorated with humans. Despite that, this experience is very valuable because it has made me a more patient person (Student#9, FNA).

Challenges

Poor Internet connection

Poor Internet connectivity was a major problem faced by a third of the students. These students complained that especially synchronous learning was always interrupted because of the poor Internet access.

The main issue is the weak internet connection since I live in a rural area. The wifi connection at home is always unpredictable and this makes it difficult to follow the online lessons (Student#2, AF).

My very big problem with learning online is technical issues. As an online student, I can access class wherever I have a connected device, but a strong internet connection is required. Low bandwidth and weak internet can affect how quickly I can connect and participate in class. It may be easy to find a free Wi-Fi location, but the quality of that internet connection may be spotty. If I need to immediately work on something, you'll need a fast connection (Student#5, EC).

Poor self-control

Others found it hard to focus as there were distractions when learning online at home. Some students admitted to neglecting their studies. The following excerpts give a glimpse of the distractions that students faced:

....when being at home, I would watch TV shows. I also like to cook and because of that many of my course assignments were not completed (Student #33, NAS)

...during the online class, instructors cannot see us. We tend to walk elsewhere and not be attentive in front of the laptop (Student #9, FNA).

The lack of interaction with instructors and other students hampered the learning process. One student complained that he lacked understanding of the subject matter given the one-way interaction. The following excerpts reflect the students' sentiments:

I don't have the opportunity to have face-to-face interaction with my instructor and friends. Online learning makes it hard to ask questions and discuss (Student #27, NHM).

Focusing on the lessons while being online is a great challenge. The chances of losing focus are high because I only face electronic gadgets. Being in such a condition makes me sleepy and I tend to do other things (Student #31, NA)

Unconducive learning environment

Students reported that the environment at home was not conducive to learning. One student said, "the place where I study is narrow and unsuitable for learning" (Student #3, AF). The same student also commented that it was uncomfortable to learn in a narrow space as compared to spacious lecture rooms on campus. The following excerpts describe the unconducive environments that students learn while at home:

My house has only one room. I don't have privacy during lessons. The place where I learn is near the television. It is impossible to focus. When I learn online, my family members will be walking about and this distracts me (Student #9, FNA)

My mother is a babysitter who takes care of five children. It is very noisy at home because the children fight all the time. I do not blame them as they are too young to understand anything. Studying is always disrupted because I need to watch over them too (Student #13, MIS)

Feelings of helplessness and burden

Students were also affected emotionally as they had to balance studies and family responsibilities at home. Being forced to learn from home added to their feelings of helplessness. They also felt burdened with the expectations of helping with the house chores. Being in such a conundrum provoked the following emotional responses:

My parents didn't understand about online learning. I was expected to help them do house chores. It was difficult for me to focus on my studies (Student #21, MA).

My family didn't fully understand my responsibility as a student and I was torn between my studies and my responsibility as the eldest daughter. I am often in a dilemma—which do I prioritise first, is it my studies or the house chores? I have younger siblings who are often noisy at home. Sometimes I lose focus on my studies and feel stressed out. I really miss being on campus where I could study calmly (Student #27, NHM).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored students' experience of online learning from the perspectives of advantages and challenges during the unexpected lock-down in one public university in Malaysia. Students in this study, showed mixed feelings when they were forced to learn online abruptly from home during the MCO. They were generally satisfied that learning fully online was the best alternative to ensuring continuity of lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were grateful for the flexibility in learning at their own pace. There was consensus among students that they could learn at their convenience from home. These results were supported by Bdair (2021) that online learning offers more flexibility than the conventional way of learning due to easy and frequent access to recorded lectures. With the opportunity to take learning into their own hands, students had better control of their learning thus making learning more student-driven. Students also acquired new digital skills when their instructors used various online platforms and apps to deliver their lessons. In other words, picking up new skills was inevitable to stay abreast with the online lessons. According to Suliman et al (2020), online learning experience motivates students to search and acquire new knowledge.

Students also faced challenges such as poor Internet coverage that hampered learning. Having to face such technical issues can lead to frustrations and harm learning (Tang, Wong & Wong, 2015). The lack of self-control along with being in unconducive learning environments were among other challenges at the outset of transition to online learning. Feeling helpless and needing to shoulder the burden of fulfilling their responsibilities as family members were seen as obstacles to engage in online learning. Unsupportive family members and their presence at home do to some extent disturb students' concentration to study (Suliman et al., 2020).

To conclude, online learning is the best alternative strategy with the discontinuance of in-class learning. The sudden shift to fully online learning ensures that learning continues with minimal disruptions. It was obvious that students lacked preparedness to learn fully online initially but they eventually managed to cope in some ways in the virtual environment.

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