

Crisis Education: Adapting To A ‘New Normal’ Method of Lecture Delivery Due To the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article spells out the experiences faced by the author, consequent on moving away from face-to-face teaching of English language to undergraduates and adapting to an online mode in a ‘new normal’ environment, which has been brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenges and experiences faced by the writer and the adaptations made, until undergraduates are given the green-light to attend lectures, are mentioned herein, with the hope of encouraging and providing others in a similar situation, a way out, when faced with such unexpected crises.

Keywords: *Online English education, COVID-19 pandemic, Crisis education*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century brought about the need for competencies that the future generations will need to display in a future economy, yet, there is another aspect of future-ready education that we need to address - education in times of crisis (Kidman and Chang, 2020). Thus it is important, in these times of global uncertainty, to focus on “crisis education” and examine how education is able to address the knowledge, skills and dispositions required for people in precarious times (Kidman and Chang, 2020).

The year 2020 has brought with it many challenges in every area of life both locally and globally, including the education and higher education sectors in Sri Lanka, with the COVID-19 pandemic bringing all operations and activities in schools and universities, to a grinding halt. In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of novel coronavirus infection, COVID-19, as a public health emergency of worldwide concern (World Health Organization, 2020a). The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a wide-reaching impact on the global population, international economy and health care and education systems. Whilst the spread of the virus has resulted in far-reaching consequences, the closure of schools and universities has led to the inventing of innovative methods of delivering education, ensuring that students continue to receive teaching, albeit different methods of modality (Sandhu and de Wolf, 2020).

The impact that the COVID-19 crisis created on education, caused the postponement of classes due to the lockdown, and a majority of colleges and universities are facing challenges with virtual learning (Talidong and Toquero, 2020). Face-to-face classes in both the education and higher education sectors were suspended, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made a considerable dent in the education sector in Sri Lanka from the third week in March, 2020, owing to its wide-angled impact on schools and universities. Due to the pandemic, all schools and universities were closed for almost three months due to the curfew and lockdown imposed by the Government of Sri Lanka. Similarly, governments around the world imposed curfews (Kotsamboukidis, 2020; SVT, 2020) to curtail the movements of people, in a bid to curb the spread of the virus. In many cases, the closure of these educational institutes came at a crucial juncture when end semester / term examinations were about to begin or in progress, thereby disrupting the conducting of examinations and the completion of syllabii. This crisis situation, caused by a tiny virus which was responsible for the global paralysis, forced education institutes to shift from face-to-face classroom environments to online teaching modes, in order to minimize the adverse effects that were causing the hindrance of the progress of education programmes.

Adjusting to the ‘New Normal’

From the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an emotional and psychological impact on individuals, due to the fears and concerns about the spread of the virus, which in turn led to increased levels of anxiety among peoples (Roy *et al.*, 2020). The closing of workplaces and educational institutions to avoid the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic led to many challenges. However, due to globalization and technological developments new work modes were implemented, which in turn provided opportunities in workplaces for participating in virtual teams (Cameron and Green, 2020), where people worked from home

without meeting face-to-face (Townsend *et al.*, 1998). Some studies state that prolonged school closures and home confinement might have negative effects on children's physical and mental health (Brazendale *et al.*, 2017). The "psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial and can be long-lasting" (Brooks *et al.*, 2020).

In the scenario of undergraduates being unable to attend lectures at their institutes of higher learning, and the COVID-19 pandemic causing challenging changes to the lifestyles of people, a 'new normal' to conduct lectures, came into being where there was a shift from face-to-face lecture delivery to the online mode of instruction. In the arena of education and higher education, the 'lecturing mode' pendulum swung from face-to-face delivery to the online platform. This posed challenges for certain courses taught at tertiary level in Sri Lankan universities, as courses were designed for face-to-face instruction, and there was a necessity for tutors to make suitable changes to these courses, in a short span of time, in order to adapt them to be appropriate and acceptable for online delivery.

The Academic Course

The course referred to in this article is a compulsory English course offered for first year Business undergraduates which is designed to inculcate basic business ethics and etiquette, and comprises of components such as telephoning skills, letter writing, report writing, essay writing, summary writing and presentation skills. This course is a training ground for undergraduates to hone their English language skills in the journey of becoming marketable management graduates in a competitive business environment. There are around 1200 undergraduates of mixed English language competency/ability in the English language, hailing from the length and breadth of Sri Lanka, who take this course. They are divided into groups of 45 in a class, when they follow face-to-face lectures, with the lecturer playing the role of facilitator. Lectures are conducted twice a week and each lecture lasts for a duration of 1 ½ hours, which includes input by the lecturer, and, activities and discussions done as group work. Undergraduates are provided with an opportunity for experiential learning (Lee, 2019).

However, owing to the inability of undergraduates to follow lectures at the university due to its closure, an online teaching methodology was adopted in conducting lectures. This proved unsuccessful owing to many reasons. Group and whole-class discussions were characterized by longer silences and shorter student responses, which was brought about by the large class size (as the online lecture was conducted for the entire undergraduate population of 1200) and undergraduates turning their cameras off due to privacy concerns, limiting paralinguistic communication (Peachey 2017).

Thus, with a view to engaging undergraduates despite the closure of universities, another approach was adopted to continue with academic activities and to educate students in the absence of attending face-to-face lectures. The online lectures which were in the form of 35 - 40 minute recorded videos that comprised of explanations by the lecturer, power point slides, course material and short video clips, were uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS) in order to enable communication out-of-class (Moorhouse, 2018). However, although the online option was explored, there were many hurdles that were impediments to the successful implementation of this course via the online platform. Live lessons through video conferencing or Zoom were not delivered, as some undergraduates had problems with internet connections, and were unable to access the internet from their homes situated in remote areas in the country; hence, there was a chance of dwindling numbers in attendance due to a plethora of reasons. Further, some undergraduates were unable to access computers and IT equipment such as mobile phones in their homes, as this equipment is in heavy demand from parents, children and relatives who have to work from home (Sahu, 2020). It was also learnt that there were undergraduates from poverty-stricken backgrounds who did not have access to laptops or other equipment to engage in online lectures (Sahu, 2020). Especially, countries that have limited technologies, also have problems in schools and universities, and are not ready for the complete implementation of the countrywide online education (Sintema, 2020). Results of different studies indicate that the virtual teaching environments can be successfully used in schools or higher education institutes, in case of having appropriate technical environment and support. It is a fact that the quality of online education is a critical issue that needs proper attention (Sahu, 2020). With this avalanche of problems facing 'online education,' eventually, online classes for the English language course module were suspended, and undergraduates were given the option to download the lesson material and videos which the author had uploaded on LMS, whenever they were able to gain access to internet connectivity, and at a time convenient to them. This, it is hoped, would reduce the anxiety and create a positive attitude in the minds of undergraduates, with regard to online education.

Challenges Faced

At the time of writing this article, the COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted the lives of many people across the world (Sahu, 2020). The world is still witnessing the unfolding of the global outbreak of the pandemic, and, from an educationist's perspective, the safety and well-being of students and staff of educational institutions should be given priority (Sahu, 2020) at this critical juncture. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are prompted to establish management approaches regarding pandemics to encourage positive health behavior among students (Akan *et al.*, 2010). The transition to the online mode has raised questions for the faculty about their capability to deal with the existing technology as some faculty who are not techno-savvy were not be able to cope up with this mode (THE., 2020).

Additionally, access to internet and digital resources is not uniform for all undergraduates. Thus it could be said that, the shift from face-to-face lecturing to the online platform has brought many challenges in the education and higher education sectors. The institution to which the author is attached, has postponed end semester examinations, which in turn has caused anxiety and wide-spread fears in the minds of undergraduates, that the pandemic and the uncertainties it has brought about, will affect their exam performance (Sahu, 2020) and employability, bringing about a serious impact on their careers. They may likely graduate late due to the postponement of the final examination. Further, graduates are going to face the severe challenges of global recession caused by the COVID-19 crisis (Sahu, 2020). This stress may lead to unfavorable effects on the learning and psychological health of students (Al-Rabiaahab *et al.*, 2020), (Shock, fear, and fatalism, 2020)

With the classroom curriculum evolving to online material delivered from lecturers' homes to undergraduate homes (Bowen, 2020), challenges are inevitable. The traditional classroom has been a common meeting place, bringing students from different economic and cultural backgrounds to a common, shared space. However, the introduction of online education shifts a significant portion of learning to the student's home (Kadrigamar and Thiruvarangan, 2020).

Online teaching excludes students who do not have the economic wherewithal to purchase the equipment necessary to connect with their peers and teachers, due to financial constraints, and those who experience electricity connection problems and undisrupted internet connectivity. Most working-class and low income families are struggling to find money to feed themselves, with many losing their jobs due to the COVID-19 lockdown, and, purchasing internet data for education is considered a luxury, which is termed as an extravagance. Additionally most undergraduates do not have a learning environment within their homes that is free of disturbance from other members of their families, and amidst these challenges, shifting to online education without putting the proper infrastructure in place may not be conducive for the learning process to take place (Kadrigamar and Thiruvarangan, 2020).

II. CONCLUSION

In these times of crisis attitudes and values towards new methods of lecture delivery have shown a distance-decay effect, with an event like the COVID-19 crossing borders in an increasingly mobile world, which could impact and challenge teaching efforts (Kidman and Chang, 2020). The quality of online education is a critical issue that needs proper attention, especially in times of crisis, such as we are experiencing today. The transition from face-to-face teaching to online delivery has a serious impact on all stakeholders, causing a sense of uncertainty and anxiety among university fraternity, inclusive of undergraduates (Sahu, 2020). Moving in the direction of online education in a crisis situation, such as is being experienced due to the pandemic, should be done by providing the equipment and connectivity and eliminating / minimizing the cost for both students and teachers. The shift to online education should not lead to aggravating the inequalities already entrenched in our educational settings (Kadrigamar and Thiruvarangan, 2020). The quality of the 'learning online technique' needs future study. Currently there was no time to get into the details of quality assurance of the online teaching method, as the main goal was to save the education process and continue it in any possible format (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). The teaching methodologies have to be studied and improved, including the available tools and platforms.

The course referred to in this article is still on-going and the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading globally and forcing class suspensions, with the only option available being, on-line instruction. The author is not arguing that the instructional approaches adopted would work for everyone, nor that there is evidence to their effectiveness (Moorhouse, 2020). More research is needed into on-line instructional replacements to face-to-face lessons. Additionally, all stakeholders in the arena of higher education must be adequately trained, and facilities provided, so they are prepared to deliver courses on-line in the event of health emergencies (Moorhouse, 2020).

The quality of teaching and learning online needs future study. Whilst there are benefits in moving from face-to-face learning, to online education, it is imperative to take into consideration many other factors to assess the success of the programmes conducted thus far. The current success of online teaching provides an initial insight into new and innovative ways of teaching (Sandhu and de Wolf, 2020). Hence it could be

concluded that, the time is right for faculty, students, and administrators to learn from this critical situation and to overcome these challenges. Online learning could be turned into a great opportunity to continue the uninterrupted education of students even during times of crises. University authorities should promote the online platform among undergraduates and faculty by providing the necessary accessories which will help in facilitating the successful online mode of lecture delivery to support academic continuity (Gewin, 2020). Training programmes should be organized as quickly as possible for faculty members to tackle the online learning platform (THE., 2020). This force experimentation will guide universities around the world to upgrade their technical infrastructure and make the online mode a core aspect of teaching and learning (Sahu, 2020). For educationalists, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed an essential challenge to find ways and means of adapting and transforming the education sector, in a way in which Sri Lanka has never known before, without proper guidance – truly a trial-and-error method of learning. With no pre-configured rule book that could guide both teachers and students through difficult times such as these, as the pandemic continues to run its course, it is important to provide the teachers and students with the necessary skills and mindset to meet the emerging educational needs.

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