

Transitioning to Online Teaching, Learning, and Assessment in the COVID-19 Era

Understanding Student and Faculty Perspectives

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Abstract

A great majority of teaching, learning, and assessment (TLA) in higher education in the Caribbean is premised on the traditional delivery of face-to-face TLA. In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) a pandemic and many Caribbean educators transitioned quickly to online TLA. In light of this transition, the current study examines the challenges, benefits, opportunities, and lessons learnt as a result of the sudden transition from face-to-face to online modes of TLA at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted and data collected from a cohort of postgraduate criminology and criminal justice students (n=20) and their lecturers (n=5) who transitioned from face-to-face to online TLA during Semester 2 of academic year 2019/2020. Thematic analyses of the data emanating from semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers indicated a multiplicity of challenges, benefits, new opportunities, and lessons learnt.

Keywords: information technology, digital education, TLA, COVID-19, higher education, The University of the West Indies

Introduction

Since the beginning of higher education, almost all Caribbean universities have utilised face-to-face teaching, learning, and assessment (TLA). For some researchers, face-to-face TLA is a traditional method of instruction (Jansen 2004) that is irreplaceable and the cornerstone of every learning institution (Liu and Long 2014; Nikoubakht, Yeilagh, and Kiamanesh 2019). However, the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) of 2020 upended the traditional face-to-face TLA and prompted educators at many Caribbean universities to adjust their teaching practices away from the traditional modality of face-to-face TLA.

A major component of this adjustment saw changes being made to pre-COVID-19 modes of pedagogical instruction which included an almost instantaneous departure from the well-entrenched face-to-face modality of TLA to online TLA. While online learning is not new to higher education (Loch and Borland 2014; Phillip and Cain 2015), the sudden transition from face-to-face to online TLA appeared to be difficult for many students and lecturers. This difficulty was due to the deeply entrenched nature of face-to-face TLA within the culture of tertiary level institutions in the Caribbean. Therefore, any mention of online TLA was generally frowned upon by both students and educators who have grown accustomed to face-to-face modes of educational instruction in the region.

Firmin (2008) emphasises that any form of transition involves challenges, whether it is the transition from employment to retirement, transition from one country to another, transition from secondary school to university or the transition from one mode of teaching and learning to another. Indeed, the transition from face-to-face TLA can be challenging for both faculty and students (Chiasson, Terras, and Smart 2015; Esani 2010; Martínez, Aguilar, and Ortiz 2020; McCaul et al. 2020; Phillip and Cain 2015; York, Yang, and Dark 2007). On the other hand, the transition can also be rewarding (Esani 2010) as well as intimidating for academicians (McCaul et al. 2020).

In some quarters, the term “emergency remote teaching (ERT)” is used to define the sudden shift away from face-to-face TLA (*see* Hodges et al. 2020) that was precipitated by the COVID-19 global pandemic. According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternative delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. ERT involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the

crisis or emergency has abated. In this study, the authors utilised the term “online TLA” and not ERT as there was no indication that the TLA that was conducted online due to COVID-19 was temporary or that it would return to the previously utilised face-to-face mode of delivery at the tertiary institution under inquiry.

Online TLA

There is no singular definition for online TLA. For instance, Yam and Rossinni (2011) point out that online learning is commonly known as “web-based instruction”, “e-learning” or “distance learning”, while Dhawan (2020) opines that online learning refers to learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices (mobile phones, laptops, etc.) with internet access. In a similar vein, Cojocariu et al. (2014) assert that online TLA means online learning, open learning, web-based learning, computer-mediated learning, blended learning, and m-learning and they all have in common the ability to use a computer connected to a network with the possibility to learn from anywhere, anytime, in any rhythm, and with any means. Instructively, Anderson (2016) and Mpungose (2020) submit that e-learning education that takes place over the internet, alternatively called online learning, is an umbrella term for any learning that takes place across distance that incorporates websites into programmes by universities by providing study materials, having podcasts for students to access at their own convenience, the use of emails and discussion boards for in-depth communication, and the submission and return of assignments and feedback. Figure 1 provides a continuum of online learning, while figure 2 provides a pictorial of online TLA as utilised at The UWI, St. Augustine.

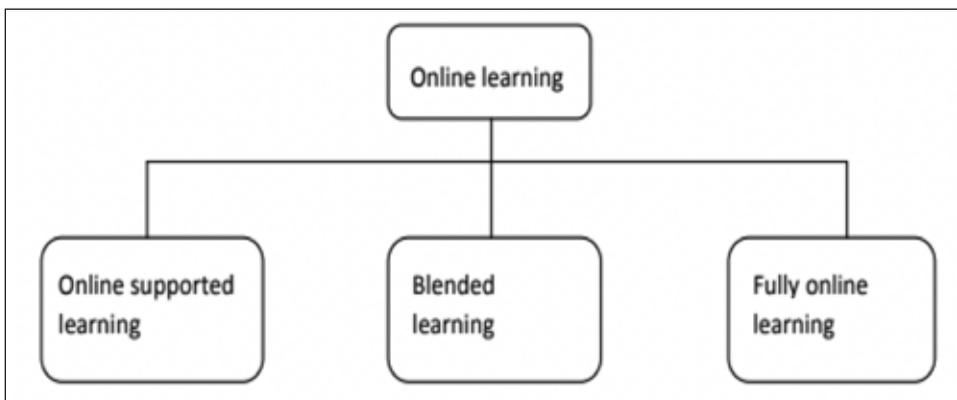


Figure 1. A continuum of online learning.
 Source: Adapted from Garrison and Kanuka (2004, 97).

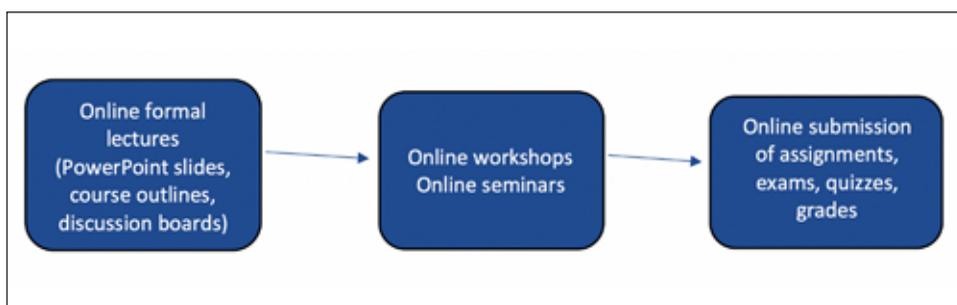


Figure 2. Course delivery of online TLA at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

Source: Fieldwork, 2020.

As a result of the sudden or enhanced digitisation of higher education (online courses, online exams, animation, facilitation of online library usage and digital textbooks) at The UWI, St. Augustine campus due to the COVID-19 virus, conversations about higher education post-COVID-19 are plentiful as scholars are increasingly monitoring, researching, and evaluating changes to the established university TLA pedagogy. The authors of this article propose that such scholarship is needed in order to understand how assumptions about traditional face-to-face TLA in the Caribbean are being challenged by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also important to gain a fuller understanding of the impacts of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA on the well-being of students and lecturers, as well as on the academic development of students.

In sum, the present study aims to understand the lived and self-reported experiences of students and lecturers in a postgraduate criminology and criminal justice programme at a tertiary institution in Trinidad and Tobago after the transition from face-to-face TLA to online TLA. While there is much research on this transition in other jurisdictions (Chiasson, Terras, and Smart 2015; Gloria and Uttal 2020; Lockyer et al. 2006; Mpungose 2020; York, Yang, and Dark 2007), little is known about this phenomenon in the Caribbean (*see* Oyedotun 2020; Phillip and Cain 2015 as exceptions). As a result of this gap, a qualitative research design was adopted to explore the phenomenon in Trinidad and Tobago. Willis (2007) posits that the qualitative methodology is useful for exploring concepts when there is little available published literature on the issue under inquiry, while Kvale (2007) argues that this method allows for the gathering of thick-descriptions of the phenomenon under inquiry.

The study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1. What were the major challenges that students and lecturers faced as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?

RQ2. What were the major benefits that accrued to students and lecturers as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?

RQ3. What new opportunities were presented to students and their lecturers as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?

RQ4. What were the lessons learnt by students and lecturers as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?

Background

On 11 March 2020, the WHO (2020) declared COVID-19 a pandemic and people were advised to avoid close contact with persons displaying symptoms of the virus. Therefore, universities across the globe were forced to restrict staff and student access to their physical infrastructures. In the context of Trinidad and Tobago, the Prime Minister, Dr Keith C. Rowley, began implementing precautionary procedures that included social distancing and a ban on large public gatherings. The Prime Minister also called on all teaching institutions to suspend their usual face-to-face activities and find alternative ways to offer teaching and learning. The result of the government's directive was that face-to-face lectures became an instant impossibility and online TLA became an immediate initiative for the delivery of TLA. By mid-March 2020, almost all institutions of learning (kindergarten, primary, secondary, technical, and university) in Trinidad and Tobago were faced with the monumental task of converting the traditional and well-embedded method of TLA in brick-and-mortar establishments to TLA via online platforms. This monumental task impacted institutions of higher education, including lecturers and their students at The UWI, St. Augustine campus, as they were faced with the task of suddenly transitioning from face-to-face to online modes of TLA without any advance warning and little to no preparation.

Lecturers and students were also faced with the instantaneous task of learning how to use new technologies such as Microsoft Teams, BlackBoard Collaborate and Zoom in furtherance of their TLA. Further, online academic advising, online office hours, online attendance at official university meetings and online responses to student queries quickly became the “new normal”. While admin-

istrative and academic staff and students came together to ensure that students' education continued, the effort was not without significant challenges. Indeed, many students and lecturers were faced with challenges including, but not limited to, technologically diverse students, unfamiliarity with online platforms, poor internet bandwidth, lack of training, lack of infrastructure to work online, limited internet access, shared laptops at home and in some instances, a total lack of internet connectivity. Importantly, the transition from face-to-face to online TLA also provided opportunities for all stakeholders in education at The UWI, St. Augustine. Instructively, online TLA was already being used in the education system in Trinidad and Tobago (*see Phillip and Cain 2015 for support*), however, it was sporadic as almost all TLA at universities and colleges in the country had been utilising the deeply entrenched system of face-to-face instruction.

The Study

The study was conducted as a result of the discomfiture that was observed by the primary researcher among students and lecturers in the general population at The UWI, St. Augustine as a result of the sudden transition from face-to-face TLA. Further, as The UWI, St. Augustine began embracing online TLA as a method of ensuring continuity of its TLA, it was important to gain an understanding of the perspectives of students and their lecturers as they transitioned to online pedagogies (*see Redmond 2011 for support*). Additionally, research into student and lecturer attitudes towards online TLA is important in order to determine whether the digitisation of education was beneficial to both groups (Wong and Fong 2014).

The current research effort is educationally significant as well as aligned to the theme of this issue of the *Quality Education Forum* ("Navigating Higher Education in a Pandemic: Teaching and Assessment in the Time of COVID-19 and Beyond") as the authors of this article sought to gain an understanding of the processes employed by students and lecturers as they transitioned from face-to-face to online TLA during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is also significant and relevant to the Caribbean region as there are long-term ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic for contemporary pedagogy in higher education and these ramifications will only be highlighted by empirical research, such as the current one.

This research is also significant as it highlights the functionality of The UWI

during a period of epidemic and seeks to highlight what should be prioritised or conversely, allowed to lapse within the institution as this may hold the key to the sustainability of the institution in the future. The significance of this article should not be underestimated as the study adds to the limited body of scholarly literature on the issue in the Caribbean. Further, the findings, though limited in generalisability, offer insights into TLA in the COVID-19 era, highlights efforts at transitioning to online TLA by a sample of students and lecturers, and can be utilised to proactively plan for similar pandemic events in the future.

In conceptualising the study, the researchers selected postgraduate rather than undergraduate students, as there is a general perception among graduate students that “online education does not provide a desired deeper level of learning or sufficient instructional forethought and planning” (Martínez, Aguilar, and Ortiz 2020, 2). This study is descriptive and does not seek relationships between variables as its contribution to knowledge was constructed within the methodological aperçu of Park and Burgess (1921) that focuses on illuminating phenomena, rather than pursuing generalisability and hypothesis testing.

Review of Literature

Globally, there is an acceptance of online education as a major and viable component of higher education (Allen and Seaman 2016), however, the transition to online TLA from a traditional face-to-face approach challenges the expectations and roles of both instructors and learners (Redmond 2011). Quite notably, online TLA is not without challenges (Dhawan 2020; Esani 2010; Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, and Santiago 2017; Martínez, Aguilar, and Ortiz 2020; Yang and Cornelious 2005) as well as rewards for lecturers and students (Esani 2010).

According to Esani (2010, 187), “Transitioning from on-campus to online teaching brings about some challenges and surprises.” These challenges are premised on notions that “Online students may require constant feedback and clarifications on difficult concepts which can be very time consuming for the faculty” (Esani 2010, 187) and that students usually prefer to take difficult or important courses face-to-face, instead of online (Jaggars 2014). Challenges associated with transitioning from face-to-face TLA to online TLA are encapsulated in a study by Phillip and Cain (2015) in Trinidad and Tobago. The findings from that study reveal that some educators experienced challenges in negotiating the online environment, as well as a lack of student engagement. The study also found that

the transition to online TLA was challenging as it contested the identities of the educators, their classroom practices, and their power relations in the virtual classrooms. The transition to online TLA also has other difficulties. For example, the teaching methodology has to be adapted and new resources put in place (Martinez et al. 2020).

It is also challenging to create a sense of social presence to ensure that students feel they are a key component in the learning environment (Esani 2010). Managing student participation and interaction is also a difficult task for educators engaged in online TLA (Phillip and Cain 2015). Challenges associated with the transition from face-to-face to online TLA as well as with online TLA, are not restricted to any one group, but impact students, lecturers, and the academic institution. For example, Dhawan (2020) points out that online learning presents many challenges including students' issues, educators' issues, and content issues, as well as engaging students and making them participate in the teaching and learning process. In a similar vein, Priluck (2004) posits that first-time, full-time students find it difficult to manage and successfully complete online courses.

Recent scholarship on the introduction of online TLA has also indicated that there are challenges associated with the online experiences of students. This includes students' preference for face-to-face forms of educational experience as they value the social interaction and the communication skills acquired from the classroom environment (Marriott, Marriott, and Selwyn 2004), decreased social contact and the potential isolation of learning on their own (Wong and Fong 2014), student's preference for traditional styles of teaching (Osgerby 2013) and technological difficulties experienced (Smith and Greene 2013).

As it relates to benefits associated with online TLA, an Australian study on the transition from face-to-face to online teaching found that online teaching enabled educators and students to participate in teaching and learning at a time and place that was convenient to them (Redmond 2011). Similarly, other studies by Arbaugh et al. (2009) and de los Santos (2018) submit that online teaching offers some benefits to faculty and students. In a similar vein, Djenic, Krneta, and Mitic (2011) argue that online learning is beneficial for students who cannot regularly attend classes.

Apart from the challenges and benefits of moving from face-to-face to online TLA, opportunities abound for both students and their lecturers as the environment facilitates the provision of meaningful and engaging learning experiences for students (Dhawan 2020). Instructively, Dhawan (2020) points out that online

learning generally has a lot of available opportunities. For example, it allows a boom in learning for academic institutions that have switched to online models of TLA. However, Chickering and Gamson (1987) submit that such opportunities for learning should be guided by sound principles. Importantly, it is argued that the principles can be applied to both online and face-to-face TLA, however, they are more critical in online environments. According to Chickering and Gamson (1987) these principles are student-faculty contact, student-student collaboration, active learning, prompt feedback, focus on time on task, communication of high expectations, and respect for diverse abilities.

Methods and Materials

A qualitative approach using phenomenology was used in this study to gain an understanding of how students and their lecturers transitioned from face-to-face to online TLA. Phenomenology focuses on the lived experiences of participants and aims to amalgamate individual experiences into commonalities (Creswell 2013). In light of Creswell's postulation, the narratives of this study's participants were examined in order to discover common experiences.

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the transition, participants for the study were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling facilitates the selection of appropriate participants which allow researchers to discover, understand, and gain insights into the phenomenon under study (Devers and Frankel 2000; Merriam 2009) by selecting participants from sites due to the specific characteristics of the selected individuals or groups' experience(s) of the phenomena under study (Devers and Frankel 2000). In this study, the selected individuals were students and their lecturers in a postgraduate programme at The UWI, St. Augustine campus who transitioned from face-to-face TLA to online TLA in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve the study's objectives, data were collected from a cohort of postgraduate criminology and criminal justice students (n=20) and their lecturers (n=5) who transitioned from face-to-face to online TLA during academic year 2019/2020 at The UWI, St. Augustine. The researchers contacted thirty individuals via email and telephone calls to schedule interviews for the present study; however, twenty-five persons participated in the study. After twenty students were interviewed, saturation was achieved (Bowen 2008). This meant that adding new students would no longer result in new codes being applied to the data and

there was a real possibility that no new themes would emerge from the study. Therefore, the researchers concluded that the sample size for the students was adequate for purpose and design. This position is compatible with that of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) and Neuman (2006) in reporting on research saturation in qualitative studies.

Data Collection

Data were collected by the four researchers through recorded semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews sought to determine challenges, benefits, opportunities, and lessons learnt as a result of the transition to online TLA. As the research was conducted during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent lockdown and social distancing practices, several of the study's participants felt uncomfortable to conduct the semi-structured interview on a face-to-face basis. As a result, a great majority of the interviews were conducted over the telephone and via email.

A semi-structured interview sheet containing twenty open-ended questions guided the data collection process. The semi-structured interview schedule was created by the researchers using research questions and current literature in the field (for example, Dhawan 2020; Esani 2010; Gloria and Uttal 2020; Loch and Borland 2014; Martínez, Aguilar, and Ortiz 2020). The semi-structured interview sheet was pilot tested at a tertiary institution in Trinidad and Tobago with eight postgraduate students and two lecturers who had experienced a similar transition from face-to-face to online TLA. Minor typographical errors, repeat and difficult to understand questions were detected and altered. Two experts in qualitative methodology reviewed the semi-structured interview sheet to ensure that it was free from personal bias and was thus valid. Importantly, both independent experts found the instrument to be clear and free from bias.

The questions to the students and their lecturers were generally the same with the exception of demographic questions and a few questions that were specific to lecturers and students. Questions on the interview schedule included, but were not limited to:

1. At the university where you completed your undergraduate degree, what percentage of lectures (teaching) were conducted face-to-face?
2. What are some of the challenges you experienced as a student transitioning from face-to-face classroom TLA to online TLA?

3. What are some of the benefits you experienced as a student transitioning from face-to-face classroom TLA to online TLA?
4. What are some of the challenges you experienced as a lecturer transitioning from face-to-face classroom TLA to online TLA?

As the interviews were semi-structured, this allowed the researchers great flexibility in allowing the participants to narrate their experiences while allowing the researchers to probe deeper for answers to partially answered questions.

Before the data collection began, the nature and purpose of the research were explained to participants and informed consent sought before conducting the interviews. The participants were informed of confidentiality, anonymity, and protection of their rights as participants in the study. They were also informed that there were no right or wrong answers and they would not be judged by their responses. Participants were also informed that if at any time during the interview they felt overwhelmed, they should notify the interviewers and take a break or end the interview without any penalty. The interviews were recorded by the primary and secondary researchers and transcribed by the primary researcher with assistance from the secondary researchers when areas needed clarity. In this study, the researchers sought to protect the identity of the participants and assigned numbers to each participant for coding purposes. Further, in reporting the data, pseudonyms are utilised and not names or identifying features of the participants.

Whether research is conducted using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods, validity and reliability must be addressed. In the context of qualitative research, Creswell and Miller (2000) provide a basic framework of approaches to assess validity and reliability and have recommended that in undertaking and analysing qualitative studies, researchers should engage in at least two different validity procedures. The authors of this scholarly article heeded the view of Creswell and Miller (2000) and utilised three different validity procedures, namely: (1) disconfirming evidence, (2) peer debriefing, and (3) the peer review process.

Throughout the data analysis processes, peer debriefing was used. Peer debriefing entails reviewing the data and findings with individuals who are familiar with the study as well as the concepts being investigated. In this study, peer debriefing was conducted by the primary researcher and occurred with individuals from The UWI and the University of the Southern Caribbean. Additionally, the primary researcher conducted a search for disconfirming evidence on the narratives that

emanated from the semi-structured interviews. As the main themes developed, the primary researcher searched the data for evidence that contradicted them in order to ensure that disconfirming evidence did not outweigh the main themes. Another key strategy employed in this study to establish trustworthiness and credibility of the findings was the peer review process. Using the peer review process, the primary researcher analyzed the transcripts, however, an independent researcher reviewed the transcripts for comparisons, discussed the codes that were assigned to the data, and checked the emerging categories to ensure that they were correct.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved coding the data, comparing the codes, and grouping similar or related codes to form categories. It was a continuous, iterative process in which the codes and categories generated were constantly reviewed and refined. A guide developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to conduct the thematic analysis on the data collected. Data elicitation of textual comments emanating from the participants' narratives was conducted in order to seek out similar themes. Using this analytical approach, the data were coded and this identified patterns and themes regarding participants' perspectives on the transition from face-to-face to online TLA. After data elicitation was conducted on the transcripts, several themes emerged. These themes were identified and categorised, and codes were developed within each theme. The primary researcher also classified patterns between categories with the aid of axial coding where thematic analysis procedures were used, followed by a presentation and interpretation of the results. The study utilised open coding, employing an inductive method (Maxwell 2005) and this meant that before coding began, the researchers did not have pre-established codes, rather, the participants' narratives were assessed for recurring words, thoughts and ideas before arranging them under themes.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study were gleaned from the data emanating from semi-structured interviews that were conducted with postgraduate students (n=20) in a criminology programme and their lecturers (n=5) at The UWI, St. Augustine. The results are presented in a manner that highlights the perspectives of both

lecturers and students. The researchers also answer the research questions and provide the major themes that emanated from the narratives of the participants. As the study was qualitative in nature, several participant quotes have been used and this is aimed at illuminating the voice of the participants.

The participants

The five lecturers assigned to the postgraduate programme in criminology and criminal justice at the tertiary institution under inquiry participated in the study. The lecturers included four males and one female, two were part-time and three were full-time lecturers on the programme with an average of 12.7 years of lecturing experience. From the cohort of students, there were seven males and thirteen females who ranged in age from twenty-three to forty-four years, with an average age of 32.7 years. Fourteen of the student participants were part-time students, while six were full-time students.

Answering the research questions

As it relates to RQ1: “What were the major challenges that students and lecturers faced as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?”, the lecturers indicated the following challenges: lack of a faculty policy, safety issues (due to being on campus late to conduct lectures), lack of familiarity with online technologies, inadequate internet signals, student logging into lectures and being physically absent, lack of student participation, power outages, lack of internet at times, external noises and distractions when lecturing from home and inappropriate comments made by students when their microphones are not muted. The challenges experienced by the lecturers are consistent with the findings of previous studies, for example, on students’ lack of participation in online lectures (Lockyer et al. 2006; Phillip and Cain 2015; Shen et al. 2009). However, the major challenge faced by lecturers as a result of the transition to online TLA was inadequate internet connectivity to conduct their teaching tasks.

The students’ challenges included poor internet connectivity, lack of interaction with lecturers, distractions at home/work, background noise/interference, unfamiliarity with online platforms, lack of student engagement/group activities/discussions, demanding occurrences at home, distorted audio-recordings and The UWI administration not catering to the needs of students with disabilities.

However, the three major challenges that students faced as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA were: (1) lack of interaction with lecturers, (2) poor internet connectivity, and (3) distractions at home/work. The lack of interaction was evinced by Participant #6 who asserted: “Being a mature student working during the day and having classes in the evening, even though I may feel tired during face-to-face classes, I am surrounded by classmates and my lecturer. However, being at home it is easier to drift off [lose focus] due to lack of in-class interactions.”

The challenges faced by students are aligned with past research by Dhawan (2020), Esani (2010), Oyedotun (2020), and Sutton (2020) who articulated a plethora of challenges for student participants of online TLA including, but not limited to, digital inequalities, distractions at home and lack of interactions with lecturers and student colleagues.

In answering RQ2: “What were the major benefits that accrued to students and lecturers as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?”, the lecturers’ responses were wide and varied. The participants indicated the following benefits: working from home, not commuting to lectures, increased experience with online TLA, flexibility and innovation in lecturing, reaching students beyond the local and restrictive borders, gaining greater confidence as a new lecturer as there is less pressure from students when online compared to face-to-face and efficient use of time. However, the lecturers indicated that the major benefit that accrued to them as a result of the transition from face-to-face TLA to online TLA was learning the usage of different technologies and platforms for lecturing, for example, Zoom, BlackBoard Collaborate and Microsoft Teams.

The student participants indicated that the major benefits that accrued to them as a result of the transition from face-to-face TLA to online TLA were many and included: flexibility, convenience, time saving, cost efficiency, the ability to multi-task, not having to leave work early to attend lectures and less stress as a result of not having the burden of traffic. However, for thirteen of the students, (1) convenience, (2) flexibility, and (3) cost efficiency/time saving were the top three benefits that accrued to the students as a result of not having to be physically present in a face-to-face lecture. Student participant #3 articulated the following view: “The convenience of not having to leave my home to go to class was a major benefit”, while student participant #5 opined: “I can access classes from the comfort of my home or office.” In a similar vein, student participant #7 asserted: “I do not have to spend money to travel from Tobago to Trinidad to attend class”, while

student participant #2 stated: “My gas bill decreased, the cost of transportation was reduced and my overall auxiliary expenses were reduced.” This finding is supported by the research of Oyedotun (2020) as well as the Online Education Trends Report (2020) which found that convenience and flexibility are benefits that accrue to students using online programmes rather than being on campus.

In response to RQ3: “What new opportunities were presented to students and their lecturers as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?”, the lecturers indicated that new opportunities were presented to them as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the move away from the well-enmeshed and ever present face-to-face TLA of their pedagogical praxis at the university. New opportunities were presented to participant lecturers and this included the following: increased engagement with stakeholders, the provision of training and development opportunities related to online platforms, a wider array of approaches to lecturing, working from home, and the remote management of resources. The five lecturers indicated that the main new opportunity that was presented to them was the provision of training opportunities about online TLA platforms. The lecturers’ position regarding new opportunities as a result of the transition to online TLA is supported by previous research by Mpungose (2020a) and Oyedotun (2020).

The majority of the students (n=11) indicated that no new opportunities were presented or accrued to them as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA. Many of the students indicated that they were familiar with online platforms and as such this was not new to them. This finding is in stark contrast to Dhawan’s (2020) finding that online TLA generally has a lot of available and new opportunities for students, lecturers, and academic institutions. From the limited positive responses garnered from the other student participants, the top three new opportunities that were presented to students included: (1) the opportunity to conduct more research due to the extra spare time given, (2) the opportunity to complete assignments while lectures were in progress, and (3) privacy, viz-à-viz, the opportunity to learn in their own spaces.

The final research question investigated “What were the lessons learnt by students and lecturers as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA?” The lecturers indicated that they learnt a host of lessons including the need for flexibility as lecturers, patience in dealing with technology, and the limitedness of resources for students (lack of resources such as computers and internet), however, the major lesson learnt by lecturers was the limitedness of resources for students. In response to RQ #4, the students indicated that they

learnt a plethora of lessons due to the transition from face-to-face to online TLA. The lessons learnt by the students included: patience, adaptation, self-motivation, time management, self-accountability and the use of technology. For the majority of these students, the major lessons learnt were: (1) adaptation, (2) self-motivation, and (3) self-accountability. These lessons were encapsulated in the words of participant #20 who asserted: “As a postgraduate student you have to be open to change, manage your time efficiently, be self-accountable and most important, possess the ability to motivate yourself. I heard some of those things in academic advising, but the change to online cemented it for me.”

Main themes – Lecturers

The researchers created themes that emanated from the participants’ narratives, however, only the three top themes that emerged from both datasets (students and lecturers) will be presented. The discussion begins with the main themes that emanated from the narratives of the lecturers.

Theme 1: Training

Sub-theme – The provision of training on the usage of online technologies

Throughout the interviews, the five participants spoke overwhelmingly about the need for training of faculty on the use of online TLA platforms. In fact, this was a common thread running through the length and breadth of the participant interviews. For example, participant #4 stated: “The training provided by the university gave me the opportunity to learn a lot about available online technologies for teaching/learning as well as how to interact online and use online assessments.” In a similar vein, it was noted that “COVID-19 at The UWI provided me with training in the usage of online teaching, learning and assessment platforms” (participant #3) and “there should be greater exposure of lecturers to training on the usage of online technologies” (participant #5).

Theme 2: Increased Experiences with the Use of Online Resources

The second most prevalent theme emanating from the lecturers’ narratives was the increased experience with online TLA. Four of the participants indicated that as a result of the transition to online TLA they now have greater exposure and more experience with online TLA when compared to what existed pre-COVID-19 and

that it enhanced student learning. For example, participant #2 submitted: “The transition to online TLA has caused an increase in my experience with online teaching and learning”, while participant #4 stated: “All of my lectures were done using in-class format lecturing and if I had an urgent appointment, I would cancel my lectures, however, in this new dispensation, I can be anywhere and conduct my lectures. Thanks to the pandemic and the move to online teaching, I now have much more experience with online teaching than what I had before – zero.” These findings are complemented by researchers Mpungose (2020b) and Selwyn and Stirling (2016).

Theme 3: Interaction with Students

The third most prevalent theme that emanated from the participants’ narratives was interaction with students and this was espoused by participants #1, 3, and 4. According to participant #1: “I prefer face-to-face lectures as there is [sic] greater levels of interaction with students. It is individualised. You place a face to a name, rather than seeing someone behind a screen. Also, you actually get to read the body-language and emotions of students when they say they understand and do not understand.” Participant #3 submitted: “I like the interactive setting of the classroom. I think it is a better way to interact, engage, and develop better relationships with students.” Similarly, participant #4 stated: “COVID-19 has reduced face-to-face meetings with my students, however, postgraduate teaching requires greater student engagement and interaction, especially with some of the more difficult courses.”

Main themes – Students

Three main themes emanated from the narratives of the students. These are discussed below.

Theme 1: Convenience

Throughout the interviews, the students spoke glowingly about the convenience of online TLA and the fact that they can learn, attend lectures, and conduct assessments from the comfort of their homes and offices. While the students outlined numerous challenges they faced, convenience was the most common thread running throughout the length and breadth of the interviews. The element

of convenience was succinctly captured by student participant #18 who asserted: “The convenience and comfort of not leaving your home [to attend lectures] is great. I’m in New York, I have taught classes, I could attend from anywhere in the world.”

Theme 2: Interactivity

Interacting with lecturers and their peers was a major concern for an overwhelming majority of the participants (n=15). As the students were accustomed to face-to-face lectures, the lack of interaction and social presence was highlighted in the narratives of fifteen students who indicated that they missed the high level of interactivity offered by face-to-face TLA when compared to the present system of online TLA as a result of transitioning from face-to-face to online pedagogy.

Sub-theme 1 – Lack of Interaction

A majority of students (n=13) spoke to the lack of physical interaction with their peers and lecturers as a result of the current online TLA. Academic literature and research have confirmed the importance of student interaction with their lecturers in the educational process (Anderson et al. 2001; Garrison 2009; Garrison and Anderson 2003; Muirhead 2001), however, online TLA does not facilitate frequent and/or substantive interactions with lecturers and classmates. According to Bennett, Priest, and Macpherson (1999) and Phillip and Cain (2015) this lack of deep interaction is a common problem that afflicts online TLA and the student participants in the current study indicated this in their narratives. Instructively, this lack of student interaction with lecturers (and their classmates) is highlighted by the Community of Inquiry (COI) theoretical framework as espoused by Garrison and Anderson (2003) and which reflects a collaborative-constructivist approach to learning (see figure 3).

Sub-theme 2 – Social Presence

A great majority of student participants (n=13) submitted that the sudden transition to online TLA hampered their educational experience, to wit, their student-to-student interaction and concomitantly, caused a lack of social presence. Indeed, for students, non-interaction facilitates a lack of physical and face-to-face contact and leads to feelings of isolation or lack of social presence (Leh 2001) and this was evident in the student narratives. Shin (2002, 22) points out that social presence is the “sense of being in and belonging in a course and the ability to

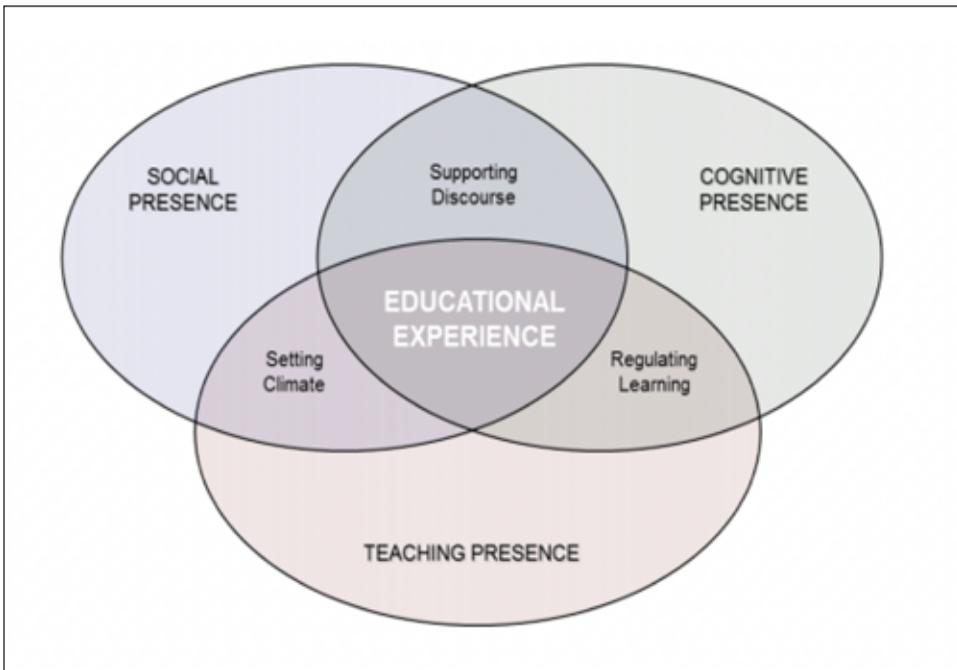


Figure 3. Community of Inquiry model.

Source: Garrison and Anderson, 2003.

interact with other students and an instructor although physical contact is not available” (see Esani 2010 for support), while Danchak, Walther, and Swan (2001, 1) submit that presence refers to the “involvement, warmth, and immediacy” that students experience during communication and interaction with their peers during online TLA. The importance of social presence in education is highlighted by the Community of Inquiry (COI) theoretical framework as espoused by Garrison and Anderson (2003) (see figure 3).

Theme 3: Challenges

The narratives of the student participants indicated that a little more than half of them were faced with numerous challenges as a result of the transition from face-to-face to online TLA. Participant #19 had this to say: “Some of my classmates may not say we had challenges or they may try to downplay it, but I had real challenges, from bad internet and students in the lecture with their microphones on, to distractions at home, problems logging into Zoom, and not being able to interact with my lecturers to get quick feedback, I had it all.” This position

is complemented by Esani (2010), Chiasson et al. (2015), Mpungose (2020a) as well as by York et al. (2007) who posit that although online education offers convenience and flexibility for learners, there are numerous challenges associated with online TLA.

Lecturers' Perspectives

Three lecturers indicated that between March 2019 and March 2020, 76–100 per cent of their lectures were conducted face-to-face, while the other two lecturers submitted that 51–75 per cent of their lectures were conducted using face-to-face pedagogy during the aforementioned period. The participants pointed out that the face-to-face approach was utilised as this was the established and entrenched mode of teaching and learning at the institution. When asked why lectures were generally conducted using the face-to-face approach, participant #1 responded in the following manner: “That is the institutional way of lecturing, though some lecturers are taught to use blended and online learning when attending training in lecturing at The UWI [Certificate in University Teaching and Learning].”

Three of the lecturers preferred face-to-face to online teaching and the other two expressed their preference for online teaching. In response to the question regarding the preference of face-to-face versus online TLA, participants #1 and #3 responded in the following manner: “I prefer face-to-face lectures as there are greater levels of interaction with students. It is individualised. You place a face to a name, rather than seeing someone behind a screen. Also, you actually get to read the body language and emotions of students when they say they understand and do not understand” (participant #1), and “I like the interactive setting of the classroom. I think it is a better way to engage and develop better relationships with students” (participant #3).

A key question that was posed to the lecturers sought to gauge their views on the nature of the response by the administration at The UWI, St. Augustine as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lecturers appeared hesitant to answer this question, however when probed, there was a general consensus that The UWI's response was generally professional and empathetic (though weak in a few areas). Participant #3 stated: “While experiencing challenges, the administration was effective in providing staff with the necessary training. They also made some of the university's resources available online. Furthermore, they adapted to the requirements of the Ministry of Health COVID-19 guidelines.” In a similar vein,

participant #4 opined: “At first, response from administration was a bit pithy, however, they quickly grasped the severity of the situation and a raft of advisories and communiqués were frequently sent to both staff and students advising them on their health and well-being.”

The lecturers were questioned on their preferred mode of teaching instruction if the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions were relaxed and the University returns to normalcy. Four of the lecturers indicated that they would prefer to utilise a combination of face-to-face and online TLA, while one lecturer indicated a preference for online TLA. Another question sought to elicit from the lecturers whether and how the administration at The UWI, St. Augustine could have better assisted faculty members to improve the transition from face-to-face TLA to online TLA. This question elicited a range of responses, however, a common thread running through the responses was the provision of training in online tools and equipping staff with the necessary resources to conduct their teaching tasks, such as headsets, cameras, and speakers. The following words were used to describe lecturers’ experience of transitioning from face-to-face TLA to online TLA: exciting, innovative, positive, tough, and easy.

Students’ Perspectives

Seventeen of the students indicated that between March 2019 and March 2020, 76–100 per cent of their lectures were conducted using face-to-face modalities. When asked for their thoughts on the rationale for the dominance of this method of TLA, the general response was that this was the traditional, established norm of TLA at The UWI, St. Augustine campus and that the lecturers had grown used to this method, hence they were not technologically savvy nor familiar with online platforms and procedures. As it relates to students’ preference for face-to-face or online teaching and assessment, seventeen students indicated their preference for face-to-face teaching, fourteen of the twenty students had a preference for face-to-face final examinations, four preferred online final examinations and two of the students indicated that they held no preference for either method.

As it relates to the mode of final examination, student participant #12 posited: “There is always the risk of connectivity issues in online examinations. Face-to-face final examinations also takes away the distraction factor.” Moreover, student participant #9 confirmed this in the following manner: “It is impossible to experience technical difficulties in face-to-face final examinations.” On the

other hand, student participant #15 asserted: “Face-to-face final examinations ensure that I study and capture all the information taught to me for the entire semester and this helped me remember by learning/studying for exams. I am not motivated to study for online examinations and the information is not stuck in my brain because I can Google my answers for online exams.”

Fifteen students proffered the view that learning is easier when lectures are conducted face-to-face, while two students were of the opposing view and one student felt that learning occurred whether face-to-face or in the online environment. When asked about their rationales for support afforded to face-to-face versus online lectures, several qualitative responses were elicited. For example, participant #1 stated: “Online classes are not as engaging as face-to-face. Being a deaf student, it is challenging at times to understand what is being taught and discussed via online technology”, while student participant #3 quipped: “Because I live with my two kids and my husband, the environment for face-to-face is more conducive to learning.” Similarly, student participant #13 stated: “I have grown accustomed to that style of learning [face-to-face]. It is more interactive as we get to meet people face-to-face and interact. This style of learning also does not present internet connectivity issues”, while student participant #15 stated: “Having face-to-face lectures makes me pay attention to the lecturer and be interested in the topic being taught. I am usually distracted by other things when having class online.”

Regarding the preference for online versus face-to-face teaching, two students proffered the following: “As a working student, I cannot always get to class on time. The online platforms allow me to log into the class from any location once I have an internet connection” (student participant #10), and “I think online teaching provides persons with the confidence to engage and interact more as opposed to in a classroom. Most times your cameras are off and you’re not visible in the spotlight when asked a question” (student participant #14).

Conclusion

The participants indicated that they experienced a slew of challenges, however, in spite of the challenges encountered due to the sudden transition from face-to-face to online TLA, they generally experienced benefits and new opportunities, and learnt new lessons. The study’s participants also indicated that despite the sudden transition, the administration at The UWI, St. Augustine handled the transition

fairly well and this was evidenced by the slew of advisories and communiqués on staff and student welfare that were circulated by the administration at The UWI, St. Augustine.

On the other hand, a minority of student participants commented that the needs of disadvantaged students (those with disabilities, limited financial and infrastructural resources) could have been better managed. The student participants also indicated that while there were numerous challenges that hindered them from realising a smooth transition, activities such as the continued provision of loaned laptops, provision of free internet, provision of training on the use of technology, maintaining communication with and provision of services for students with disabilities, improved communication systems and multimodal models of TLA – for example, a combination of face-to-face and online TLA – may be effective solutions in the context of COVID-19 and online TLA at The UWI, St. Augustine. Generally, the students and lecturers indicated that the challenges experienced in navigating the transition were outweighed by the benefits, opportunities and lessons learnt.

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