

# **Online Education Yesterday, Today and Forever**

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## **Introduction**

Most universities successfully operated on the basis of blended learning since the days of the '2015-16 Fees must fall' and prior. However, for some rural-based universities with limited resources and shoestring budgets, blended learning was not something to go by. The traditional contact and face-to-face tuition dominated the higher education spaces, in response to relics of digital divide prevalent in the South African higher education landscape.

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns thereof, millions of students in higher education the world over were pushed out institutional-based education. Most, if not all higher education institutions, out of necessity took an unprecedented migration from traditional and blended learning approaches to a fully online approach where all teaching, learning and assessment take place electronically using digital technologies (Buzetto-More & Alade, 2006; Camilleri, 2021) due to Covid-19. Online instruction, learning and online assessment are termed online education in this study. The Covid-19 situation has made online education a mandatory requirement, hence displacing any possible reservations and hesitations about shifting to electronic resources for instruction and assessment.

Instead of waiting and folding our hands waiting for Covid-19 to subside and return to the traditional modes of instruction and assessment, academics should take the opportunity to propel higher education to another level (Hargis, 2020). That will make education more inclusive, more like an upstate blended learning. It is upstate because so much has been invested into online education and multitude skills have been garnered by both students and instructors just to let online education move into extinction. Robust digital platforms and Internet data plans, we will return back better to contact tuition. Academics have to turn the current challenges of the pandemic into

grand opportunities for future online education in higher education. In contrast to other online systems that automates a particular service, online education does not threaten to eliminate the teacher in the classroom but makes his role more pronounced and defined. The teacher takes the centre stage in online education as he commands instruction and assessment in the virtual classroom. The aim of this study is to describe a community of university lecturers' experiences and perspectives in online education prior, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of this study is to ground the three pillars of online education, teaching, learning and assessment onto the digital platform in response to the present Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. Blended learning was somehow used all along and has the potential to emerge after the pandemic on a higher level.

### **Problem statement**

The higher education teaching, learning and assessment landscape is under immense pressure to transform, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, teaching and learning at most universities took a holistic shift to online, albeit with some glitches and resistance to change. The future is uncertain, with immense possibilities of pursuing online education beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. With the current growing interest in digital technologies in almost every facet of human life, academics need to re-think about sustainable means for teaching, learning and assessment (Timmis, Broadfoot, Sutherland & Oldfield, 2016). Hence, even without Covid-19, online education was looming, but not at the rapidity that has been witnessed for the past 20 months. Thus, lecturers have to update, upskill, and learn further digital skills to manage the unprecedented changes in the way we live in pre- and post-pandemic times. This study shall attempt to answer the research question, "What opportunities exist in online education in the current and post-pandemic dispensation?"

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

To achieve best practices in online education, this study will turn to the theoretical underpinnings by Wenger's (1998) community of practice (COP). COP is defined as a "learning partnership among people who find it useful to learn from and with each other about a particular domain. They use each other's experience of practice as a learning resource" (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat, 2011, p. 9). Wenger argues that there exists

three crucial characteristics of a COP. The *domain* is a common interest that connects and holds together the community; a *community* is the relationships and interactions that bind the shared activities whereby members can learn together; and *practice* signify the defining property which identifies members of a community of practice as practitioners. The domain for this study is online education at university. The community is the education faculty lecturers who meet regularly to deliberate on the domain; and the practice is lectureship in higher education.

Synchronous web-based technology discussions shall be used to examine the ways in which the three components of Wenger's COP framework play out in online education environments. The COP framework does not specify the duration for collegial interactions; hence some projects may take a few weeks, some a few months whilst others a few years (Smith, Hayes & Shea, 2017). Wenger (2000) argue that although individuals learn through participation in a community of practice, more important is the generation of newer or deeper levels of knowledge through the sum of the group activity. Chiefly, we will have to devise a collaborative strategy, document it and make reflections of it along the way. The COP theoretical framework shall be used to interpret the lecturers' reflections and elaborate on the implications to higher education in South Africa.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative research study shall be conducted by employing narrative inquiry as the methodology. Creswell and Creswell (2018) define narrative inquiry as "a qualitative strategy in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives." (p. 378). Narrative inquiries focus on participants' construction of coherent stories that give meaning to their experiences (Guerin, Kerr & Green, 2015). The participants in this study are the academic staff members in the educational sciences faculty at comprehensive university in South Africa, who are about 90 in total. A purposively selected sample of ten lecturers who are active in online education shall make up the sample for the study. The study shall be conducted within the context of the disciplines of the participants in order to try and understand how the contexts impacts implementation of online education. Data shall be gathered using semi-structured interviews with each participant and the responses shall be audio-recorded for later transcription. The

researcher shall ask questions that will help him interpret and give meaning to the world of the participants (Wang & Geale, 2015). Collection of data shall be done at the end of a semester or six months of online education in the case of year-courses. After the transcription, the author shall prepare the narratives and the narratives shall be read repeatedly to establish recurrent themes.

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