On the Road to Blended Learning post Covid-19 Era Settings: Students' Perceptions at Women's University in Africa

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions on the use of blended learning during the post Covid-19 era. The study uses a qualitative approach, which is interpretive in nature. A case study of five purposively sampled undergraduate students at Women's University in Africa was used. The study is hinged on a constructivist framework. Data from semi-structured interviews and documents were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Findings show that students had differing preferences in shifting from purely traditional methods of teaching to blended learning during the post Covid-19 era. Majority of students highlight positive experiences during online learning, and they would not mind mixing it with the traditional methods of learning in future. Students indicate that online learning assists them to interact and co-operate freely while the traditional methods of learning assist them in getting individual attention such as support from their lecturers while researching for assignments, as well as benefiting from library and information technology facilities on-campus. The study recommends that lecturers should sharpen their computer skills in chosen digital platform to conduct online and face to face lessons which is blended.

Keywords: *Blended learning, Post Covid -19 era, Face to face learning, Online learning, Traditional methods of learning*

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1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has produced unparalleled problems in all parts of life including the education system. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization confirmed a world-wide pandemic which affected about 90,000 people in more than 60 countries (ONU, 2021; Cobo-Rendón, Bruna Jofré, Lobos, Cisternas San Martin & Guzman, 2022). Due to this situation, there was need to curb the spread of the pandemic by closing educational institutions (UNESCO, 2021). This consequence of Covid-19 saw most institutions of higher learning closing their campuses and adapting digital online learning. The emergence of online learning facilitated by the Covid-19 has also made a major stride at Women's University in Africa towards a sudden switch to digital learning. Many academics argue that although the Covid-19 pandemic led educational

institutions to make this switch, learning online was already overdue (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). All higher institutions of learning were seen opting for either blended learning or purely online learning to avoid losing their academic year. Now that Covid-19 is receding there is a dilemma on whether universities should continue with online lessons or revert back to the traditional face to face lectures. Berger, Berger, Bosetti, Gilboa, Hansen, Jarvis & Smith (2021) support the above by stating that deciding during a pandemic like Covid-19 is not easy at all. It is deemed difficult because new information and educational technological advancement are motivating the need for change (Fullan, 2001; Kieschnick, 2017). On change, Dewey (1986) contends that education is of social importance that it should always be a "field of both concrete and abstract challenges because of its nature which is dynamic and transforming. This is similar to how students and their communities change and develop over time. Academics need to endeavour towards

constant change and advancement. Colreavy-Donelly, Ryan, O'Connor, Caraffini, Kuhn and Hasshu (2022) suggest that for change to be successful educationists have to consider the availability of resources to continue carrying out the digital lessons, as well as to evaluate both the lecturers' and students' digital skills to carry out online lessons effectively. There are different viewpoints that are being debated on, as to how higher institutions of learning can carry on with their business without any disruptions. The first idea is to have face to face lectures where a few students come at a time to facilitate physical distancing while encouraging them to sanitise, mask up and vaccinate. The second option is carrying out Open Distance e-learning ODEL, while the third option is carrying out a mixture of virtual as well as face to face learning activities, which are known as "blended learning". The purpose of this study is to understand the students' perceptions on blended learning during the post Covid-19 era. The study explores the students' perceptions on blended learning considering that they have experienced the use of both online and the traditional face to face learning in the Covid-19 and pre-Covid-19 era respectively. The study tries to understand which form of learning students would prefer during the post Covid-19 era. The study aims to answer the following research question:

- What is the possible best way of learning that could be effectively used in the post Covid-19 era at Women's University in Africa?

2. Literature Review

With the changing time, the innovative technologies and communication systems have given a new vision to the education sector. The growing number of young people has brought attention to the higher education system to build a new form of learning. The new perspectives towards education systems have brought a blend of virtual as well as traditional modes of learning, known as "blended learning". Blended learning is an idea that was established in the early 1960s and has developed to different methods that are extensively carried out in academic settings all over the world (Mahaye, 2020). Blending is a term that suggests the mixture of different elements to come up with a new form (Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, Norberg & Sicilia, 2018). According to Harasim, (2017); Suprabha and Subramonian (2015) blended learning is defined as a mixture of online and traditional face to face method of teaching. On the other hand, Horn and Staker (2015:34) define it as "learning is any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace". Therefore, blended learning may be viewed as use of both face to face and online lessons. In a blended learning class students also take part in a face-to-face traditional classroom which is supervised by the lecturer. Students meet physically with their peers and lecturer and use learning platforms like Moodle, Google, Teams

or WhatsApp to improve and make learning much more effective. In a blended class students interact, socialise and support each other.

Blended learning has its own advantages to the students and the lecturer. During the learning process students use electronic gadgets to meet their learning requirements in different contexts. This assists in students becoming creative as well as being critical thinkers and problem solvers (Clifton & Harter, 2019; Horn & Staker, 2015; Kieschnick, 2017). Students learn at their own speed through blended learning as they have more time on their own to master the given content. They are also able to spend extra time revising given work and looking at other sources online after the lecture, thus making it flexible (Gedik, Kiran, & Ozden, 2012; Kieschnick, 2017; Staker & Horn, 2012). For those who would have grasped their work, they may carry on with their learning instead of waiting for others (Horn & Staker, 2015). Students are able to take charge of their learning by selecting the best way to learn a concept. The role of the lecturer is to guide the students who are expected to be imaginative and active in leading their own learning (Kieschnick, 2017). While giving guidance to the students, the lecturer also identifies the needs of the students to implement blended learning as well as guiding them in using a wide range of online resources to provide a learning experience which is valuable. In a blended learning classroom, time is flexible it is not limited to a specific period of the day.

There are also disadvantages in a blended learning class. Lecturers opine that they get challenges in applying guidance to the students online when students are not in the physical classroom (Frey, Fisher & Pumpian, 2013). The reason being that sometimes it takes time for information to be delivered to students because of network challenges. This also makes it difficult for students to give feedback to the lecturers and vice-versa. In addition, online learning is deemed to be more expensive when compared to the traditional face to face delivery mode. Moreover, both lecturers and students are required to be information technology literate to be able to send and access information. The issue of power shortages can also be one of the hindrances of blended learning when it is an online class. The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning practices of higher education institutes (HEI) and to understand the influence of a blended learning approach on attitude and behavioural aspects of the learners and teaching professionals.

Many studies on blended learning have been undertaken by different scholars. In Ireland, Brown Skerritt, Shevlin, McNamara and O'Hara (2022) carried out a study on deconstructing the challenges and opportunities for blended learning in the post emergency learning era and found that the rise of online teaching experience have signalled the need for adequate resources and digital skills to carry out blended learning. A study carried out in Pennsylvania by Kenney and Newcombe (2011) shared her experiences and positive outcomes of blended

learning. She highlighted that online learning is likely to be the future and blended learning may be used to prepare lectures for this era that is to come. One of the findings carried by Allen, Seaman and Garrett (2007) on blended education in the United States indicate that most institutions of learning report offering a greater percentage of online courses than blended courses. In South Africa Tshabalala, Ndeya-Ndereya and van der Merwe (2014) found some factors that affected blended learning like lack of policy, inadequate professional development for staff and limited access to the computer laboratory for students. In Zimbabwe a study carried by Mupa (2020) found that during online learning in the Covid-19 era some lecturers were unavailable online making collaboration between students and lecturers inadequate. There is a dearth of studies on blended learning during the Covid and Post Covid-19 era. This study seeks to explore the students' perceptions on blended learning during the Covid-19 era.

Theoretical framework

The study adopts the constructivist theory by Vygotsky (1978), which propagates the view that interaction and collaboration assist learners to construct new knowledge (Hew & Cheung 2008). Vygotskys theory emphasises on the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Chaiklin 2003). Vygotsky (1978:86) states that the ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". Vygotsky's finding implies that what students can do during interaction and collaboration, they are able to do independently in the next lesson. This theory assumes collaboration between a more capable and a less capable on one task, helps the less capable one become independent at the task once done jointly (Chaiklin 2003; Harland 2003). Learning thus, takes place as the result of interaction within the ZPD (Nassaji & Swain 2000). In Vygotsky's (1978) theory, the lecturer is the facilitator who guides students to reasoning, decision making, personal judgement and interaction face to face as well as with electronic texts in different layouts (Thornberg (2013). The researcher adopted this theory because of the phenomenon understudy which provides students with an opportunity to read, write and interact with their peers' face to face as well as with electronic texts in different layouts. In addition, this theory was ideal in this study because when principles of the ZPD are applied they put together pertinent features of blended learning like the lecturer, the student, their objectives and intentions, as well as available technological resources (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994).

3. Methodology

The study is qualitative and interpretive in nature. The researcher sought to get deep descriptions on the students' perceptions on how they would prefer to learn during the post Covid-19 era. Furthermore, the research design chosen was a descriptive case study since the study aimed at describing the students' experiences during the online and traditional methods of teaching.

3.1 Selection of participants

Purposive sampling technique was used to choose the participants. The researcher used five purposively selected students who were directly involved in a phenomenon to give their opinions on their experiences before and during Covid-19 (Merriam, 2009). For anonymity purposes, the researcher used colour pseudonyms for the five participants. The researcher used the colours Red, Purple, Yellow, Blue and Green.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, which were conducted using the five students who had experienced learning online and the traditional way. A semi-structured interview, which is anchored in interpretivism was used. The semi-structured interview gave importance to the rich descriptions given by the participants (Mertens, 2014). Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse data obtained from participants through interviews and the focus group discussion. The researcher allowed themes to emerge from the participants' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher immersed herself into the data during data collection and when transcribing the recorded audios through interviews and focus group discussions. The collected data was coded and then arranged into categories. The study looked for themes from the collected data. The themes and subthemes that emerged from the findings were analysed by confirming, refuting or getting novel findings compared to the literature review (Creswell, 2009).

4. Results and Discussion

From the findings students' perceptions emerged through three themes which are the privileges of blended learning, its restrictions and the way forward.

Potential privileges of blended learning

Students highlighted that they preferred blended learning because it allowed them to have part of their lessons online. They stated that since the country is facing economic challenges, they were able to do projects like buying and selling as well as attending lessons at their own time because of its flexibility. Students gave the following responses

➢ Student Green: *Blended learning is appropriate for me because of its flexibility*
➢ Student Blue: *I can always work on given exercises during my own time without losing any information*

- Student Red: *Blended learning helps us to be independent learners.*
- Student Purple: *The good part about blended learning is that if I do not get a satisfying response, I can always get one when we do the face-to-face lecture*
- Student Yellow: *I like the flexibility of blended learning because I do my work during my own time and if I do not understand I can always ask for help from others who have gone through the notes or exercises before me*

The above findings agree with Collopy and Arnold (2009) and Gedik, Kiraz and Ozden, (2012) who found that blended learning was flexible and good to the students because it also minimised their going to campus. Students highlighted how this flexibility allowed them to do other jobs that would help them get an income to help them survive. Some students also highlighted that blended learning privileged them to access information anytime on the Moodle/ WhatsApp learning platforms. This meant that even if there is no network for them to access it at the time of the lecture, once the lecturer posts information it will always be available. This finding was incongruent with Peimani and Kamalipour (2021) who found that students preferred to work on live lectures than look at their work later.

Students also highlighted that blended learning assisted them to interact and collaborate. Meeting for the traditional face to face lectures would then be necessary to reinforce what they would have learnt and done online. In addition, those students who would not have collaborated online would have the opportunity to do so during presentations. The following except indicate what the students said:

- Student Red: *Online learning gave us the opportunity to help and assist each other. If then I can meet my group members during the traditional face to face lectures it will have positive influence on me because it gave me the urge to cooperate when we are working online*
- Student Purple: *Blended learning gave me so much support from my peers online. I learnt a lot from my peers how to interact on the Moodle platform because I preferred working on the WhatsApp platform*
- Student Yellow: *I increased my interaction with my peers on Moodle. I would not be shy or even afraid to ask any thing that I did not understand. There was so much collaboration and I can imagine when we meet for the face to face it would be great*
- Student Blue: *Blended learning will be good for us. At least when we do face to face learning we can get help from lecturers and the library on campus*

The findings are similar to Parsons, Ankrum and Morewood (2016) and Vygotsky (1978,) who found that student's participation with the more knowledgeable other promotes collaboration and it can ensure that students get a deeper comprehension of the content under study. Participating in individualised teaching with a more knowledgeable peer can ensure teachers develop a deeper understanding of how to address student needs with effective instructional practices (Parsons, Ankrum & Morewood, 2016). Students also highlighted that blended learning assisted them to learn on their own. They stated that blended learning taught them to be digital literate. They are now able to access the digital platforms without any help.

The advantage of blended learning could also come in handy when it comes to missing assignments. Student Green highlighted that online learning gave students a peace of mind in that once an assignment was uploaded, the lecturer would access, mark it and give feedback online. Student Blue also gave the following response:

> *I think if we mix traditional face to face and online lectures we would benefit more as students. I would prefer handing my assignment online instead of giving the class representative to collect and hand it to the lecturer. This avoids having to deal with missing marks and missing assignments.*

The finding disagrees with Habibu (2012) who found that some lecturers lacked skills to the use of information and communications technology (ICT). This finding may imply that if lecturers do not have adequate skills, they may find it difficult to access student's assignments and mark them online. However, the benefit of doing blended learning could be that students may bring in hard copies if the lecturer is unable to use ICT.

Possible restrictions of blended learning

After experiencing online and face to face learning students shared their opinions on the restrictions that blended learning could have if it is implemented. Participants gave the following responses:

- Student Red*: Working from home was problem because we would not concentrate during the online lessons. So, a blend of the traditional face to face and online learning will be good to keep us in check.*
- Student Yellow: *It is difficult for our lecturer to monitor us when learning online. Sometimes we would log in and not concentrate on the lecture.*

Findings show that students indicated that it was difficult for the lectures to monitor students while teaching online. This finding is similar to Brown Skerritt, Shevlin, McNamara and O'Hara (2022) who state that while some lecturers are very good in technology, others may have challenges. This may mean that lecturers with challenges may not have the capacity in monitoring students learning online and may fail to fulfil specific skills that

require guidance and interaction. Students also raised the issue of digital learning

Student Purple: *The other problem that we would have is that online learning needs one to have network which needs money.*

This finding is similar to what Brown Skerritt, Shevlin, McNamara and O'Hara (2022) who state that disadvantages of blended learning could be that some students may fail to access network and they may not have an internet device. As a result, students highlighted that blended learning would be disadvantageous to them because by the time they meet for face-to-face lessons they would be behind with their work. The issue of network was also highlighted by the students who stated that with power cuts they experience in the country some information would take time to be delivered because of network challenges.

Students also highlighted that both them and their lecturers needed to be taught how to use the Moodle online platform to be able to assess materials online as well as give them feedback on time. Students had the following to say:

➢ Student Yellow: *When we learnt online some lecturers were not technology literate. They could not even access our assignments online*
➢ Student Red: *I had problems with uploading my assignment online. When I finally did, I was surprised that my lecturer professed of not being able to access it. So we really all need to be taught*

Way forward

When students were asked about what the college administration should do regarding to blended learning. Students gave the following responses

➢ Student Blue: *The administration should consider using blended learning that is traditional face to face and online whose advantages cannot be salvaged from one type of learning. The two methods complement each other.*
➢ Student Red: *The traditional face to face lessons assist the group representatives to have control over the class*
➢ Student Yellow: *While both online lessons have both advantages and disadvantage face to face classes may cover up for them and we learn effectively*

Students argued that blended classes were much better at promoting valued learning. They managed to get the best from the two forms of learning. This finding is supported by Ginting, Fahmi, Linarsih and Hamdani (2021) who found that parents accepted that the incorporation of online learning to that of the traditional face to face as a prospect to improve the quality of learning. Students also

highlighted that administrators needed to let them continue online and use the traditional face to face learning for interaction to balance and strengthen the learnt information.

The students also highlighted that the administrators needed to customise the Moodle platform that they use to suit the needs of the Women's University Students. One of the students highlighted that:

➢ Student Purple: *The University should come up with an easy way of uploading assignments as well as downloading content.*

To support student Purple, Kenney and Newcombe (2011) state that for a blended learning to be successful, the website and the layout of the assignments may need to be adjusted for easy accessibility by the students. The above sentiments were supported by the analysed documents which were logged on the Moodle platform. Findings were that two participants did not log in their assignments on the Moodle and they claimed the process of uploading assignments was difficult. When interviewed why they did not they indicated that they had network challenges and they had not mastered how to upload the assignments. Findings showed that those that were able to upload their documents uploaded in word format and had challenges uploading in PDF.

Students also indicated the need for in cooperating the use of Moodle during their ICT lessons. They gave the following responses

➢ Students Blue: *It will be ideal to learn how to use Moodle during our ICT lessons. This will help us to embark on blended learning without any problems*
➢ Student Red: *I suggest the first two weeks of orientation would have students being taught how to use Moodle. This will help in a long way.*
➢ Student Purple: *Some of our lecturers also need staff development to enhance their ICT skills so as to teach us effectively on the Moodle platform*

The need for both students and lecturers to be trained were highlighted by the students. This finding is similar to Kenney and Newcombe (2011) who found that training is needed to successfully integrate the traditional face to face and online learning. Online learning is well comprehended when both lecturers and students have an opportunity to participate in online workshops directed by information technology gurus. This gives the students and lecturers enough experience to learn and lecture online.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

From the findings, both online and traditional face to face learning were viewed by students as a licence to open

doors for quality education. Although there were disadvantages from doing blended learning, students indicated that blended learning had more possible advantages oscillating from flexibility to accessibility of learning which suited their schedules as they had to work to supplement the money they are given by their parents. Other advantages were highlighted as having an opportunity to interact with peers online and getting clarification of difficult concepts during face-to-face lectures. Additionally, the blended course design would allow students to learn competently within Vygotskys (1978), whereby students interact and the more knowledge other scaffolds their peers. Benefits of having continuous access to the uploaded information when they get an opportunity to be online was also highlighted by students. From the finding, Covid-19 has necessitated a new learning development at Women's University in Africa. The use of only face to face traditional methods in the blended type of learning covers up on what the online learning may not offer. This includes using facilities on campus like the library and free Wi-Fi for researching. The use of the traditional face to face method of learning may come to an extinction as students who have experienced both online and traditional face to face methods of learning want to have them blended for best learning practices.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that the college administrators need to staff develop their lecturers in new teaching strategies and methods so that they meet the requirements of their students when using online lesson. Students may need to be trained how to use the Moodle platform that is chosen by the college. Furthermore, as this study focused on students' perceptions at Women's University in Africa, it is imperative that further studies on the phenomenon be explored from other universities to get an all-inclusive picture.

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