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"It's Like Listening to an Audiobook:" Students' Experiences with Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Boitumelo Tiny Ramoroka, Keokgale Basetsana Tlhogogang,
Brigid Goitse Conteh, and Beauty Boikanyo Ntereke
University of Botswana

The abrupt shift to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic put a strain on the education sector the world over. Using the social constructivist theory, this study postulates that face-to-face teaching and learning does not seamlessly translate to online instruction both in terms of pedagogical practice and learner experiences. This study explores students' experiences with the quality of online learning during the pandemic. Data were collected through focus group discussions with undergraduate students across seven faculties. A thematic analysis of the responses reveals that participants mostly reported negative experiences with online learning arising from factors such as lack of compatible digital devices and conducive virtual class learning spaces. This study provides rich data that contributes to an understanding of students' experiences with online teaching and learning during the pandemic and thus, provides insights into how lecturers' online pedagogical practices influence students' perceptions on the quality of online learning.

Online learning is not a new phenomenon in higher learning since the integration of technologies into the educational curricula has been documented for the past 2 decades (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010). Over the past decade, there was a significant increase in the adoption of online technologies as a complementary mode of education delivery (Asunka, 2008). However, the focus of integration of technologies into the education curricula was on blended learning which afforded students the benefits of both face to face and online learning.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a significant paradigm shift on higher education teaching the world over because of the implementation of social distancing protocols by governments. Due to the pandemic many universities, including the University of Botswana, were forced to move from the traditional face to face teaching and blended learning to online teaching following the closure of universities. This drastic change from face-to-face mode of instruction to online learning and teaching meant that both students and lecturers had to quickly adapt to using new technologies in learning and teaching, adopt new assessment methods, and design teaching materials that fit the new environment (Serhan, 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) describe this new approach as *emergency remote teaching* (ERT) given the unplanned nature of teaching arising from inadequate preparation time, support for curriculum redesign, and staff support in general. However, for purposes of this research, this article will adopt the use of the term online learning to refer to this emergency remote teaching.

The transition from face-to-face to online learning was necessary and mandatory, however, it was not a smooth process for learners, instructors, and institutions. A cursory look at studies in higher education conducted in 2020/2021 globally indicated challenges brought about by the abrupt transition to online teaching and learning, such as infrastructural and technological resource availability and lecturers' readiness to teach online (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Aboagye et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Heng & Sol, 2020; Khotimah et al., 2020; Muchemwa, 2021). A study conducted to explore university lecturers and students' preparedness for online teaching and learning at the outbreak of COVID-19 found that lecturers and students were caught unprepared for online teaching and learning mode though they did their best to rise above the challenges (Muchemwa, 2021). Findings also indicated that other challenges experienced included limited access to the internet, limited mobile networks, unreliable electricity supply, lack of appropriate technological gadgets, lack of technical know-how, high levels of stress, and low performance level.

Several studies which focused on students' experiences with the sudden shift to online learning and their readiness during the COVID-19 pandemic have also been conducted. For example, Aboagye et al. (2020) reported on learners' psychological readiness for online learning, stating that learners did not find the online environment motivating. Other studies like Hamid and Hasan (2020) and Adnan and Anwar (2020) revealed students' dissatisfaction with online learning and this seemed to have been attributed to inappropriate implementation practices among other challenges. They observed that most students perceived the implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to be less effective and thus had reservations about it. Furthermore, participants attributed their decreased interest in learning to the limited space for interaction between lecturers and students and among students themselves. Similarly, a study by Surani and Hamidah (2020) revealed that learners reported that they had challenges with understanding the material taught online as the delivery methods used were not effective.

They argued that careful planning was necessary for online teaching to be effective. These studies seem to suggest that due to the drastic shift, most lecturers did not have time to work on their skills to deliver online lessons, and therefore lacked the necessary online teaching experiences.

Furthermore, Rohman et al. (2020) found that although most students agreed that online learning was the right solution during the COVID-19 pandemic, they had negative perceptions of online learning. The students raised concerns that the online learning was implemented without proper planning and was therefore ineffective. In another study by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), some of the challenges reported by students were lack of efficient technological infrastructure, learners' digital incompetence, socio-economic factors affecting learners, heavy workload, and suitability of learning platforms for practical subjects that required physical interaction. Other studies documented feelings of isolation by students arising from peer interaction and lack of engagement in practical subjects (Heng & Sol, 2020, 2020; Khotimah et al., 2020). Furthermore, Agormedah et al. (2020) documented students' lack of formal orientation, training, and financial preparedness for online learning. It can be deduced from these studies that the various challenges could have contributed to students' negative perceptions of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In sub-Saharan Africa, context studies on online learning during the pandemic were also documented. Mphahlele et al. (2021) explored students' experiences of access and participation in online learning at three universities in Southern Africa. The findings of their study revealed that students' access and participation in learning during COVID-19 were negatively affected by digital inequality and poor quality of internet coverage. Similarly, Pather and Booi (2020) found that the majority of off-campus students in a university in South Africa mainly used smartphones for online learning and had challenges with internet connectivity. Lastly, findings from a study by Nhatuve (2021) revealed that the students felt that the whole process of online learning was frustrating and monotonous as lecturers used inefficient strategies to maintain relevant and fruitful interaction between lecturers and students. The studies reviewed highlighted the inequitable and inadequacy of resources caused by socio-economic disparities among students and these challenges could further widen the digital divide brought by COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of Botswana, a few studies have been conducted to evaluate ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' learning and teaching in higher education. In their study, Mupedziswa et al. (2021) reflected on the experiences and strategies used to consider virtual course delivery and lessons learnt in the department of Social Work at the University of Botswana (UB) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conclusions from their reflections indicate that there was a need to re-examine the curriculum to include courses that will help students cope in the 'new normal.' Additionally, Ntshwarang et al. (2021) conducted a review of literature on the use of e-learning tools and their relevance in the context of the UB. Based on this review, they noted that there were challenges related to infrastructural development and technological resource availability. Similarly, Hondonga et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study in which they assessed how well Botswana Private Tertiary Education Providers were prepared for the shift to online teaching methodologies during the COVID-19 learning disruptions. The results of this study suggest that though some had established online teaching and learning platforms before the pandemic, most institutions were not ready for the transition to an online environment under the ERT circumstances.

Although Hondonga et al.'s (2021) study was conducted in the context of Botswana, its main focus was mainly on the online readiness of lecturers, students, and institutions and did not target how students perceived the quality and effectiveness of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, their use of quantitative research methods limited the depth of student voices. To get an understanding of students' lived experiences with online learning during the pandemic, it is important to explore the students and how they perceived the quality of online instruction. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore UB undergraduate students' lived experiences and their views on the effectiveness and quality of online learning during the pandemic. The study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are students' experiences with the effectiveness of digital platforms for learning purposes?
2. How do students perceive their lecturers' online pedagogical practices?
3. How do students perceive the quality of online instruction in enhancing student engagement and participation?

A Social Constructivist Framework

The framework that is used to conceptualise learning in this study is the social constructivist perspective on learning in higher education institutions. According to the social constructivist theory, knowledge construction is both a cognitive and a social process (Azhari et al., 2020). In an online environment, the social constructivist perspective underpins a student-centred learning process and promotes learning environments and instructional pedagogies that are student-centred and highly engaging activities. Learners are portrayed as

active participants in knowledge construction within a socially interactive learning environment and learning occurs when students construct meaning through communication, collaborative activities, and interaction with others (Swan, 2005). Thus "teaching practices are required to optimise appealing environment for learning" (Morchid, 2020, p. 267). Proponents of this theory believe that teaching should prioritise learners and their contribution to their learning. The responsibility of teachers on the other hand is to facilitate learning processes by designing and structuring activities that foster an environment suitable for an open, engaging and meaningful student interaction (van Wyk et al., 2020).

Central to this theory is that students do not learn in isolation. Even in an online classroom, the learner should be placed at the core of the learning process and so should be the teaching practices, hence 'the application of technologies in teaching should 'ease learners' productivity' (Morchid, 2020, p. 268). This means that a constructivist online classroom should be characterised by a high level of interaction between the students, students and content, as well as students and instructors (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Thus, online interaction must be meaningful, stimulate learners' intellectual curiosity, engage students in productive instructional activities, and directly influence their learning (Mbati, 2012; Woo & Reeves, 2007). Therefore, the social constructivist approach to knowledge construction should be supported by a variety of digital technologies that will provide rich contextualised problem-solving activities that learners can experience individually and in groups. Thus, the interaction should ultimately result in boosted creativity, critical thinking, knowledge construction, and improved communication skills. It is in this light that this study aims to examine the quality of learning and the effectiveness of online instruction, and the learner's perception of the level of engagement and interactivity in an online learning environment at the UB during the COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of the social constructivism theory.

Methods

Study Context

The eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic forced lecturers to move totally online to continue learning. In the context of the UB, the Vice-Chancellor called on the university community to adhere to COVID-19 protocols in the workplace and that the delivery of lectures and learning should be done remotely (Memo Ref: UB/1/37/1 of 5 February 2021). Following this memorandum, most of the teaching was moved to online platforms. To facilitate remote learning, the university upgraded the internet bandwidth to improve internet speed and also arranged with one of the internet providers to issue all of the learners sim cards to facilitate access to the internet. During this transition, to complement Moodle (an open-source learning management system) that was already in existence, the university adopted business communication platform, Microsoft Teams (MST), to facilitate virtual lessons.

This study was conducted within the Academic Literacy course that is compulsory for all first-year students across the different faculties of Science, Social Science, Business, Education, Health Science and Humanities. Some of the participants were also drawn from the Advanced Writing Skills course, an elective course offered to post-year-one students. The study was carried out from April to May of 2021 during the second semester of the 2020/21 academic year. Critical to note is that the courses that were delivered virtually during the pandemic were not originally designed based on online instructional design strategies and conventions due to the abruptness of the transition.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was adopted for this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach can be used to understand, interpret, and explain complex and highly contextualized social phenomena. Thus, it is suitable for an in-depth understanding of student's experiences of the quality of learning and the effectiveness of online instruction and for gaining insights into learner's perceptions of their level of engagement and interactivity in an online learning environment at the UB during the pandemic.

Data Collection

The focus group discussion technique was employed to collect data. The techniques enabled participants to address issues that they perceived to be relevant to them in an interactive and discursive way, rather than issues chosen by the researcher. This, therefore, generated rich and deep descriptions of students' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In focus group discussions the researcher's role is that of facilitator, who guides the discussions instead of taking the central role and that it is the "inter-relational dynamics of the participants that are important" (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 26). These group dynamics help the researchers to explore issues in context, depth, and detail thus yielding more insights into the research topic. Further, data is generated on the synergy of the interaction among the participants (Nyumba et al., 2018; Rabiee, 2004). According to Williams and Katz (2001), focus group interviews are effective in that the researcher taps on the multiple realities of the participants'

experiences and can get a 'glimpse' of the participants' world which they would not get through other methods.

Face-to-face focus group interviews were conducted at the completion of the courses. A general interview guide was used as the basis for the discussion. The discussions were guided by questions derived from the following: students perceptions on their technological skills, their views on institutional support given during COVID-19 in order to adapt to online learning environment and its effectiveness, perceptions on the quality of classroom engagement and participation in online versus face-to-face instruction, and their perceptions on the effectiveness of online communication methods between students and students and lecturers. A total of six focus group interview sessions were conducted and there were seven participants in each focus group, making a sample size of 42 participants. Because the participants came from different faculties, this enabled us to gain a diverse range of experiences and a variety of perspectives with online learning. Each focus group interview lasted about 50–60 minutes and was recorded on tape. Some observational notes were also taken immediately after the interview.

Sampling

The selection of the participants for this study was purposive based on their convenience and availability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the identification of participants was based on the relationship among participants and pre-existing groups that shared similar characteristics (Kitzinger, 1994; Paker & Tritter, 2006). In this sampling procedure, we were more interested in gaining insights into the students' experiences rather than a statistically representative sample. The group compositions were drawn from two cohorts. The first cohort were both direct entry and mature students from a year-one compulsory Academic Literacy course from the faculties of business majoring in accounting; social sciences majoring in defense and strategic studies; and natural sciences majoring in computer science, biology, chemistry, and physics. The ages for direct-entry students ranged 17 to 21, while for mature-entry students the ages ranged 38 to 44. The second cohort were students from an elective advanced writing course offered to post-year-one students from different faculty across the university majoring in special education, social work, law, psychology, biology, chemistry, and physics. Their ages ranged 20 to 27. The sample was selected deliberately in order to provide information-rich cases from students who had experienced learning through both the traditional and blended learning before the pandemic, and those who when entering the university were immediately introduced to online learning. Participants were invited to participate in this study through their lecturers. Students that volunteered were asked for their consent and guaranteed anonymity. Further consent to record the interviews was sought. Willingness to engage in focus group discussions is critical in gaining useful data and this was made easy because of the homogeneity of each group.

Data Analysis

Data for this study were analysed through thematic analysis (TA). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a method used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. The coding process was done in parts. The first step involved the identification of broad categories, keys words, and phrases used by the participants to indicate important themes without limiting the number of codes. The research questions and narratives from the participants were used to help develop the themes. In the second step, similar categories were merged, and some were eliminated. Direct quotes were sorted out and re-arranged under appropriate thematic content and were later interpreted within their context. The direct quotes were illustrative of emerging viewpoints about students' lived experiences with online learning. Careful attention was paid to the frequency of participants' views and emotions they expressed as they discussed the different points of view. Observational notes were also analysed to capture the participants' emotions, tone, and nonverbal cues. Validation of the analysis was done iteratively by the authors who were not involved in the initial coding.

Findings

The findings presented next encapsulate students' experiences with the effectiveness of digital platforms for learning purposes, their perceptions of lecturers' online pedagogical practices, and their perceptions of the quality of online instruction in enhancing students' engagement and participation. The findings will be presented according to the research themes as they emerged during the coding process.

The participants were students from a year-one compulsory Academic Literacy course from the faculties of business, social sciences, and natural sciences, and from an elective advanced writing course offered to post-year-one students. The ages for direct entry students taking the academic literacy course ranged from 17 to 21, while for mature entry students the ages ranged between 38 to 44. The ages for the post-year-one elective advanced writing skills course students ranged between 20 and 27.

Students' Experiences with the Effectiveness of Digital Platforms for Learning Purposes

In responding to questions regarding experiences with the effectiveness of online platforms for learning purposes, five sub-themes emerged from the discussion as follows: 1) ease of use, and 2) efficiency of online platforms in virtual classrooms, 3) network availability, 4) compatibility of digital devices to sanctioned platforms, and 5) conducive learning spaces for online learning.

Ease of Use and Efficiency of Online Platforms During Virtual Classrooms

This sub-theme relates to students' experiences with online learning platforms in terms of how easy the platforms were to use and how efficient they were. Several focus group discussions indicated that participants found some platforms to be more useful than others based on their functionality and ease of use. Learners also considered platform efficiency to be critical in facilitating a satisfactory remote learning experience. Participants across several focus groups indicated that they were introduced to a number of platforms in a trial-and-error manner. Some of the participants noted that it took some time for them to familiarise themselves with the platforms. For example, one participant reflected on the difficulty they experienced familiarising with different new platforms. The participant stated that,

> It was not easy, it was very difficult to use them just to learn to operate them, but with time we end up learning; but there are still challenges here and there and it seems there are different issues that come with different platforms.

Several other discussions across the focus groups compared the platforms in terms of ease of use and reliability. One participant commented thus,

> We used Zoom and MS Teams and between the two, one which was easy to use was Zoom because it is not complicated and sophisticated like Teams, but the most reliable is Teams. The other one is easy to use but the other is most reliable.

Other discussions elaborated on the ease of use and organisation of content on the platform and considered that to be very important when making decisions on which platform to use. In that regard, one participant perceived content on Moodle to be easy to use. However, the participant believed that lecturers did not efficiently organise the content on Moodle. Examples of statements relating to the comparison of the platforms and ease of use include:

> For me, I think Moodle is good, it's only that it is not arranged efficiently, they will give you what you want in a simplified manner. It's easy to the eye, it's easy to arrange for tests… so, it is good in that sense. (Student – Social Work)

> Moodle is good; it's only that lecturers should be understanding about how to use it. (Student – Law)

> Teams is not easy to use …sometimes it is not easy to get into the link to get into the online lesson because it does not send you the notification, it is very random, sometimes it comes, and sometimes it doesn't come. (Student – Science)

As the participants compared different platforms, they made a further comparison of their experiences of online learning and teaching with face-to-face learning. Participants seemed to agree that face to face was the best mode of learning as it allowed for participation. Participants within one of the focus groups engaged in a debate that echoed these sentiments:

> If I were to compare between conventional learning and the online learning, physical learning is much better than online learning. Mainly because in physical learning one is able to participate fully. (Student – Social Science)

> For me face-to-face classes are much better. (Student – Business)

> I agree with her to a certain extent; for me, physical classes are the best however online classes can work in instances… some instances too. (Student – Advanced Writing)

As shown in the these extracts, students' experiences with online learning platforms would appear to have significantly impacted their attitudes toward online learning. There seemed to be a general sense of dissatisfaction and frustration with online platforms because of the challenges associated with navigating some of these platforms.

The emotions that were captured as students expressed these challenges ranged from frustration and hopelessness to anxiety. Students demonstrated that they would rather have face-to-face learning if the circumstances allowed. Participants used expressions like, "to me, honestly, online is a no-no; it's just that we do not have a choice."

Despite the challenges students discussed, as the discussions progressed there seemed to be a shift in perspectives evident in the sense of acceptance of learning platforms as the new way of doing things (that is, teaching and learning). The following statement captures this change in perspective:

> The other thing is that these online platforms that were there before, like Moodle, are now actively used instead of like before. Lecturers are now doing videos and posting them on Moodle and we are able to learn while we use Moodle.

Network Availability

In this subtheme participants in all of the focus groups expressed the importance of a reliable network particularly in sustaining a virtual classroom, enabling smooth access to instructional material and completion of learning activities. It emerged from the discussion that frequent network failure disrupted the flow of virtual lessons and, as such, students missed on content unintentionally or were unable to complete certain activities on time like online tests and other assessments. This led to a lot of frustrations, as indicated in the extract here:

> Sometimes when the lecturer is busy teaching, the network cuts or the network bandwidth becomes poor. Then we have to miss that class which means we remain behind because we could not cover content which was meant to be covered at that time. You spend 20 minutes trying to access the lesson, [so] when you enter its almost at the end; you don't have access to what happened previously. (Student – Computer Science)

> Even [with] the UB Wi-Fi you cannot do a WhatsApp call. Wi-Fi is a/n facility [amenity] that a university must have but it is so frustrating; I have cried so many times because of the UB Wi-Fi. You are trying to do school work, try to do research, [but] you[have to instead] go to the student center…(Student – Computer Science)

In addition to disrupting the flow of the lesson, participants also expressed how network failures diminished lecturers' efforts to create interactive content. One of the participants responded thus, "even if they are interactive, we cannot access course material."

Another participant echoed that:

> For Bio, he started posting video. It was helpful because you can download and watch and watch again but the problem is with the Wi-Fi, you can't download the video.

Access to a reliable and stable internet connection was considered critical across all focus groups because online classes rely heavily on a stable internet connection. Participants also raised concerns about inadequate internet coverage where certain parts of the campus had no internet coverage at all.

The Availability and Compatibility of Digital Devices with Sanctioned Learning Platforms

The third subtheme highlighted that participants' attitudes to online learning were influenced by the availability and limitations of digital devices that support the use of sanctioned platforms. The participants considered the availability and compatibility of the technological devices as imperative in determining the effectiveness of online teaching and learning. They indicated that they used the various devices at their disposal to access educational content, including attending virtual lessons and taking online assessments. Those students who did not have desktop or laptop computers resorted to using their mobile devices and these presented challenges as outlined here:

> In the beginning there were some challenges because, most of the time, I used my phone to attend classes and it is not easy to access most things with a phone. It is much better with a laptop because the phone in some regard is restricted.

This sentiment was shared across focus groups. As the discussion progressed, one of the participants elaborated on some of the limitations of some of the devices they used that emerged as an impediment to learning as reflected in the following comment:

> The other challenges with access are the phones: some phones are not able to access the programs that we use, e.g., some phone will not open pdf documents. So, it is not only about access to the platforms, the devices also limit us.

There was a turn as the discussion progressed to focus on the suitability of online platforms in some disciplines that are hands-on or practical subjects. The following extracts indicated that real-time virtual teaching and learning was not suitable for practical subjects and had its limitations:

> For me, I do programming online, and programming is hard. When you get to learn something computational, through the computer again, its gets worse. (Student – Computer Science)

> I was doing biotechnology last semester. You just log on online and see experiments being done

> online. It wasn't nice because we were watching it instead of doing it hands on, so it was quite limiting. (Student – Science)

> Courses like accounting where there is a lot of calculations, online does not help. (Student – Business)

Conducive Physical Spaces for Effective Engagement in Online Learning

Although the participants were not specifically asked about their physical learning spaces when attending virtual classes, it commonly emerged that some students did not have a good learning environment at home and even in the university classrooms. Participants consistently believed that effective engagement in learning requires conducive, physical spaces. One participant elaborated on the disengagement caused by disturbances that occur when attending a virtual class in a shared physical space and how it affected participation in class discussions. This is particularly critical with real-time virtual classes where one must simultaneously listen to the lecturer and other students and take notes or complete activities. Some of the comments that participants made follows:

> Face- to- face classes are way much better than online classes because a lot of the time I attend online classes at home or here at school in a classroom, but I am never alone in the classroom. I am with other students so in cases where the lecturer is asking us to contribute verbally it is not easy because there are people around me and just talking could be distracting to the other students with me in the room. The same thing happens at home, my family is always around so it is not easy but it is much easier in face to face for me to contribute when the lecturer asks a question, or I raise my hand to ask. (Student – Social Science)

> Normally we go to the library to connect for lessons because we are not allowed to stay in classrooms when there are no lessons, so the school could dedicate some classes for online lessons so we don't flock to the library or '24/7' (students' computer labs) to try and connect for the online lessons. (Student – Business)

> In our rooms there are a lot of disturbances (meaning hostels on campus.) (Student – Special Education)

Lecturers' Online Pedagogical Practices

Lecturer practices in the online delivery of courses determine students' experiences and attitudes toward online learning, hence it was important to explore how participants perceived their lecturers' practices in online course delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. The issues that emerged from the discussions centred on how lecturers delivered content and their online assessment practices both on Moodle and Microsoft Teams. Responses from most participants seemed to express dissatisfaction with lecturers' online delivery practices. The expressions that kept recurring during the discussions of their experiences were 'frustration,' 'overwhelming,' and 'depressing.'

When discussing lecturer practices in the delivery of content during virtual classes students seemed to be disheartened by lecturers' inability to balance between 'teacher talk,' class activities, and obtaining feedback from students. They, therefore, viewed virtual lessons as "a one-man show" and that "online teaching at UB is like listening to an audio book." Students seemed to value lecturer-student engagement in online lessons and the lack of involvement in the lessons seemed to make them feel disconnected and isolated.

Participants' narratives further highlighted their frustration with their lecturers' inconsiderate distribution of the workload especially on Moodle which is used to upload teaching materials as part of remote learning and teaching. Students felt overloaded and overworked. The frustration can be gleaned from the following comments:

> They still pile us with a lot of videos, for example, six videos at a time. Lecturers should consider us, that we are doing other subjects. You can't post a video at 11 am and expect me to do it then, because at 11 am I have something else. I have set myself to do my chemistry during my chemistry lecture and if you now don't consider... because there are some people who don't consider us, even assessment is changed consistently, they just post quizzes. They are not consistent, they overload us. We are working on adrenalin.

Furthermore, participants highlighted concerns about the ineffectiveness of online assessment. They mentioned that the types of questions asked were too low order requiring True or False and one-word answers. They found this to be too limiting, especially with subjects that needed justification and elaboration. One of the participants said that,

> When it comes to assessments, these online tests totally do not work for me personally because I am somebody who prefers to express myself. So, online tests limit me. For example, it's just multiple choice and true and false and short questions are just one-word or two-word answer. Maybe when you are supposed to write creatively, and you write

> creatively, you get the answer wrong. For me that does not work for me at all.

Students' Perception of the Quality of Classroom Engagement and Participation in Online Platforms

To further discussions on digital technologies in pedagogy, participants were asked about what they perceived to be quality classroom engagement and participation in online platforms. Three subthemes were identified under this theme: engagement with the lecturer during virtual teaching and learning, student to student engagement, and student engagement with content.

Student–Lecturer Engagement

Student-lecturer interaction during virtual teaching and learning establishes a teaching presence that aims at keeping students interested in the content being presented and providing them with the necessary support. Participants pointed out the critical role played by visual cues in communication which diminish during virtual interactions. Participants decried limited opportunity for engagement when one cannot see their lecturer, and they expressed a desire to see their lecturer's face. They added that the nature of online classes which requires them to switch off their cameras and mute their microphones goes against the philosophy of interactive, learner-centred learning environments. Participants generally expressed these views:

> I think that when teachers are trained, there is something to do with facial cues and if the network doesn't allow you to open videos on Teams, how will you pick up on facial cues? Most of us will not say anything on MS Teams. (Student – Social Sciences)

> These online things—they lack the social and facial cues. If you are teaching and I squint my eyes you can be able to say, 'What is wrong?' And you are also able to see the person. (Student – Business)

> But when you are on Zoom and Teams you switch off the camera and the microphone and the teacher will just present, present, present, and then end the lesson. (Student – Social Work)

These narratives seem to suggest that participants appreciate seeing their lecturers' face and that lack of non-verbal cues made them feel disconnected from the lecturer. It also seems to suggest that seeing the lecturer's face may influence students' motivation to participate.

For example, in the focus group discussions, one participant commented that:

> Contact [in] class is very important as the interaction between the students and the lecturer is very important. With [online classes] there is less participation from the students and only the lecturer speaks for most of the time. Most of the time it is the lecturer is who talking and less participation from the students.

Other participants reported a desire for more interaction with the lecturer during teaching. For example, one participant commented,

> Lecturers are not teaching compared to face-to-face; there is no interactions like asking questions and they fly/read through the PowerPoint presentation. They no longer ask for questions.

Student–Student Engagement

One of the challenges with online learning is that students can feel isolated from both their peers and their lecturers. Student-student interaction creates a sense of community for the students and enhances student engagement. Participants in the study reported that they were not satisfied with the Moodle communication tools when assigned online collaborative tasks. They expressed that they had more interaction with peers through WhatsApp because of the instant aspect of the platform. The students shared their experiences in the extract here,

> We also use WhatsApp; we create groups without necessarily being instructed by our lecturers. These we use for our study groups where we share material. In addition to the other platforms that have been mentioned, WhatsApp is easy to subscribe to, it is accessible. (Student – Psychology)

> Of all of the platforms, WhatsApp is the best because we are able to see that the person saw your message. (Student – Law)

Although lecturers assigned students online collaborative tasks using Moodle communication tools like the discussion forum, participants preferred WhatsApp for engagement with their peers. They perceived WhatsApp to be more effective in enhancing their interaction and providing opportunities to seek and exchange both emotional and educational support. The students reported that interaction through social media fostered sense of belonging and they did not feel isolated.

Student–Content Engagement

Students' engagement with content online emerged as critical amongst most participants in the various focus groups. Participants expressed divergent views on the extent of digital learning platforms fostering independent learning. Some participants reported that independent engagement with the learning material prompted them to intellectually interrogate the content presented. This was different from face to face where the lecturer guided them in making sense of the content.

> Ever since COVID-19 and the use of online platforms being adopted, I have really grown. Before online platforms, we regarded the lecturer as the knowledge holder, and we always thought what they gave us was enough but since the online learning they refer us to articles and videos and links. We have the zeal to research more and go the extra mile to research online platforms for learning. (Student – Social Sciences)

> I was forced to read and find answers for myself because I am in the course to learn. (Student – Psychology)

> You have to go out and look for information, if you wait for the lecturer you are going to fail. (Student – Science)

> It helped me to learn new ways of learning. (Student – Law)

While some participants held these strong views about the benefits of online learning in facilitating independent learning, some viewed it as burdensome. They reported the following:

> It is a burden in the sense that we are self-teaching—we are given six outlines and six modules, and you get to decide when to study. (Student – Science)

> I am independent yet I am failing. I am not learning what I am supposed to be learning. (Student – Science)

> You are told to be independent, but you are not guided on the extent of your independence. Then you go far out, you stray, or you don't learn enough. (Student –Science)

> The online [classes]did not help me to be an independent learner. (Student – Science)

Even though students appreciated independent learning brought about by the use of digital platforms, they expressed concerns that it became a hindrance to effective learning and that could be attributed to little or no guidance from lecturers.

Findings

This section discusses the findings of this study in relation to the social constructivist conceptual framework, the research questions and the existing literature. Although the limitation of this study is that it is a relatively small qualitative study that used only focus group interviews to collect data, the findings can be transferable to other similar contexts. Despite this limitation, the study provides rich and deep descriptions of students' data that contributes to an understanding of students' lived experiences of online learning in the context of the University of Botswana during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concerning the first question on students' lived experiences with the effectiveness of digital platforms for learning purposes, the analysis indicated that participants predominantly reported negative experiences with online learning. The negative experiences emanated from several factors such as poor network connectivity, unavailability, and lack of compatible digital devices with sanctioned learning platforms, as well as conducive physical spaces for effective engagement in online learning. These appear to have significantly dampened students' enthusiasm and confidence and consequently impacted their attitudes toward online learning.

In terms of poor network connectivity, unavailability, and compatibility of devices, these findings are consistent with other recent research which found that technical issues and lack of compatible digital devices were a major impediment to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Backzek et al., 2021; Aboagye et al., 2021; Pather & Booi, 2020). These findings highlight further insights into the technological constraints associated with online learning.

Access to appropriate technological devices, reliable and stable internet connectivity and digital literacy are critical to students' learning, especially during the emergency remote learning context. It emerged from the data that the use of smartphones to access and download learning materials was limiting because of incompatibility issues. Familiarisation with different digital tools was also a challenge. It also surfaced that inadequate bandwidth and internet connectivity impeded successful participation in the virtual classroom. Recent studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic provide supporting evidence that inappropriate technological devices, unstable internet, insufficient internet data, and inadequate digital literacy skills impeded students' remote learning experience

(Aboagye et al., 2020; Agormedah, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Mphahlele, 2021; Pather & Booi, 2020). It can thus be deduced that teaching and learning during COVID-19 highlighted the digital divide among the students. This is consistent with recent studies that indicate that online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic might have widened the digital divide between social classes rather than allowing all learners to learn (Agung et al., 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020; Basuony et al., 2020; Nhatuve, 2021; Mphahlele et al., 2021; UN, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Another significant factor is that a quiet physical environment, both at home and university, was perceived to be critical in facilitating focus and participation in virtual classrooms. Data revealed that distractions resulting from using shared learning spaces hindered free participation during virtual lessons. These findings are reiterated in Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), Pather and Booi (2020), and Literat (2021), who suggest that these challenges often exposed students' socio-economic inequalities. Premised on these, academic institutions have to consider providing spaces that are specifically designated for virtual classes.

Data revealed that online learning seemed to be inappropriate for STEM and other practical subjects. In this study, online platforms proved to be limiting because they do not provide opportunities for experiments and practical problem-solving. Consistent with this, Neumann et al. (2002) contend that indiscriminate attempts to transfer teaching methods across disciplines could be a hindrance to the effective use of digital platforms. In addition, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), Surani and Hamidah (2020), and Appana (2008) maintain that disciplinary differences are an important factor affecting the use and appropriateness of technology. Therefore, the study highlights the importance of aligning digital technologies with knowledge perspectives in various fields of study in online course design because not all courses can be effectively transformed from a hands-on classroom experience to a computer-based environment.

With regard to the second research question which explored how students perceived their lecturers' online pedagogical practices, the findings revealed that students placed great value on their lecturers' practices in how they deliver and package content for remote and virtual learning environments. In this study, students felt overburdened and overwhelmed because of a lack of consideration on what tasks should be pre-distributed online for offline completion and which tasks can be completed in real-time during a virtual classroom. These considerations would enable students to engage with instructional material at a reasonable pace and eliminate the sense of being overburdened and overwhelmed. Consistent with these observations, Literat (2021) reports that participants in his study perceived online learning as overwhelming because of the high workload, emotional, and psychological challenges that hampered active engagement with online courses. Bao (2020) suggests that, to promote students' focus, teachers should break down content into small units with each lasting approximately 20–25 minutes. This implies that pedagogical practices play a critical role in the way students interact with, respond to, and comprehend online learning material.

The findings also suggest that lecturers need to make a conscious effort to balance between teacher talk and class activities when delivering online content. Participants in this study reported excessive teacher talk and absence of non-verbal cues during virtual classrooms, which could be attributed to the separation created by the screen, characteristic of virtual platforms. This separation eliminates lecturers' opportunity to gauge learners' reactions and make necessary adjustments. This is consistent with Bao (2020) who argues that, in online platforms, learners only depend on the spoken word especially where the video is switched off to optimise internet performance. In such scenarios, students do not benefit from non-verbal cues like body language, facial expressions, and teachers' voices. Thus, Camacho and Legare (2020) suggest platforms that provide tools for instructors to demonstrate tasks and share their screens, while also capturing the instructor's face.

The last research question explored how students perceived the quality of online instruction in enhancing student engagement and participation. In this study, issues that emerged as critical to a satisfying online environment were a student-to-student engagement, engagement with the lecturer, and engagement with course content. Participants cited student-to-student engagement in online environments as critical in creating a sense of community. Scholars have also discussed the importance of student engagement and the need to strengthen the use of collaboration tools. They point out that student engagement increases students' satisfaction, enhances student motivation to learn, reduces the sense of isolation, and improves student performance in online courses (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Banna et al., 2015; Britt, 2015). Contrary to this, findings in this study suggest that lecturers did not effectively explore the use of collaborative tools on Moodle such as wikis, discussion forums, and chats to facilitate interaction and engagement among learners. Consequently, students resorted to the use of social media platforms that they were familiar with and were easily accessible, such as WhatsApp to facilitate engagement and interaction. This finding is congruent with Everson et al. (2013) and Tess (2013) who found out that the use of social media in online courses provided an opportunity to enhance engagement through social interaction among learners. This is in line with the social constructivist theory

(Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasises that knowledge construction is a social process; therefore, through student interaction and engagement, students can create knowledge which subsequently leads to their academic success.

Furthermore, participants perceived student and lecturer engagement as valuable in enhancing learning in the virtual classroom. It is interesting to note that participants' perception of engagement with the lecturer referred to the ability to *see* their lecturers during virtual lessons. Consistent with this finding, Hunt and Oyarzun (2020) contend that students desire to interact with the facilitator and peers and also highlight the importance of being able to present oneself as a real person in virtual platforms. Participants also seemed to be attached to the traditional (face-to-face) pedagogy where social presence is inherent. This is supported by other studies that indicate that students preferred face-to-face teaching which allowed both academic and social interaction (Shawaqfeh et al., 2020; Aboagye et al., 2021).

Online learning environments require autonomous and self-directed learning consistent with social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Participants' views in this study revealed that online learning environments fostered independent learning and growth as it provided them with opportunities to interact with content and take ownership of their learning. However, a few participants perceived self-directed instruction as challenging and felt that they needed to be guided to understand the theoretical knowledge base. These sentiments are consistent with the World Bank (2020) report that states that simply pointing students to different online content and resources without appropriate guidance would not benefit students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident from our findings that lecturers assume learners have the skills and level of maturity required to interact with online content independently. Therefore, a conscious effort to develop skills for autonomous learning is crucial.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Botswana through the lens of social constructivist theory. The social constructivist perspective underpins a student-centred learning process and promotes learning environments and instructional pedagogies that are student-centred and highly engaging activities. Several insights can be drawn from this study. First, the findings indicate negative online learning experiences by students which were influenced by factors such as poor network connectivity, unavailability of devices for online learning, lack of compatible digital devices for sanctioned learning platforms, lack of quiet physical learning environments, and lecturers' pedagogical practices. Second, the study highlights lecturers' pedagogical practices which appeared not to have been aligned to the principles of social constructivism. This seemed to have impacted negatively on students experiences of online teaching and learning. Last, contrary to the social constructivist view that learners need to take responsibility for their learning, the study indicated that some students had challenges doing so. In the same vein, Chan (2001) cautions that students' ability and preparedness to take responsibility for autonomous learning is not intrinsic, it has to be encouraged and acquired through formal learning. Therefore, there is a need for institutions of higher learning to offer appropriate training for lecturers and support for students in order to facilitate a good online learning experience. Future research could explore the learning culture that promotes learner autonomy in online platforms.

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DR B T. RAMORAKA is currently a Senior lecturer at the University of Botswana in the Department of Communication and Study Skills. She holds both Masters' Degree in English Language Teaching for Specific Purposes and a PhD in English language teaching and Applied Linguistics from the University of Warwick in the UK. She has taught communication and academic literacy courses at tertiary level for more than 20 years. Her research interests are in written academic discourse analysis, genre analysis, academic writing,

corpus-based textual analysis and teaching at higher education institutions. She has presented at several international and local seminars and conferences and has published in local, regional and international journals.

BEAUTY BOIKANYO NTEREKE is currently a senior lecturer in the Communication and Academic Literacy Unit at the University of Botswana. Beauty has an MA (ELT) Nottingham University, UK; Post Graduate Diploma in Education and a BA Humanities Degree from the University of Botswana. She has taught communication and academic literacy course at tertiary level for more than 18 years. Her research interests are in academic writing, digital technologies in education, academic and professional communication. She has presented at several international and local seminars and conferences and has published in local and international journals.

DR. BRIGID GOITSE CONTEH is currently a lecturer in the Communication and Study Skills Unit at the University of Botswana. She obtained her MEd in Language Education from Georgia Southern University, USA and a PhD in Language and Literacy Education from the University of British Columbia, Canada. She has a more than 20 years in the teaching experience in English for academic and professional communication in higher education institutions. She has presented various academic and research-based papers at several national and international conferences. Her research interests include digital literacies, academic literacies and academic writing in ESL contexts.

BASETSANA KEOKGALE TLHOBOGANG is a lecturer at the University of Botswana in the Department of Communication and Study Skills. She is currently reading for a PhD in Media, Culture and Heritage at Newcastle University. She has taught communication and academic literacy courses at tertiary level for more than 15 years. Her research interests are in the areas of academic and professional communication, public relations and research in digital ethnographies.