

## **An Academic's Professional Experiences in a Developing Country during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Autoethnography**

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries imposed restrictions on daily movements and operations, which resulted in the physical closure of academic institutions. As the world moved online, a University in Guyana also transitioned its programmes. However, operating in an online environment was fraught with challenges relating to inadequate technological expertise and support, official policies, and financial, technological, and infrastructural constraints. Through autoethnographic self-reflection, this research considered how the author experienced lecturing during the COVID-19 pandemic between April 2020 and December 2021. The themes that emerged out of a thematic analysis of the author's self-recorded recollections for this period revealed the specific challenges faced by the author, how they adapted their professional practice, and the lessons learned from those experiences. These findings were compared against literature describing the experiences of academics in developed and developing countries to discover shared experiences and those specific to the Guyana context.

**Keywords:** *Autoethnography; Online Instruction; Professional Experiences; Higher Education; COVID-19 Pandemic; Developing Country*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a disruptive force that significantly affected our way of life. Every sector across the globe was negatively impacted by the emergency restrictions to operations that Governments enforced to curb the spread of the deadly coronavirus (Garcia-Morales et al., 2021; Hale et al., 2021; Krishnamurthy, 2020). In the education sector, many universities closed their physical campuses and adopted a distance education model by moving their classes online (Babbar & Gupta, 2021; Krishnamurthy, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Academic staff and students were forced to transition to classes online whether they were technologically, financially, or mentally ready (Ghazi-Saidi et al., 2020). In Latin America and the Caribbean, higher education institutions had previously made limited use of technology in their operations. These regions also had insufficient information and communications technology (ICT) support. These factors subsequently affected the equity and quality of the online education offered (World Bank, 2021), with major interruptions to education affecting vulnerable students the hardest (UNESCO, 2020).

In early 2020, I was working as a University lecturer at a financially disadvantaged institution in Guyana, a small, developing country in South America. In April 2020, the University began transitioning from the physical to the virtual work environment. However, it had made limited use of online technologies in its academic functions before the pandemic and lacked official policies guiding their use. The lack of technological expertise and support, and financial, technological, and infrastructural constraints led to increased difficulties in moving academic responsibilities online (World Bank, 2020). As a lecturer whose original mode of work was in a face-to-face environment, the rapid shift to conducting classes online was fraught with challenges.

In this paper, I have used the autoethnographic approach, which is a method to describe and systematically analyse personal experiences (Ellis et al., 2011) to reflect on (i) the challenges I faced as a lecturer delivering my courses through Emergency Remote Teaching, and (ii) how I

adapted my professional practice to cope with the transition during this time. Apart from contributing to the literature, this paper aims to enlighten readers so that they may gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by a lecturer at a University in a developing country while also being able to appreciate the similarities and differences in the realities that exist between their country and Guyana.

The overarching research question (RQ) for this study is:

RQ: *How did the sudden transition from the face-to-face mode of operations to the online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic affect my experiences as a lecturer at a University in Guyana?*

The sub-research questions are:

RQ1: What challenges did I face as a lecturer during the sudden transition from the face-to-face mode of operations to the online environment?

RQ2: How did I adapt my professional practice to cope with the sudden transition from the face-to-face mode of operations to the online environment?

RQ3: How did I develop professionally through my experiences as a lecturer during the sudden transition from the face-to-face mode of operations to the online environment?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The emergency restrictions enforced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many schools and universities rapidly moving their operations online without prior planning. According to Torrisi and Davis (2000), preparation for delivering courses must be conceptualised as a transformation rather than a simple translation from the face-to-face to the online mode. Not only does it require a redesign of the courses, but also a change in the lecturer's way of thinking about course delivery. For effective online learning, courses must be suitably developed to be conveyed online so that the effect of the lack of face-to-face interaction is mitigated (Branch & Dousay, 2015; Lemay et al., 2021). Like traditional classrooms, online learning courses must meet learners' needs. By incorporating elements such as clear expectations, course clarity and organisation, student engagement and learner support, existing literature suggests that students involved in the online mode of instruction do not necessarily find it more stressful or challenging than learning in traditional classrooms (McQuiggan, 2012; Roddy et al., 2017).

Well-designed online learning courses generally exhibit the following characteristics: a welcoming and supportive environment that fosters student interaction (Barbour & Bennett, 2013; Hoyle, 2010; Lai, 2017; Stroet et al., 2013; Velasquez et al., 2013), engaging chunked content to prevent cognitive overload, activities that promote knowledge construction through active learning (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015), and communication in synchronous and asynchronous formats (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Rose, 2018). Effective lecturers adapt to students' needs (Cook & Grant-Davie, 2016), communicate and facilitate courses effectively (Crichton & McDaid, 2016; Roddy et al., 2017; Yuan & Kim, 2014), motivate students, and show concern for their learning (Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Roddy et al., 2017).

Although educational institutions worldwide were forced to transition to the online mode of teaching and learning at short notice due to the pandemic, **developed countries** held a distinct advantage in terms of their preparedness and readiness for the transition over developing countries. Most students already had computer access, and high-speed Internet access was widely available. According to a survey conducted by Gaebel et al. (2021) in 2020 on higher education institutions in European countries, most institutions utilised virtual learning environments (VLEs) to supplement

their face-to-face operations even before the pandemic. This enabled the seamless continuation of course content being made available online during the pandemic. Pre-existing familiarity with VLEs allowed for smaller learning curves by persons who were already accustomed to their University's platform and were learning to use additional functionalities (Godber & Atkins, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Additionally, many of these universities employed instructional technologists who developed course material and aided lecturers in utilising this content in their classes.

In the 2021 survey of European higher education institutions, the main issues faced by these institutions in delivering online instruction were a lack of staff resources and inadequate external funding opportunities (Gaebel et al., 2021). A study by two lecturers from a University in New Zealand found that their main concerns were choosing appropriate pedagogical practices, creating an effective online learning environment, providing pastoral care to students, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance (Godber & Atkins, 2021). In a study by Dabrowski (2021), teachers working in isolation without community support were more likely to suffer from burnout and mental stress. Online Communities of Practice were set up by some University faculty within their departments using various social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Discord and Reddit (Trust et al., 2020; Ulla & Perales, 2021). A virtual or online community of practice (oCoP) is a platform that "attracts professionals operating in a specific knowledge domain, who share a common problem, interest, or topic" (Bolisani et al., 2020, p.1). Research shows that faculty who used oCoP during the COVID-19 pandemic were able to benefit from academic, social and emotional support (Greenhow et al., 2020).

Throughout the literature that focused on online learning in developed countries, notably absent were concerns that persons would be unable to access online learning environments. There was the inherent assumption that access to digital infrastructure and support for digital technologies for online learning were accessible to all within the classroom.

Murgatroyd (2020) argued that the nature of online learning makes it accessible, affordable, and flexible. This argument took for granted the pedagogical expertise necessary for the online environment, and the facilities accessible to persons in technology-advanced countries. However, it did not consider the existence of alternate realities that are deeply affected by the digital divide. In stark contrast to those in developed countries, persons in **developing countries** contend with complex, underlying issues, such as unreliable electricity, lack of access to the Internet or inability to afford reliable high-speed Internet, inability to afford suitable computing devices (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; World Bank, 2020), and home environments that are not conducive for work or school (Godber & Atkins, 2021). In their study of students, parents and teachers from 3 developing countries – Libya, Pakistan and Afghanistan, performed by Khlaif and Salha (2020) they identified the lack of sufficient laptops and/or phones in the homes to support the family members as a major factor affecting the quality of online learning. A study carried out between October to December 2020 of schools in 29 Caribbean countries revealed that

"There is a percentage of our students who don't have access to the internet. There's a larger portion of them who will have access to the internet but mainly on their smartphones, they don't have a computer, or they don't have a tablet to access, so it's only mobile data" (Parker & Alfaro, 2021, p. 12)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students had access to their educational institutions' computer and Internet facilities. Following the lockdown, they were expected to make their own arrangements to acquire a suitable computing device and a reasonable-speed Internet connection to support their needs. However, job loss and changes in financial circumstances during the pandemic meant that persons did not have the means to upgrade their services to meet the higher resource requirements of the online environment (World Bank, 2020). Resources necessary for online education that were

taken for granted by academic staff and students from developed countries were a luxury in many developing countries.

Several issues related to online instruction were common to lecturers in both **developed and developing countries**. However, they were more prevalent among academics in developing countries where online learning was implemented at short notice due to the lockdowns. Factors such as time constraints, lack of skilled expertise, or lack of foresight meant that courses could not be redesigned according to suitable pedagogical or best practices (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Godber & Atkins, 2021). Lectures were held virtually in the same format as face-to-face lectures (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). Studies have shown that several university faculty members lacked necessary technological skills and encountered problems in effectively using ICT (Aytaç, 2021; Li & Wang, 2020; Tadesse et al., 2020). With little support available, lecturers worked overtime as they tried to learn and use new technological tools in the classroom and convert their courses into formats suitable for the online environment. They also had to deal with the psychological stress arising because of trying to balance work and their personal lives (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020; Chang & Fang, 2020; Hoq, 2020). The lack of a clear distinction between work and personal time and dealing with increased workloads resulted in increased feelings of stress and depression (Godber & Atkins, 2021). Academic staff also expressed concern over the continued pressure on research achievement whilst coping with the pandemic (Gaebel et al., 2021). Further, lecturers were pressured to provide pastoral care to students who had not yet developed solid coping strategies.

Academics in both developed and developing countries have, for many years, grappled with the problem of student interaction and engagement in the traditional classroom environment and more recently, within the online environment (Alqahtani & Rajkhan, 2020; Lambert, 2020). Keeping students engaged in the online classroom is even more difficult than in the traditional classroom because of differences in the two environments: the student is in an isolated setting with several environmental and technology-related distractions that include digital distraction and multitasking (Wang, 2022); the lack of student and teacher presence in the same physical space which results in a lack of direct person-to-person interaction (Wut et al., 2021); and the lack of social interaction and engagement with their peers resulting in boredom and lack of engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Cultivating a sense of community in an online classroom is important in providing improved classroom participation and learning (Garrison et al., 2010). However, this can be difficult in the online environment, especially with limited opportunities for student-student interactions (Koslow & Piña, 2015).

Course-related issues regarding content overload, difficulty in grasping course content, and communicating with others within the class were commonly identified as areas of concern (Hashimoto, 2021; Jung et al., 2021). Testing was also complicated since online testing without invigilation may lack integrity (Arkoful & Abaidoo, 2015; Rivera-Mata, 2021). This is especially true for objective-type assessments using question formats such as multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks and matching. Nguyen et al. (2020) suggested that measures such as increasing the frequency of assessments and using strategies that required the student to utilise higher-order thinking skills, could be used to minimise online academic dishonesty.

While existing literature considers the experiences of academics in developed and developing countries around the world, little literature exists that identifies or describes the experiences of lecturers in the Guyana context during the COVID-19 pandemic. I propose to fill this conceptual gap by examining the challenges I experienced as a lecturer at the University as I attempted to support my students' education.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Ontological and Epistemological Perspectives**

As a researcher, my ontological position is relativism through interpretivism. It is important to recognise that each individual experiences a reality moulded by their lived experience, a concept supported by interpretivism (Greener, 2008; Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). As considered in relativism, these separate realities influence how everyone would interact in a particular context (Lee, 2013; Scotland, 2012). Having completed my undergraduate education during the pre-pandemic years, my lived experiences were very different from those of students attending university during the COVID-19 global crisis. As a lecturer, it is necessary to understand these different, subjective realities to accommodate and support the varying needs of students in their learning. My epistemological stance follows as one of social constructivism, whereby knowledge can be constructed by observing students' interactions, social forms, and processes through which their internalised understanding and beliefs are developed (Adams, 2006; Vygotsky, 1962).

### **Autoethnography as a Method**

Autoethnography is a method that allows the autoethnographer to play the dual and self-exploratory role of researcher and participant, thereby adding their voice to provide a deeper understanding and more meaningful context of a particular experience (Starr, 2010; Wall, 2006). It requires the autoethnographer to live "consciously, emotionally, and reflexively", such that observations made are interrogated to question what and why they think and believe the way they do (Adams et al., 2013).

Autoethnography provided a reflexive self-introspection element to enable me to make sense of my professional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a better understanding of myself in the context of a lecturer adjusting to disruptive change. It allowed me to reflect on my thoughts and behaviours because of my experiences. In addition to these personal benefits, autoethnography provided me with the platform to represent myself and otherwise invisible context-specific factors to the wider community.

### **Data Collection**

This research adopted a data-driven approach utilising the observations, analyses, and conclusions of recent and relevant literature pertaining to the responses of educational institutions in developed and developing countries to the COVID-19 pandemic. A review of recent peer-reviewed literature sourced from reputable online journal databases and open-source journals enabled the identification of existing and recurring themes as they relate to challenges faced by these institutions.

In addition, I identified themes unique to my University's circumstances. The identification and discussion of these themes enabled me to insightfully comment on challenges and coping mechanisms that are of significance in an educational institution in a developing country, that may previously have gone unobserved in the existing literature.

My University transitioned to the online mode in April 2020. The period from April 2020 to July 2020 when my second semester course was completed was a period when the focus was simply to complete the course using various technologies like Zoom, Facebook, and the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). This was a period during which I was just trying to keep my head above water and coping with both personal and professional challenges. The realisation that the pandemic was not anywhere near the end, and that we were going into the 2020-2021 academic year in the online mode was when I started active documentation of my experiences as a lecturer

transitioning into a fully online mode of instruction and assessment. Using a combination of observation and reflection, I recorded my experiences and perceptions related to performing my duties as a lecturer and coping with challenges within my personal life. Making these notes was not a deliberate part of data gathering as the research was not planned at the time, but it was important in helping me navigate the online journey.

In early 2022 when I embarked on performing an autoethnographic study on this topic, I drew on the data from April 2020 to December 2021 during the self-reflective writing process. The data for these recollections included personal memories, class experiences, and my journal entries for the period September 2020 to December 2021. My recollections were verified against the message history of work-related WhatsApp conversations that I had had with my Department's lecturers, work-related e-mails received from the Administration regarding University operations during the pandemic, and my calendar data for the period April 2020 to December 2021 to guide the development of the timeline. To ensure that my personal memories used in the autoethnography were a true reflection of the events, I asked a colleague to review them for accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

I then performed a thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach. This process was performed using line-by-line coding over iterative readings of the recollection data. The data was tagged with codes associated with the themes discovered during the literature review, and with codes that identified recurring thoughts that I felt were integral to how I, as a lecturer, experienced and coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. The codes were then grouped into broader categories to describe the recurrent themes that were depicted by the data. To ensure the objectivity and rigor of this research, I asked a colleague familiar with my experiences to critically review the narrative.

### **Ethical Considerations**

While I did not foresee any ethical issues associated with this research, I remained cognisant of my position as a member of the institution in which I am conducting this research. I have not used personally identifiable information when describing my past interactions or conversations between myself and my colleagues or students. To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of students and colleagues in this research, pseudonyms were used to obscure their identities. The opinions and comments expressed in the data were commonly voiced by multiple persons and therefore cannot be traced to any particular individual.

## **FINDINGS**

The themes arising from my recollections illustrate the challenges I faced and how I adapted my professional practice while operating in the online environment. These themes are presented below.

### **Challenges Faced**

#### **1. *Lights On, Lights Off – The Uncertainty of Unreliable Electricity***

*"I had to cancel class again this morning because the entire coast has a blackout. A few students joined my class, but it didn't make sense to have the class when so many students couldn't attend."*

The electrical infrastructure in Guyana remains relatively poor in the highly populated areas, and in some cases primitive or non-existent in the rural communities. Certain areas experience frequent

spikes in electricity, while others experience low voltage for prolonged periods. The electrical infrastructure is prone to frequent failure, and the constant uncertainty and worry affect the mental well-being of the people who rely on consistent, reliable electricity to perform tasks. Even though some persons have access to a backup power source, these may not be available to all persons, and students without them should not be penalised for missing a class or test due to an incident beyond their control. During online testing, unreliable electricity has even more of a negative mental impact on students, who are fearful that they will be interrupted by a power failure, and so cannot focus their full concentration on completing the test. To accommodate students who could not attend class due to a power outage in their area, I provided lecture recordings that they could go through in their own time. Sometimes lectures had to be rescheduled when the outage affected most students in the class.

## **2. *You're Breaking Up, Please Repeat – The Difficulty of Lecturing with Low Bandwidth***

*“My upload speed barely supports uploading the audio and slideshow during classes. I feel bad that my students are trying to listen carefully, and they're interrupted by my voice becoming distorted and unintelligible. I'm already trying to prevent the amount of data being transferred by not allowing the use of video, and we're working with the bare minimum here.”*

Classes and meetings were held via the videoconferencing software, Zoom. In 2020, Internet service providers in Guyana had the infrastructure in place in urban areas to support bandwidth speeds of up to a maximum of 250 Mbps. However, access to high-speed Internet was locked behind expensive subscription fees. Average DSL Internet users had access to download speeds of 5-10Mbps, and less than 1Mbps in upload speeds. These relatively low-speed Internet connections had the potential to negatively impact the transmission of audio and video data during synchronous sessions, resulting in distorted videoconferencing and loss of data during the transmission process. It meant that lecturers and students could not have their videos on during class, as they were unable to effectively transfer large amounts of data generated by videoconferencing. Further, the culture in Guyana is one where extended families tend to live in a family home, resulting in a single Internet connection being utilised by multiple persons, further degrading the service.

## **3. *The Lack of Adequate Technological Skills***

*“I had never needed to use Moodle or Zoom before, and suddenly my entire worklife revolved around these two applications that I knew little about.”*

Before the pandemic, the University did not have access to videoconferencing software, nor was their Moodle platform highly utilised. Most lecturers used online services like Facebook, WhatsApp and e-mail to communicate their course material with students.

In April 2020, the University purchased Zoom subscriptions which were integrated into the Moodle LMS. Most staff at first learned to use these software by trial and error. As we were using software without a clear grasp of their features, it was inevitable that we would face a variety of issues, ranging from harmless oversights to malicious disruptions. As we moved into the 2020-2021 academic year, the University started to offer multiple training sessions in the use of Moodle and Zoom.

## **4. *Equipped with Just a Smartphone – Smartphones Replacing Computers in Households***

*“Many of my students already own a smartphone for everyday use, and they are now using those devices to access their education. The problem is that these devices have small screens and limited hardware specifications. Students have mentioned how difficult it is to*

*read the slides that are shared on the screen during lectures, but when I've asked them to join the lecture from a computer instead, they've said that they don't own or have access to one."*

Smartphones are the preferred form of computing device, with affordable device options being very popular in Guyana. Increasingly, students attended my online lectures using their smartphones, while indicating that their households did not have a computer. However, smartphones are not optimal as a student's primary computing device due to their small screen sizes and on-screen keyboards, and lack of a point-and-click device. Before the pandemic, the lack of ownership of a computer would not have been an issue, as the students could have used the computer facilities on campus. Many employed students also made use of their computers at their workplace. However, with the lockdown in effect, some students were unable to access any computers.

*"The Moodle mobile app provided a different user experience to the web browser version. By default, the mobile app presented a single course section at a time instead of everything at once. Some students were confused by this, and told me that they weren't seeing elements of the course. The difference in user experience was acutely felt during tests, as I received many reports of the mobile app being slow or question formats such as the 'Drag and drop' functioning differently to what was expected."*

Several students using smartphones used the Moodle mobile app to connect to their courses. However, due to some limitations of the app, it is not recommended as a replacement for accessing Moodle with a web browser on a computer, but rather as a complementary tool. Moodle's user interface is not optimised for mobile devices resulting in fewer features, and certain aspects of the course being displayed differently. Certain functions, like drag-and-drop support, might not work as anticipated. Therefore, students using smartphones may experience difficulty navigating the site and accessing course materials or taking quizzes on Moodle. I encouraged students to report issues with their mobile app user experience so that I could address them when designing the Moodle course interface and activities.

##### **5. We Were Not Ready –Insufficient Policies for Online Operations**

*"Initially there were no existing plans or policies to facilitate the process of going online. Hence it was difficult to get answers about the University's expectations for online classes."*

Before 2020, little thought was officially given to using the Internet to support the educational operations of the University. Although the Administration had generally felt positive about online learning (Livingstone, 2015), few steps had been taken to make it a reality. Thus, when the University took its operations online, there were no policies in place. Lecturers were advised to be flexible, considering students' lack of access to technology, low bandwidth and personal circumstances. Lecturers found themselves playing the roles of both lecturer and counselor but were not guided on the extent of the support that they were expected to offer. Staff were left to make decisions while shouldering the risk of not being safeguarded by established regulations.

The lack of policy governing online content at the start of the pandemic was of concern. Previously, as lecturers, we had concerns about students sharing course material on websites such as Course Hero. As all the course material was now being made available online, lecturers were worried about how the content that they had created would be protected. Further, as there was no policy to guide how audio/video recordings of lectures could be used, many lecturers were concerned about making recordings of lectures available to students. As we moved into the 2020-2021 academic year, the University's IT Governance, Research, Innovation, and Security (IGRIS) unit that was newly established in July 2020 started to develop several policies addressing online assessments and violation of copyright/intellectual property issues, among others.



## 6. *The Consequence of Modifying Assessments Without In-Depth Reflection*

*“Students are under a lot of pressure with the pandemic and their changing circumstances, so maybe they’ll perform better with multiple small assessments. Even if they do poorly in one, it won’t have a huge impact on their grade. They may also be less motivated to cheat since a lot of their grade won’t be riding on a single assessment.”*

Existing literature suggests that effective testing in the online environment should comprise of a series of small but frequent tests or quizzes (Still & Still, 2015; Szpunar et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2018; Wooten, 2016). To ensure that no single assessment would weigh students down in the event of poor performance, some members of my Faculty chose to institute small weekly quizzes or graded activities.

*“The increased number of assessments that were being held crushed our students under their weight. Grades are actually deteriorating instead of improving and some students are considering dropping out.”*

As the 2020-2021 academic year progressed, complaints from overwhelmed students began to reach the lecturers. Students were taking anywhere from 4 to 6 courses per semester as part of their program requirements. Students said that they were overloaded with multiple weekly assessments and indicated that they did not have enough time to devote to all the courses. The impact was disastrous. Multiple courses in the Faculty had high failure rates due to students not completing many of the assessments.

*“Maybe smaller, frequent assessments work if students are taking two courses, but for a regular semester’s worth of courses, it’s too much. It makes more sense giving application-type assignments to utilise the concepts, rather than having so many smaller assessments.”*

My Department was concerned that we were doing students a disservice by unwittingly putting them in incredibly stressful situations instead of aiding them in their education. This led to a review regarding how testing should be performed, and how many assessments should be given per course. The Department’s reflection led to lecturers implementing a maximum of five assessments per course. The positive impact of this change was immediately felt as students were under less pressure and could focus on completing the small number of assessments per course.

## 7. *The Lack of Student Interaction & Engagement*

*“I feel like I’m talking to myself. Are the students listening? Are they even there?”*

By 2020, I had been lecturing for nine years and had gained a level of comfort in my abilities in the physical classroom. I was able to translate, with some level of success, certain active learning strategies from the face-to-face classroom to the virtual classroom. These strategies included interspersing the 3-hour lecture with small activities such as asking students to respond to a question using a show of hands or using a poll and getting them involved in small group activities using breakout rooms. However, it was not as effective as it was in the face-to-face classroom setting. The low bandwidth available to me and the students forced me to ask students not to turn on their videos. My default method of lecturing, interspersed with interaction and whiteboard usage, was suddenly difficult to accomplish effectively.

My ability to change direction or address concerns on the fly was suddenly of little use since I could not see my students and establish a rapport with them. I could no longer judge from their facial expressions and body language whether they had understood the material and were engaged. There was no way of knowing if a student was present in the class or had joined the Zoom meeting

and then disappeared or was multitasking with other tasks. Overall, there was little interaction, and whatever interaction there was usually from the same few students.

## **Adapting my Professional Practice for the Online Environment**

### **1. *Fostering Student Interaction & Engagement Through Active Learning in the Online Environment***

*“Students always enjoyed in-class group work on campus. I believe the same effect can be partially recreated by using Break Out Rooms. This should keep them actively engaged, and less likely to tune the class out.”*

Over the 2020-2021 academic year, I experimented with new ways of conducting online classes. In addition, the University began providing several training sessions and workshops to assist with developing online courses using online pedagogies and incorporating various technological tools to enhance learning in the virtual environment. I used some of the same active learning strategies that I used during the face-to-face classes to keep students more engaged and focused. This was time-consuming as I had to plan online activities for each class, and this increased my workload. Active learning strategies for collaboration, such as think-pair-share and small group activities that I previously used in the traditional classroom setting had to be adapted to the online classroom using online pedagogical tools such as polling software, breakout rooms, digital whiteboards, Zoom reactions and game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot. Discussions in the Break Out Rooms tended to be animated and relaxed. The smaller group settings provided a less intimidating space for students to communicate, and students appeared to be more enthusiastic and engaged after they returned from the Break Out Rooms. By the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, students began feeling more confident in their interactions and asking to use their microphones to contribute their thoughts to the class. This was an incredible difference from the very beginning of the academic year, where students were silent listeners, whose presence could not be felt.

### **2. *The Faceless Voice – Learning How to Speak in the Online Classroom***

*“Is that my voice? That doesn't sound like me. Is that really what I sound like?”*

About a month into moving online, I had listened to a recording of a Department meeting at which I spoke, and I was shocked by how I sounded. My voice did not sound the way I thought it did, and instead had a louder, harder, more serious tone. This intimidating voice did not reflect who I was as a lecturer or person. Feedback from past students indicated that they felt more motivated if they were able to connect with the lecturer. As my students could not see my face, it was important to establish that connection through my voice alone. Since that revelation, I've worked to modulate my voice, to add a more friendly tone so that students would feel comfortable interacting with me. I also included lighthearted moments during lectures to make students more relaxed. Over time, I found that students seemed more comfortable communicating with me and their peers in the classroom.

### **3. *Acquiring the Technological Skillset for the Online Environment***

The University's VLE (Moodle) and videoconferencing software (Zoom) necessitated lecturers to become advanced users within a short timeframe. In addition to learning the features of the software, I also needed to be able to use the features effectively. For example, some students become overwhelmed by the amount of content presented on Moodle, and struggle to find the material they're currently supposed to be focusing on. I attempted to maintain their focus by hiding content and only making it available when it was being addressed in class. The more advanced Moodle features, such as testing, group submissions and marking, were far more complex and I contacted a colleague to guide me through them.

*“On multiple occasions, Zoom classes and meetings were disrupted by malicious actors. They hijacked the sessions by sharing their own screens, annotating the screen with offensive language, and unmuting their microphones and playing obscene music. Some of my colleagues were forced to end their class early since they were unable to regain control of the session.”*

Zoom is an immensely useful and powerful tool, if used correctly. However, staff at the University were in the early days of the pandemic not provided with the training necessary to understand and set the features needed to secure a Zoom meeting. Since students tend to share the class Zoom links, there have been occurrences at the University where Zoom sessions have been hijacked by malicious persons. To prevent such an occurrence in my own classroom, a colleague and I set up a Zoom meeting and reviewed every security setting available in Zoom and created a checklist of security settings that needed to be set before allowing persons into the session.

*“Problems like various file types not opening on devices, difficulties getting into the Zoom class, and even problems with students’ hardware and software were issues I encountered every week. These problems necessitated immediate solutions, and waiting for Tech Support wasn’t always an option. If I couldn’t resolve them, then students wouldn’t be able to attend class, or wouldn’t be able to access course content when required.”*

Since our mode of operations was now exclusively online, lecturers in addition to their pedagogical, social, managerial and technical roles (Berge, 2001) were now also tasked with troubleshooting issues when students ran into urgent technological problems. I found myself fielding students’ questions regarding their difficulties with their computing devices and software. As students were using different devices – desktops, laptops, tablets, smartphones - running different operating systems and using different browsers, troubleshooting their problems required me to acquire quite extensive knowledge of various technologies. As an IT lecturer I was able to do so and assist them, but this may not have been the case with other lecturers, especially those with non-IT backgrounds. Since several students used only their phones for all their academic work, I had to familiarise myself with some of the commonly encountered problems and fixes to assist them and resolve issues with the least amount of disruption. For situations beyond my scope, I directed them to the University’s Software Services Helpdesk. Students were also encouraged to assist each other to solve problems. This helped them feel more comfortable with each other and helped boost self-confidence in their abilities.

Technical training provided by the University to staff and students during the academic year 2020-2021 eased many of the problems faced by lecturers and students. In addition, lecturers communicated with each other via WhatsApp and email to share their experiences, ask questions, discuss technological and pedagogical tools, student-related issues, and personal coping mechanisms. For example, when we first encountered problems with academic dishonesty in Moodle quizzes, lecturers shared tips with each other on how this could be minimised. We also assisted each other in setting up our courses and conducting assessments on Moodle.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study was guided by the following research question:

*How did the sudden transition from the face-to-face mode of operations to the online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic affect my experiences as a lecturer at a University in Guyana?*

The study explored my experiences as a lecturer working at a small university in a developing country during the pandemic. There were challenges that I faced in common with academics from

both developed and developing countries. The themes drawn from the literature examining the challenges experienced by lecturers in developed countries indicated that their chief concerns were related to applicable pedagogy, ability to learn the skills necessary to work in the online environment (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020), concerns over content overload, student interaction and engagement (Hashimoto, 2021; Jung et al., 2021), time management, and how to protect one's wellbeing amid the constant demands of the online environment (Dabrowski, 2021; Godber & Atkins, 2021). I faced similar concerns, as these were themes that dealt with issues encountered by academics worldwide.

The themes that I shared with academics from developing countries included issues relating to unreliable electricity and low-bandwidth internet connections. These infrastructural challenges are shared in varying degrees of severity by other developing countries and the more isolated, rural areas in developed countries (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Due to their unpredictable (electricity) and slow (low-speed Internet) nature, these elements create constant uncertainty around the availability and accessibility of quality online learning. It is important to note the negative psychological impact of this unsuitable infrastructure, as the affected persons have no control over it, and hence, cannot foresee when they will be impacted by unreliable service. This is in stark contrast to universities in developed countries where access to infrastructure and digital technologies for online learning are taken for granted.

Prior to the pandemic, my University had focused on face-to-face delivery. Most lecturers did not need to have technological skills beyond using productivity software and the Internet. Similar to other studies (Aytaç, 2021; Li & Wang, 2020), lecturers at my university encountered a lack of technological skills required to use the University's VLE and videoconferencing software. This contrasts with academics in some developed countries whose universities were already using VLEs and supplementing their face-to-face courses with online courses prior to the pandemic (Godber & Atkins, 2021). Unlike academics at some universities who established online Communities of Practice to share information (Trust et al., 2020; Ulla & Perales, 2021), my colleagues and I informally shared our experiences, knowledge, and resources, and provided each other with assistance as needed. The benefits from this approach aligned with those from the literature resulting in much-needed academic, social and emotional support (Greenhow et al., 2020).

I encountered similar problems related to online student interaction and engagement as reported by several researchers (Lambert, 2020; Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Wang, 2022; Wut et al., 2021). These included a reluctance to speak in class, a preference for passive learning, multitasking during class, and disruptions from using digital devices and the environment. However, in my situation, these issues were compounded by the fact that my students and I could not use video due to our low bandwidth, which meant that I could not see their facial expressions and hence had no way of knowing if they understood what I was saying, if they were paying attention, or even if they were present in the class. Since the students could not see each other and had most likely never met each other in person, it was also difficult to establish a sense of community which is key to class participation and improved communication (Garrison et al., 2010). Research has shown the importance of teacher presence in an online classroom, and the importance of providing students a conducive environment in which to communicate with the lecturer and their peers (Leslie, 2020). I also became cognisant of the fact that since my students could not see me, the impression they formed of me was solely through my voice and online persona.

The lack of computers was not noted as a widespread challenge experienced by staff or students in developed countries. However, in Guyana, as in many developing countries (Rahiem, 2020; Khlaif & Salha, 2020) and the Caribbean (Parker & Alfaro, 2021), many students own only smartphones and no computers. Reasons for not owning a computer could range from not seeing the need for one to not having the funds available to purchase one. Others have only one computer in their household which is shared by multiple persons. Whichever the case, my students were and

are still using their smartphones for many of their university tasks, even though it does not provide them with the optimal and most effective user experience.

Of particular interest were the findings related to course assessments. Existing literature suggests that online testing is most effective if conducted through a series of small, frequent assessments (Nguyen et al., 2020; Still & Still, 2015; Szpunar et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2018; Wooten, 2016). However, when this model was adopted by my Department, the cumulative workload that ensued was too high for the students to cope with, resulting in reduced academic performance and low morale. The proposed model of small, frequent assessments should, therefore, be adopted after careful consideration of the factors that could result in unintended negative consequences.

The rapid transition to the online environment was experienced globally, and the difficulties in overcoming the disadvantages associated with this shift were almost universally shared. The impact of challenges directly related to conducting courses in the online environment was initially compounded by my University's lack of strategy for online learning. Navigating the process of emergency online teaching with little initial guidance was a difficult and frustrating process during the initial phase of the transition. As observed from the literature, online courses should be designed according to suitable pedagogy and best practices (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Godber & Atkins, 2021) to prevent cognitive overload and promote active learning (Arkorf & Abaidoo, 2015). However, there was no time to enable the redesign of courses and training of staff when the pandemic restrictions were initially enforced. During the academic year 2020-2021, the University began to invest in IT personnel and resources, and policies were developed to guide online operations in addition to offering training sessions and workshops.

### **Opportunities for Professional and Personal Development**

The transition to online learning created new opportunities for advancing my technological and pedagogical knowledge and expertise and was instrumental in promoting my personal and professional development. During the 2020-2021 academic year, the University began offering training sessions to assist lecturers in their jobs and support their professional development. I became more confident as a lecturer as the pedagogical strategies and tools I used resulted in more vibrant classes with increased participation.

I developed in a personal capacity as well since I became more confident in my abilities to deal with challenges in stressful situations. I found myself successfully troubleshooting Zoom and other technical issues in the moment and being in a position to be able to provide assistance to colleagues in other faculties in the use of Zoom and Moodle. In retrospect, I realise that I was functioning as a reflective practitioner using both reflection-in-action (solving problems on the spot as and when they happen), and reflection-on-action (using past teaching experiences to solve problems) (Schön, 1983). For academics, reflection is key to promoting learning and self-development, to develop their teaching methods and become more effective educators.

### **Summary Table of Key Findings and Lessons Learned**

The table below summarises the key findings in the form of themes and my recommendations based on lessons learned. These recommendations may be useful to academics, institutions and policymakers, especially in developing countries, who may face similar situations in the future.

**Table 1: Summary of Key Findings**

| <b>Responsible Entity</b> | <b>Key Findings</b>  | <b>Recommendations</b>   |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Academics                 | Uncertainty of Unreliable Electricity                            | Provide audio/video recordings lectures;<br>Provide clear protocols for students to follow in case of disruptions  |
|                           | Difficulty of Lecturing with Low Bandwidth                       | Keep videos short;<br>Use short audio clips to deliver key points;<br>Ask students to use the Reactions feature on Zoom so as to provide the lecturer with feedback;<br>Provide students multimedia content in different forms so that they can access it as video, audio or as text to suit their bandwidth.  |
|                           | Consequence of Modifying Assessments Without In-Depth Reflection | Limit the number of assessments provided;<br>Be cognisant of student workload for the semester   |
|                           | Lack of Student Interaction & Engagement                         | Provide opportunities for virtual interaction and student feedback using technologies like Polling, Gaming platforms like Kahoot, and enabling small group discussions using Zoom breakout rooms   |
|                           | Smartphones Replacing Computers in Households                    | Create course and Moodle quizzes so that they can be accessed without problems using both a browser and Moodle mobile app  |
|                           | The Faceless Voice   | Make students feel comfortable interacting with the lecturer and their peers by using a voice and manner that is welcoming and promotes a safe classroom environment conducive to learning and sharing.  |
|                           | Lack of Adequate Technological Skills                            | Establish online Communities of Practice to enable lecturers to share knowledge and experiences, to promote discussion, and achieve solutions to issues.   |
| Institution               | Lack of Adequate Technological Skills                            | Offer workshops and training on an ongoing basis;<br>Provide textual/visual guides on the use of Moodle, Zoom and other digital platforms and tools<br>Establish online Communities of Practice that can be used for academic professional development, and quickly adapted in times of global crises to provide support to the academic community.  |
| Policy makers             | Insufficient Policies for Online Operations                      | Create clear policies<br>- for the development and implementation of online courses;<br>- that outline how academic dishonesty issues will be addressed;<br>- that outline how violation of copyright/intellectual rights will be addressed;<br>- that outline how to provide support for financially disadvantaged students or those in marginalised communities to allow for continuity of their education |

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study used participant observation, allowing me, the researcher, to be a part of the social group being studied, thus putting me in a position to understand the viewpoint and experiences of my students. This was a strength whereby I had increased familiarity and understanding of my students. However, it was also a limitation in that since I was an active member of the social group being studied, it could have affected the behaviour of the people being observed (Jhangiani et al., 2019).

In addition, if the researcher acts as a participant observer there can be concerns with personal biases and those resulting from developing relationships with the participants (Jhangiani et al., 2019). This can result in the researcher becoming less objective. To minimise subjectivity, a colleague checked my recollections for accuracy and critically reviewed the narrative.

## **CONCLUSION**

This autoethnographic study was conceptualised to reflect on my experiences as a lecturer at a University in Guyana during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As I considered my experiences in the wider context of developed countries, it became clear that I shared similar challenges to academics in developed countries as they relate to course delivery, time management, and personal wellbeing. There also existed infrastructural challenges that Guyana shared with developing countries. In an observation specific to Guyana, I found that students' attitudes towards online assessments differed from the literature from developed countries. This difference was significant, since solutions and strategies created for developed countries would be based on attitudes and values that may not be compatible with those held by persons in Guyana. Thus, any strategy developed external to a specific context must be carefully examined for elements that may not mesh with the existing culture of the intended adopting institution.

Being a reflective practitioner is important to professional development and new learning, especially when operating in challenging and uncertain conditions. Despite the many challenges and stresses that I experienced during the transition to online teaching, the use of reflective practices allowed me to adapt my professional practice successfully for the online environment, improve my teaching, and seize opportunities for professional and personal growth and development.

## **FUTURE WORK**

Though many educational institutions used informal learning networks during the pandemic, there have been no autoethnographic reflections found on the effectiveness of such groups in providing academic and social support to academics. It would be valuable to learn about the lived experiences of academics in these groups during global crises. Further, while autoethnographic studies have been done on the effect of the pandemic on academic burnout and well-being, no research has been found on this topic from academics in Caribbean universities. It would be interesting to know how the global crisis affected Caribbean academics' emotional and well-being in continuing to perform their job functions, ensuring research productivity, and maintaining work and personal life balance.

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