The Impact of De-Transitioning from a Fully Online to a Physical Learning Environment on the Students' Academic Behavior and Their Identities

[1]Rajeswari Kangayanatha Aiyer, *[2]Shalini Maheshika Kumari Kaduwela
[1]Post graduate Institute of English, Open University of Sri Lanka
[2]Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology, Sri Lanka
Email address of the corresponding author - *shalinikaduwela@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Citation:

Rajeswari Kangayanatha Aiyer, Shalini Maheshika Kumari Kaduwela (2023). The Impact of De-Transitioning from a Fully Online to a Physical Learning Environment on the Students' Academic Behavior and Their Identities. Proceedings of SLIIT International Conference on Advancements in Sciences and Humanities, 1-2 December, Colombo, pages 19-24.

ABSTRACT

The effects of COVID - 19 pandemic have been felt around the globe irrespective of the geographical locations and the populace. The education sector too has faced immense challenges due to the sudden shift to online teaching in terms of resources and knowledge sharing. This study, however, focuses on the next wave of the shift; from online back to physical teaching and explores how this has impacted the students in terms of their academic behavior, social relationships, and academic performance. Data was collected from 120 students in the form of identity portraits, semi-structured interviews from three lecturers and from the administration to ascertain the students' academic performance. Thematic multi modal discourse analysis revealed that the perceptions of the lecturers on students' academic performance and behaviour contradicts what students perceived about themselves. Though the students were enthusiastic about returning to physical learning, the lecturers' expectations were not met. The results shed light on the challenges faced in the return to traditional classroom learning and recommend improved understanding among the stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to humanity. It has impacted the lives of the people in all aspects including the education sector. The ramifications of this on the students, their nature of learning and academic behaviour warrant further exploration. With COVID, major changes were witnessed in the teaching practices as strict lock down rules were implemented; learning was forced to be shifted from physical to online classes. The challenges posed by this shift, namely, adapting to new technologies along with being able to deliver and receive learning material online had to be managed by both the educators and the students.

In recent months, as normalcy returns, education has reverted to the physical environment. This second transition (de-transitioning) from online to physical classrooms has come with unique challenges in terms of following the institutional regulations, the behavioral patterns of the students and changing nature of teacher-student interaction. This paper focuses on understanding the impact of this switch on the learners and educators.

While multiple studies have investigated the pedagogical implications like inequalities in accessing online learning (Ilankoon et al., 2020), problems in learning environment (Fatoni et al., 2020; Basar et al., 2021) and disrupted interaction and participation (Tsegay et al., 2022) during the pandemic, only a few discuss the effects of online learning on higher education institutions during the post-COVID period. Even though the studies that analyze learning after COVID focus on the difficulties in teaching online etiquette and transferable professional behaviour (Neuwirth et al., 2020), student management in terms of changing admission dates (Ewing, 2021) and the aftermath of online education in students' attributes Hikmat (2020), none of them have focused on the overarching effect of students' changed classroom behaviour as they return to physical education on teacher's perceptions and the measures to be taken by the management.

Hence, this study examines the problems faced by teachers and students and informs the administrative body by investigating the changes in students' behavior, the implications they have on the educators and how these volatile times have shaped students' academic behaviour.

Therefore, the study sought to find answers to below research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions about getting back to physical classes?

2. What are the lecturers' perceptions of the students' behaviour both inside and outside the classroom?

3. What are the changes witnessed by the lecturers in students' academic behaviour?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Creswell (2014), mixed methods inquiry provides "a more complete understanding of the research problem" (p. 32). Hence, this study utilizes a mixed methods approach to answer the research questions with identity portraits, semi-structured interviews, and statistical data from the administration as key data collection tools. Busch et al., (2006 as cited in Herath 2015) emphasizes the significance of visually representing data for making meaning and expressing ideas that cannot be verbalized. Bagnoli (2009 as cited in Esteban-Guitart et al., 2016) recommends the use of drawings among school and university students as these visual representations have promoted an understanding of the psychology of the students.

To comprehend the psychology of the students through pictorial representations, empty silhouettes were distributed among 120 students who were studying in the Foundation Programme of a private university located in Colombo. They were asked to represent themselves undergoing online education during COVID -19 lockdowns on one half of the figure and to portray themselves in the current times when they are back in physical classes on the other half so that the changes in thought process can be easily represented. Three lecturers who had the experience of conducting online classes and continued with physical classes were selected through purposive sampling for the semi-structured interviews.

In addition, data was collected from the administration with regards to the attendance, assignment submission deadline achievement and pass rates of the students to ascertain the academic success rate of the students.

2.1 Data Analysis

A thematic multi modal discourse analysis Pavalenko (2007, as cited in Bristowe et al., 2014) has been conducted using the student portraits to generate themes that correlated with the themes generated from the lecturers' interviews. Nine sub themes that emerged from the portraits were categorised into three main themes: namely the students' perception on their academic, behavioral, and attitudinal changes. Parallel to these themes, the lecturers' perceptions about the academic behavior inside and outside the classroom were analysed along with the students' behavioral changes.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the shift from physical to online teaching has been challenging for both the lecturers and the students. According to the lecturers, the novelty of online learning sparked interest among the students for a short time; but diminished quickly once they got accustomed to it. Students, however, highlight the lack of communication and inability to maintain social relationships with peers as the primary concern during COVID restrictions. The discussion below details their perceptions on going back to physical classes (de-transition).

3.1 Behavioural Changes inside the Classroom

The interviews revealed the lecturers' perceptions on how the students' behaviour changed over time and what measures they had taken to manage the situation.

Transitioning from online to physical learning has not been a smooth shift according to the lecturers. The initial observations were very positive - they found the students to be excited; over-excited in some instances as one lecturer describes it to be "coming from the desert". The students were keen to get to know their 'online' friends in the physical world. However, in terms of communication, they had visible difficulties. In many instances, they chose to text each other instead of talking. The times they did communicate, they seemed to be aggressive and "very direct" in conveying the message. This contrasts with what the students felt about their communication skills as they were happy about being able to work in teams and develop bonds with friends.

During lectures, continual heavy dependency on mobile phones for using TikTok and taking selfies, which was a new development, clearly disrupted their learning. In addition to that, the lecturers have unanimously expressed their concern over the acute lack of attention span that lasted only 10 – 15 minutes at a stretch. In comparison to the students' behaviour pre-COVID, the current set of students asked lesser questions during classes, socialized poorly and were reluctant to take part in classroom activities, being passive learners.

Lecturers attribute these changes in behaviour to addiction to mobile phones, depression due to prolonged isolation from society and significantly long break in academic progress.

3.2 Behavioural Changes outside the Classroom

Interactions outside the classrooms continued to baffle the lecturers as they could notice a sharp decline in social decorum. All three lecturers have witnessed undisciplined behaviour in the form of rapid instigation of physical clashes, a need to release pent-up energy and inappropriate ways of expressing love and affection to their partners in the public arena. On further discussion, the lecturers attributed the reasons to three different agents. One lecturer focused on the society itself and said there was no one to "teach life" to the students; missing that during online learning has seriously affected their social skills. Another lecturer thought that the parents were to blame and accused them of being overly manipulative on their kids to limit their freedom while the third lecturer held the institution being responsible for relaxing the dress code that has led to inappropriate behaviour.

3.3 Alterations in Academic Behaviour

Concomitant to the behavioral changes witnessed from the students, their academic abilities have also been on a decline. Lecturers have witnessed a clear drop in their interest in learning and ability to take part in discussions and group activities in the classroom. The students have developed a resistance to learning as a whole and "were expecting an easy way out". They now wanted classes to be conducted physically but the exams to be conducted online.

Lecturers' observations correlate with the lack of academic efficiency recorded by the administration. The pass rates of the students varied widely from as low as nearly 45% to achieving 100% in specific modules. Particularly, Computing, Mathematics and Business Mathematics have seen the least success rate. All students have not been successful in duly submitting assignments; four out of five student cohorts had recorded late submissions. Though attendance rate has been on average well above 50%, English for Academic Purposes module has been the least attended with the average attendance rate at 64%.

3.4 Students' Perspectives

A mix of positive and negative behavioral features were expressed by the students about returning to physical classes. Optimistic views outweighed the pessimistic feelings about the de-transition; moving to physical classes from an online setting in the below mentioned aspects.

Overall, the students believed that their learning practices have improved with the renewed focus due to the lecturer's presence. Unlike in online sessions, they were engaged in teamwork and even resumed the habit of taking notes during lectures. Most of the students' attitude towards learning has changed from skipping classes to being regular due to strict maintenance of attendance records. However, some students were not successful in this as only eight module groups (out of 30) had reached 80% of attendance, throughout the previous semester.
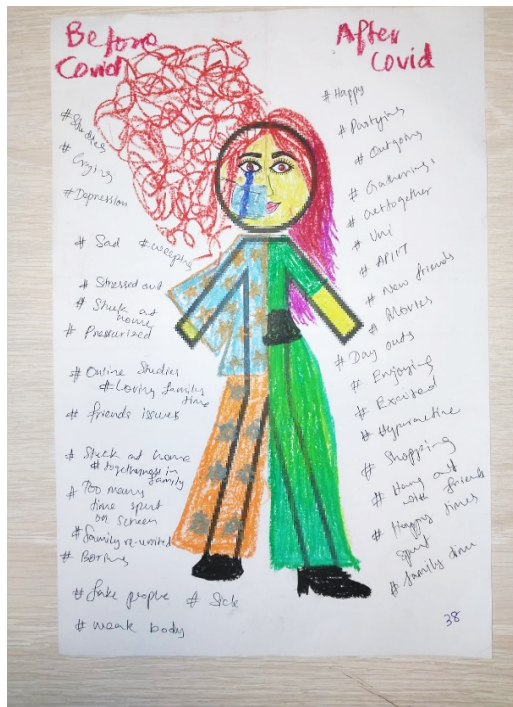
In terms of academic engagement, a smaller group of students seemed to continue a lethargic neglecting attitude which could be the effect of extended periods of staying at home and lack of compulsion to attend online classes. However, the portraits also showcased a larger group of motivated and goal-oriented students who enjoyed learning in the interactive physical environment. This view was in misalignment with the lecturers.

Students' personal values have improved to a greater extent. They have focused on values such as waking up early to go to campus, being responsible, taking care of their health and getting exposed to real-life experiences. They have enriched their social lives by bonding with friends and lecturers, attending extracurricular events on campus that helped them to enjoy life. In contrast, few students had expressed their anxiety to speak to others and the need to hide in the back of the class to avoid responding to the lecturer or delivering a presentation in class. Continued laziness and not being able to adapt to the new normal physical setting also had lowered their self-esteem.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In summary, the students were favourable about the de-transition; reverting to physical learning due to improved learning practices, academic engagement and enhanced personal values. However, the lecturers' observations about the changes in the students' classroom behaviour, social skills, and academic behaviour after the de-transition were discouraging. In fact, the lecturers attributed many possible factors including an extended period of online learning to these transformations. The study concluded that the de-transition has significantly impacted in shaping students' academic behaviour and their identities; both positively and negatively.

With this added knowledge, it is recommended that the management and administrative bodies vigorously involve in policy formulation/ modification about students' current behaviour to ensure better social understanding, academic engagement, and performance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

REFERENCES

Basar, Z. M., Mansor, A. N., Jamaludin, K. R., & Alias, B. S. (2021). The Effectiveness and Challenges of Online Learning for Secondary School Students – A Cas Study. *Asian Journal of University Education*, *17*(3), 119. https://doi.org/10.24191/ ajue.v17i3.14514

Bristowe, A., Oostendorp, M., & Anthonissen, C.(2014). Language and youth identity in a multilingual setting: A multimodal reper-

toire approach. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, *32*(2), 229–245. https://doi.org/10.2989/16073 614.2014.992644

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches (4th ed.).* California: Sage Publications Inc.

Esteban-Guitart, M., Monreal-Bosch, P., Perera, S., & Bastiani, J. (2017). Schooling and Identity: A Qualitative Analysis of Self-Portrait Drawings of Young Indigenous People form Chiapas, Mexico. *Frontiers in Psychology*, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.02083.

Ewing, L.-A., 2021. Rethinking Higher Education Post COVID-19. In: J. Lee & S. H. Han, eds. *The Future of Serivce Post COVID - 19 Pandemic Volume 1.* Singapore: Springer, pp. 37-54.

Fatoni, A. N., Nurkhayati, E., Nurdiawati, E., Fidziah, P. G., Adha, S., Irawan, P. W., Julyanto, O., & Azizi, E. (2020). University students online learning system during Covid-19 pandemic: Advantages, constraints and solutions. *Systematic Reviews in Pharmacy*, *11*(7), 570–576. https://doi.org/10.31838/srp.2020.7.81

Herath, S. (2015). *Teachers as Transformative Intellectuals in Post-Conflict.* University of Toronto.

Hikmat. (2022). Changes In University Student Behavior Intentions To Learn Offline In The Post-Pandemic Era. *Journal of Positive School Psychology,* 6(11).

Ilankoon, S. P., Gnanaselvam, K., & Warnakulasuriya, S. (2020). COVID-19: Impact on undergraduate nursing education in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Public Health Research*.

Lochmiller, C. R. (2021). Conducting Thematic Analysis with Qualitative Data. *The Qualitative Report*, 2029-2044 . https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.5008.

Neuwrith, L. S., Jovic, S. & Mukherji, R. B., 2020. Reimagining higher education during and post-COVID -19: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education,* pp. 1-16.

Tsegay, S. M., Ashraf, M., Perveen, S., & Zegergish, M. Z. (2022). Online Teaching during COVID-19 Pandemic: Teachers' Experiences from a Chinese University. *Sustainability*, *14*(1), 568. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14010568