

Teacher Trainees' Stance Towards Distance Learning During COVID-19: An Experiential Outlook

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has urged educational practitioners around the globe to step away from the traditional mode of teaching/learning and espouse the online, technology-based model. Morocco was not an exception, the pandemic has changed education in many unprecedented ways, particularly at the Regional Centers of Education and Training Professions (CRMEF). Teacher trainees in Rabat Center had no choice but to go for an all buy-in of online learning and abide by the Corona-imposed distancing requirements. In contrast, trainees in CRMEF Agadir opted for blended learning, which entails both in-person and online undertakings. This paper seeks to explore the teacher trainees' experiences of online learning within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The designed survey targeted 100 participants, 54 % of them are females while 46 % are males. 84 % are between 20 and 29 years of age- a young adult population. The majority of these participants, 70 %, have a bachelor's degree, while 30% hold a master's degree. The study reveals that students/trainees have idiosyncratic opinions and perceptions of online learning. Likewise, they seem to have experienced discrepant challenges while accessing online classes either via Zoom or Google Meet.

Keywords: COVID 19 Pandemic, ICT Support, Online Education, Stress, Students' Experiences, Teaching Effectiveness.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic in late 2019 in the Wuhan region in China has caused massive interruptions and disruptions of both social and economic activities (Foss, 2020). The measures adopted by the World Health Organization and governments globally have negatively impacted the economy and health sectors. In the mainstream, Morocco has been one of the countries to be sternly hit economically, socially, and educationally by the pandemic. Due to mandated pandemic management measures, higher education has transitioned from face-to-face classes to online, virtual ones.

Integrating Information and Communication Technology has become a viable alternative in the online education (Bell *et al.*, 2002). The question remains, however, whether the colleges and universities have considered the various challenges and barriers that individual students may experience in distance learning. Lemay *et al.* (2021) argue that the students' perceptions of online education are influenced by a range of contextual and institutional factors beyond the classroom, such as access to technology, family background, government, and institutional support as well as the integration process of online learning.

This study explores students' online learning experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. It focuses on teacher trainees in Regional Centers for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF) in Rabat and Agadir. The researchers employed a

constructivist-interpretive approach in order to examine, interpret and understand the perceptions and experiences of students in online classes.

A. Problem Statement

Learning online, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has become pervasive in the modern global educational environment. However, there is limited research on how students experience and perceive online learning, and how such perceptions and experiences influence the learning processes and learning outcomes. Critique of the appropriateness and applicability of distance learning can be effectively achieved by examining it from the perspectives of students' experiences.

The outbreak of the coronavirus has created a lot of tension among communities, especially students who have had their academic years disrupted. The education sector saw an immediate and unprecedented suspension of classroom-based learning to adopt new teaching and learning methods. The learning and academic gains achieved by a student are a result of their learning experience as determined by the personal investment of time and practice (Hellstén *et al.*, 2004). All of these factors may significantly impact how students experience online learning. This said, empirical research centered on students' experiences in online learning is minimal, making it hard to critique, model, and improve distance education.

B. Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are to ascertain the experiences of students on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic and further explore the impact these experiences have on their academic performance. The study further determines the factual differences in the students' perceptions and experiences of online learning in different colleges with a particular focus on CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir.

C. Research Questions

This research is geared towards understanding the online learning experiences of students in teacher training centers. The research framework is underpinned by the following questions:

- a. What are trainees' opinions about distance learning during the Covid-19?
- b. Did trainees in CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir have the same experience on online learning during the Covid-19?
- c. What is the student-bound impact, be it positive or negative, of distance learning during Covid-19?

D. Significance of the Research

The data developed from this research will enable CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir, and the government to understand the students' experiences in online education and how such experiences shape the perception of students' learning. The study's results and recommendations can be used to understand how online learning impacts individual students' learning outcomes. As the study has considered various circumstances and situations that may affect individual students' perception and engagement with online education, the findings can be used to formulate educational policies that promote equitable access to education not only in CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir, and across, but also in other similar learning institutions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Governments globally have enforced various measures to contain Covid-19. Presumably, not enough efforts have been made to address the impacts of the pandemic on social and economic systems (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). The mandated practices, especially self-isolation and social distancing have reduced physical and social contacts within communities as well as nations. Various psychological studies have argued that the mandates involving the reduction of physical and social proximity will have enormous adverse mental and physical outcomes (Bar *et al.*, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2020; Vaičekaukaitė *et al.*, 2021). Physical and social connections are critical for positive mental, psychological, physical, and emotional outcomes (Bethell *et al.*, 2021).

The mandated Covid-19 measures have caused tremendous disruptions that have been experienced across all global social and economic sectors. Focusing on the education sector, the United Nations report (2020) noted that the Covid-19 pandemic had had the most considerable known disruption in the history of education around the world, across all levels of education. Such disruption has notably brought new challenges to education regarding how to access online

learning and how teachers deliver their online lessons, especially in developing countries (Ramij & Sultana, 2020; Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Decades ago, various higher educational institutions tried and successfully implemented distance and online learning programs in a rush to promote their reach and competitiveness (Bauk, 2014; Casey & Griffin, 2019). The previous focus was on implementing the best practices in the online learning (Abel, 2005) in order to meet the needs and wants of learners (Kazmer & Burnett, 2011). Online education seems to gain more attention today among many students thanks to its convenience, effectiveness, flexibility and costs (Insun & Ilju, 2000).

The experiences of students in online learning are discrepant and are defined mainly by a number of factors related to students' different learning needs (Ginns & Ellis, 2009). Different social and economic backgrounds that students belong to have been identified as the main barriers to ensuring equitable access to online education (Baticulon *et al.*, 2021; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Thongsri *et al.*, 2019). Student experiences remain the central variable that determines the learning outcomes. In this respect, if students have a negative experience with online learning, their performance will be affected negatively, which leads to discouraging results.

According to Ginns and Ellis (2009), the current situation within the global education sector has accelerated the need to implement distance and remote learning. Despite the development and the current pervasiveness of online learning, recent studies have focused exclusively on the efficiency of the systems rather than the perceptions of the students towards the online learning (Thongsri *et al.*, 2019). There is a need for higher institutions such as universities and colleges to understand the challenges and barriers that exist in the adoption of distance learning and how such obstacles influence the students' perception and experience in learning.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A descriptive study design is used as it allows the researchers to identify individual attributes within groups. The design also makes it possible to study participants and evaluate variables in their natural settings without influencing them. It seeks to explore students' experiences with online learning in a teachers' college during the Covid-19 pandemic and to help better understand how such experiences occur, their actual causes, and how they influence online education.

B. Target Population

The study targets teacher trainees engaging in online learning with a focus on two training centers: CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir. A total of 100 students participated in the study by completing all the Google Form questions.

C. Data Collection

The primary research data was collected from participants using questionnaires as the primary research instrument. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants using digital methods due to considerations of the set policies of contact during the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants

completed the Google Form. A total of 97 questionnaires were returned with due complete responses.

D. Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data was comprehensively analyzed to make it meaningful and insightful with regard to students' experiences in online learning. The data analysis methods utilized in this study included the use of percentages and frequency of responses.

Equation (1) was used for the calculation of percentages using frequencies.

$$\% = f / N \times 100 / 1 \quad (1)$$

Where,

- f = Frequency of respondent's response
- N = Total number of responses per question
- 100 = Consistency in the percentage

IV. RESULTS

This study sought to sift the students' experiences of online learning within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic with a focus on teacher trainees in the Regional Centers for Education and Training Professions (CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir). Table I shows that of the 100 participants, 54 % are female, while 46 % are male. 84 % of the participants are between 20 and 29 years old. The above demographics indicate that the majority of the populations engaging in online learning are young adults. A majority of these, 70 %, are bachelor-holders degree while 30 % hold master's degrees.

Table III clarifies that when the students were asked about the technological devices they used to access online learning content, 73 students representing 73 % of the participants, used laptops, and three used desktops (Fig.1).

In contrast, Fig.1 points out that 24 out of the 100 participants did not have access to laptops and used smartphones to access learning content. Furthermore, the students indicated that it was hard to access online content as 19 % percent of the participants either had faulty devices or shared ones to access the learning content.

Such identified barriers have been confirmed by Muilenburg and Berge (2005), who noted that access to paid technological tools significantly affected students' abilities and achievements.

The students expressed differences in time spent on online learning platforms as suggested in Table III and Fig.2. Although a majority of the participants noted that they had enough time to access online learning, some students could not access it due to several factors. The amount of time students spend in participation and involvement online has impacted their academic outcomes (Congdon *et al.*, 2014; Rowe & Rafferty, 2013). The above results in influencing the way students perceive and experience online education have an impact on their academic achievement.

In response to questions aimed to test the students' experiences in online and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table IV), their experiences with staff and system support, and their overall satisfaction with online learning, 17 % of the trainees rated online and distance learning as not at all stressful while 83 % of the students rated online and distance learning between slightly stressful and very stressful. The above shows that the majority still find online learning stressful. In confirmation of these findings and factors resulting in the increase in stress, McInerney and Roberts (2004) argues that the context of online learning may hinder the learner's social context, leading to stress. Van Tryon and Bishop (2009) are of a similar opinion noting that such online contexts and the lack of face-to-face interactions may increase students' levels of stress.

During online classes, the students rated teacher trainers' support as very helpful and extremely helpful. However, when asked to rate how supportive the environment at home was while learning, variations for the support received. Although some students received a positive and supportive learning environment at home, the findings of this study indicate that some students experienced a non-supportive at all learning atmosphere during online classes at home.

TABLE I: SURVEY PARTICIPATION BY GENDER

Gender	No. of the participants	%
Male	46	46 %
Female	54	54 %

TABLE II: TECHNOLOGIES USED TO ACCESS ONLINE LEARNING

	Technologies used to access online learning	Participants
Laptop	73 %	73
Desktop	3 %	3
Smartphone	24 %	24
Total	100 %	100

TABLE III: HOURS SPENT IN ONLINE CLASSES

Hours spent in an online class	Number participants	Percentage
1 to 3	35	35%
3 to 6	51	51 %
6 to 9	11	11 %
More than 9	3	3 %
Total	—	100 %

TABLE IV: HOW STRESSFUL WAS DISTANCE LEARNING FOR YOU DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Measure	Student level of stress in online classes	Participants
Not at all stressful	17 %	17
Stressful	4 %	1
Slightly stressful	26 %	26
Moderately stressful	40 %	40
Very stressful	16 %	16
Total	—	100

Technologies Used to Access Online Learning



Fig. 1. Technologies used.

Hours Spent in Online Classes

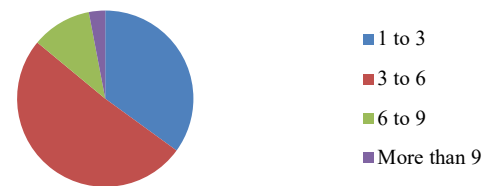


Fig. 2. Hours spent.

Student Level of Stress in Online Classes

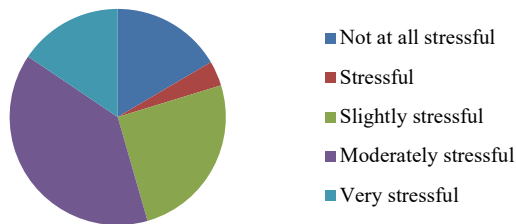


Fig. 3. Level of stress.

Similar variations were observed in Fig.3 when rating their overall experiences and satisfaction with online learning. Some students expressed better experiences, while others noted no changes in the online experience. Despite these ratings, the students expressed satisfaction with the overall online learning experience. The students further stated that the overall online learning experiences were quite enjoyable regardless of some challenges. In general, the teacher trainees in CRMEF of Rabat and Agadir suggested using blended classes, online and physical classes, to improve the students' learning experiences.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Trainees' Opinions About Distance Learning During the COVID-19

The current study aimed to examine trainee teachers' experiences with distance learning during the Coronavirus pandemic. The research examined particularly the opinions of the trainee teachers concerning distance learning. The findings indicate that a considerable number of trainee teachers think that online learning is very stressful. Some of the reasons they cited for the above opinion include lack of support from the school system and lack of resources such as laptops and high-speed internet debit. In addition, lack of physical interaction was viewed as a factor that thwarted academic productivity. The above findings are consistent with the findings from a previous study by Mc Innerney and Roberts (2004) who verifiably confirmed that online learning hinders the context of a learner's social interactions, hence causing stress.

B. Did Trainees in CRMEF Rabat and Agadir Have the Same Experience in Online Learning During the COVID-19?

According to the results of the study, the trainees in CMREF Rabat and Agadir had discrepant experiences with online learning. While some of the trainees found the

experience enjoyable and easy, another group found it challenging and stressful. Trainees with access to laptops, high-speed internet, and a supportive environment at home had a stress-free and enjoyable time. In contrast, trainees with no internet and laptops and an unsupportive learning environment at home had a challenging and stressful time with online learning. Muilenburg and Berge (2005) have come up with pretty much the same results. Accordingly, the barriers identified above affect a person's ability to integrate online learning, hence affecting their achievements. The above factors lead to a variation in the experiences of different individuals. However, all the trainees were satisfied with the online learning and willing to integrate it if they received the necessary support to improve their experiences.

C. What was the impact of distance learning on trainees during the COVID-19?

The findings indicated that online learning had both positive and negative impact on trainee teachers. Some of the positive impacts are as follows.

First, online learning helped the trainees continue their learning practices while staying safe and avoiding contracting the lethal virus. The trainees could keep up with their studies while at the same time safeguarding their health.

Second, online learning gave the trainees an opportunity to learn more about the integration of technology in the classroom. Gradually, the trainees learned how to use technology better and create a positive learning environment. On the other hand, one of the significant adverse impacts of online learning is causing stress. The lack of face-to-face interactions and necessary resources to integrate online learning was a significant cause of stress for many trainees.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that the online mode is becoming an integral part of learning globally, especially during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is deemed, by scholarly consensus, the most effective and helpful approach to learning and teaching in recent times. Nevertheless, the online learning practice draws mixed experiences from the CRMEF trainees. Some of the students may have all the basic e-learning ICT systems, while the majority lack access to laptops and high-speed internet, making their overall experiences stressful. They were not satisfied with the CRMEF management teams and the system because they got no support in terms of technological infrastructure and process framework. Since distance learning is still in the maturity cycle in Morocco, it is essential to combine both face-to-face and online classes rather than the entire transition to complete online education.

Trainees' experiences in online learning should be the core of the design of future education reforms. In the unpredictable future and with the global trends that may push full online-based learning, there is a need to explore further and enhance the design of learning to develop a holistic online education that can efficiently complement and feed face-to-face education. Future research should go beyond online learning systems and focus more on factors that influence student experiences and perceptions of online learning, such as student-student and student-faculty interactions, student and system interactions, student and content interactions, and related paradigms.

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