

Challenges and Strengths of Transitioning to Online Learning during COVID19 University Lockdown: Case Studies from Egypt and Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of under graduate and post-graduate level students who recently and abruptly transitioned from regular classroom learning to an online learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants were 30 undergraduate engineering students at the Higher Technological Institute in Egypt, and 20 graduate students enrolled in a Masters TESOL program at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. All participants completed a 10-item questionnaire regarding their opinions and experiences. Data was analyzed using a six-step thematic approach and was interpreted through the lens of the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework. Findings indicated that online courses strengths included increased student engagement and flexibility, prior familiarity with technology, increased personal time, and the use of multiple learning modalities. Challenges included problems with technology, reduced engagement due to family interruptions, and lack of visual cues. One limitation of this study was the small sample size, which may limit the ability to generalize the findings to other students. These findings provide insight into the issues which can promote or hinder success in online programs.

Keywords: online learning, COVID-19, Community of Inquiry, cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence.

التحديات وجوانب القوة في التحول الى التعليم عن بعد خلال جائحة كوفيد-19 لطلاب المرحلة الجامعية في جمهورية مصر العربية والمملكة العربية السعودية

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المستخلص :

الهدف من هذه الدراسة النوعية هو استكشاف تجارب طلاب الجامعة في مرحلة البكالوريوس والدراسات العليا الذين انتقلوا بشكل مفاجئ من التعلم في الفصول الدراسية إلى بيئة التعلم عبر الإنترنت بسبب جائحة COVID-19. تضمنت عينة الدراسة ثلاثون طالبًا جامعيًا في قسم الهندسة في المعهد التكنولوجي العالي في مصر ، و عشرون طالبة دراسات عليا في برنامج الماجستير TESOL في جامعة الملك سعود في الرياض ، المملكة العربية السعودية. أكمل جميع المشاركين استبيانًا من عشر بنود يتعلق بأرائهم وتجاربهم. تم تحليل البيانات و تفسيرها من خلال الاطار النظري المجتمعي والذي يهدف الى خلق تجربة تعلم تعاونية عميقة من خلال دراسة ثلاث أسس هامه : (المجتمع و المعرفة , التعليم) أشارت النتائج إلى أن نقاط القوة تضمنت زيادة مشاركة الطلاب والمرونة في التعلم ، والإلمام المسبق بالتكنولوجيا ، واستخدام طرائق التعلم المتعددة. بينما تضمنت التحديات عوائق في استخدام التقنية ، وانخفاض المشاركة بسبب الانقطاعات والانشغال العائلي، ونقص التواصل البصري

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم عبر الإنترنت ، جائحة كوفيد-19 ، المجتمع التعاوني ، الأساس المعرفي ، الأساس الاجتماعي ، الأساس التعليمي .

Introduction

Online learning is utilized by a substantial number of undergraduate and post-graduate students. This form of learning may be broadly defined as “access to learning experiences via the use of some technology” (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Gaylen, 2011, p.130). About one-third of all post-secondary students utilize this form of learning in some manner. Of the students who do participate in online learning, 15.7% do so exclusively. These numbers are higher for graduate than undergraduate students. For example, 38% of graduate students take at least one online course, and of those, 28.9% take exclusively online courses (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018).

A number of benefits and challenges are associated with this modality of learning. Benefits include flexibility with respect to time and learning preferences, increased motivation, increased access to learning activities for students with limitations, improved learning engagement during learning and assessment, improved interaction among peers, less student anxiety regarding participation, and the provision of more detailed feedback by instructors (Poon, 2013; Marteney, & Bernadowski, 2016; Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis, 2011). Challenges associated with an online learning format include the need for technological knowledge and confidence, difficulty in teaching hands-on skills, lack of attentiveness or attention span in students, and academic integrity/plagiarism (Alammary, Sheard, & Carbone, 2014; Mukhtar, et al., 2020). Challenges specific to teaching online language teaching include decreased character reading and writing abilities, technical sound issues, and difficulty transmitting verbal cues (Sun, 2011).

Some schools and universities have created an online component to supplement the face-to-face course (blended-learning). Many universities offer online courses for those who cannot participate in on campus courses or to supplement on campus courses. The choice to participate in fully online courses are often made by the student. However, unique circumstances have removed that choice for many individuals. In December 2019, an outbreak of pneumonia in Wuhan, China was found to be caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). By mid-February, the virus had spread from China to at least 24 other countries with 51,857 confirmed cases (Rothan, & Byrareddy, 2020). By the beginning of May 2020, the World Health Organization (2020) reported 3,517,345 cases of the disease, COVID-19, worldwide along with 243,401 deaths attributed to the disease. Countries across the world responded in a variety of ways

to mitigate the threat, including enforcing social distancing procedures and self-quarantine.

An additional outcome of this pandemic was the temporary closing of schools and universities and the transition of learning from a classroom environment to an online environment. While online learning is certainly not a new phenomenon, the circumstances under which this rapid and extensive transition occurred are. Due to the recency of this situation, a gap currently exists in the literature regarding the impact of this rapid transition upon post-secondary students. The current study focuses on the experiences of a group of 50 students: 30 undergraduate engineering students at the Higher Technological Institute in Egypt and 20 graduate students enrolled in a TESOL program in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in an effort to understand the impact of this unique and rapid change from traditional classroom instruction to online learning.

Review of the Literature

This section presents a review of factors which impact online learning through the lens of the Community of Inquiry (COI) theoretical framework. This framework assumes that learning occurs through the interaction of three elements, which also represent the dimensions of role adjustment in an online learning community: cognitive presence, social presence, and teacher presence (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013). After a description of the conceptual framework, its use within the literature is discussed.

Role Adjustment

Students required to quickly transit from classroom instruction to online learning likely undergo a role adjustment. In addition to maintaining the expectations of being a student, they may need to learn new technologies, new methods of communication with peers and instructors, and improved strategies for self-directed learning and time management. In addition, the student's physical learning space changes from the classroom environment to one more aligned with the home environment (Garrison, et al., 2004). In a study of graduate students who transitioned to an online learning environment, Kinsel, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison (2005) reported that student concerns to this new role included decreased direction from and interaction with instructors and difficulty adjusting to new technology. However, on a positive note, students in this study also reported feeling more open and interactive in an online environment and stated that they were able to develop closer relationships with their peers (Kinsel, et al., 2005).

Community of Inquiry Theoretical Framework

The COI contains three elements essential to learning in a variety of contexts, namely cognitive, social, and teaching. This theoretical framework is applicable to online learning in higher education, as well as face-to-face and online learning in primary and secondary school. A key underlying assumption of this theory is that higher-order learning outcomes are best achieved when students and educators collaborate within a community of inquiry. This “community of inquiry” may be defined as “a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding” (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013, p.105). As such, the COI seeks to create conditions which facilitate higher-order thinking skills and a meaningful learning experience. In order for these outcomes to occur, the cognitive, social, and teaching elements of the framework must develop in a balanced manner (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013).

The first element in the COI is cognitive presence, which is defined as “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013, p. 108). Cognitive presence relates to critical and reflective thinking, which are keys to inquiry and higher-order thought processes. This element of the COI is operationalized by the Practical Inquiry Model, which consists of four phases of crucial inquiry. The first phase is a triggering event associated with a problem or issue that consists of an activity which generates curiosity. Next is the exploration phase, in which students reflect internally and collaborate with peers to derive meaning from a complex issue. Integration, the third phase, involves critical discourse among students that further refines their understanding of the issue. They construct a meaningful framework by which to derive solutions to the problem. Finally, during the resolution phase, students decide upon and test a specific solution (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013). In order to successfully navigate through these four phases, students need a moderator, or teacher, that can shape and guide the critical thinking experiences and a metacognitive understanding of the inquiry process? (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013).

The second element, social presence, may be defined as “the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual

personalities” (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013, p.107). While establishing social relationships among peers is important, the true purpose of social presence within the context of learning is to support inquiry and educational outcomes. When students are able to identify with a peer group and its purpose, this group becomes more productive (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013).

Social presence supports critical thinking through three indicators, including affective communication, open communication, and group cohesion. Affective communication conveys emotions, such as through the use of emoticons, different capitalizations or punctuations, or the use of humor. Open communication involves responding to the questions and contributions of others. Finally, group cohesion occurs when students perceive that they belong to the community of learners. Evidence of group cohesion may be found when students address each other by name or use inclusive pronouns, such as “we”, when addressing others. Group cohesion facilitates inquiry, collaboration, and improved quality of learning (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013).

The third element of this framework, teaching presence, consists of the design of the educational experience, including the selection and organization of content, and facilitation of learning. This element of the COI facilitates the integration of cognitive and social presence during inquiry. In order to establish an effective teaching presence, educators must identify relevant societal knowledge, create experiences that promote critical thinking and collaboration, and assess learning outcomes. These roles are classified into three categories: design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Design and organization is closely intertwined with delivery of instruction and considers the macro level technology through which instruction is delivered. The category of facilitating discourse includes the pedagogical strategies, interpersonal skills, and organization which facilitate learning with the COI. Finally, direct instruction refers to issues related to course content, such as correcting misunderstandings, identifying essential course concepts, organizing the learning materials, and creating meaningful learning activities (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013). Teaching presence is associated with learner satisfaction, learner participation, quality of responses, and higher-order learning (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013).

Figure 1

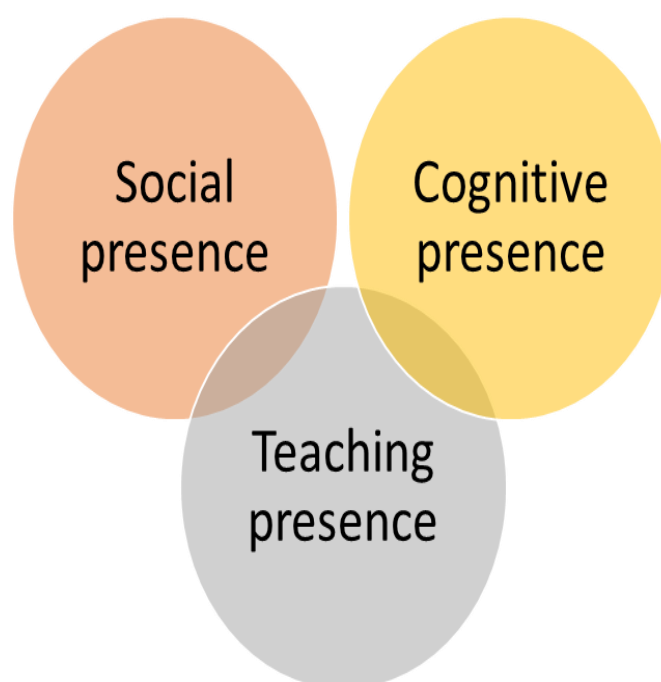


Figure 1: components of Community of Inquiry Theoretical Framework

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence refers to the construction of meaning and the development of understanding within a learning environment (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013). A variety of attributes and experiences within online learning may contribute to the development of cognitive presence. High levels of student engagement in online classes, such as through posting in discussions and completing assignments, are associated with the successful development of cognitive presence (Kovanovic, et al., 2015). Two additional factors contributing to the development of cognitive presence in online learning are “externally facilitated regulation scaffolding” (Gasevic, et al., 2015, p.55) and role assignment. With respect to the former, instructors who provide students with a framework for interaction and participation in discussions promote an earlier triggering event, or an event that motivates the learner to learn. This triggering event is needed in order for the student to progress through the remainder of the stages of cognitive presence (exploration, integration, and resolution). Role assignment refers to the assignment of individual responsibilities within a group discussion, such as the individual who summarizes the ideas and the individual who hypothesize new solutions to a problem (Gasevic, et al., 2015).

The three elements of the Community of Inquiry Model interact to form a positive feedback loop. Wang, et al. (2016) explained that an established social presence supports the development of critical thinking and cognitive presence. Both social presence and teaching presence create the conditions for high quality interactions, which in turn promote learning.

Social Presence

Social presence refers to the ability of a student to insert his or her personal characteristics into the community so as to ultimately facilitate the development of cognitive presence. The three dimensions of this construct are emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013). Social presence allows students to feel as though they experience authentic interaction with other individuals. This feeling is necessary in order to facilitate continued social interactions (Cunningham, 2015). Factors related to the establishment of social presence in an online learning environment include the ability to see a visual representation of the individual, whether through an avatar or actual image on video, the ability to interact with peers, lower levels of instructor control over student discussion contributions, student continuation of a discussion thread, students complimenting their peers, and expressing appreciation to peers (Cunningham, 2015; Horzum, 2017; Costley, & Lange, 2016; Joksimovic, et)

Teaching Presence

Teacher presence, also closely linked to cognitive and social presence, describes the curriculum design, facilitation, and direction provided to students by the instructor. Teaching presence is positively associated with perceived learning, student satisfaction, and a general sense of community among learners (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013). As stated by (Al fadda 2020) online learning have generally supplemented rather than replaced traditional face to face lectures. Strategies that promote teaching presence include the development of an interpersonal and social relationship with the instructor, the use of asynchronous discussion questions, and consistent and timely feedback (Chakraborty, & Nafukho, 2014). In addition, instructors should create online course environments which clearly communicate expectations, guide and moderate student discussions, provide helpful feedback, promote student engagement and, and enhance higher-order learning (Rubin, & Fernandes, 2013). Setting a friendly tone, modeling expectations, sharing personal information, providing helpful feedback, and serving as the primary content provider also increase teaching presence (Richardson, et al., 2016; Hegeman, 2015).

Research question:

The following research question guided this study:

What strengths and challenges are associated with online learning among undergraduate and post-graduate students abruptly transitioning from a classroom to an online learning environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

In order to explore the experiences of students rapidly transitioning from classroom to online learning, a qualitative, phenomenological approach was used. A phenomenological study describes the lived experiences of research subjects within the context of a phenomenon of interest. The purpose of this approach is to reduce individual experiences to a set of universal understandings. A phenomenological study consists of several key components, including data collection through interviews or questionnaires, systematic procedures for data analysis that move from the narrow to the broad, and a description of the essence of the experience of the research subjects (Creswell, 2013).

Research Setting

The setting for this study was an undergraduate engineering students General English class at the Higher Technological Institute in Egypt and a graduate TESOL program at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Purposive sampling was used to select study participants. All thirty Egyptian students signed consent letters for participating in the study. Twenty students completed and returned the survey out of the thirty participants in the Higher Technological Institute in Egypt. Twenty-five adult students enrolled in the same TESOL course provided written consent to participate in the study and were emailed a survey with open-ended questions. Twenty students completed and returned the survey.

The survey instrument consisted of 10 items seeking the opinions of participants on their recent online experience in the course. These items addressed technology, training in online coursework, time management, motivation, family responsibilities, instructor involvement and course delivery. Participants were also provided with an opportunity to add any additional insights not addressed in the survey questions.

Data analysis followed a six-phase thematic analysis approach as described by Braun, Clarke, and Terry (2015). This form of analysis allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of

themes found in qualitative data and is appropriate for phenomenological studies. The first phase, Familiarization with Data, requires a thorough reading and re-reading of the data in order to know the data and begin to engage in a preliminary analysis. The researchers note casual observations about the data, which serve as reminders for the analysis phase (Braun, et al., 2015).

The second phase, Coding the Data, consists of a systematic process for deriving labels which capture key ideas in the data. Effective codes consist of a word or short phrase which captures both the focus of the data and the subject's position. Codes can be descriptive, summarizing the text, or interpretive. These codes are written on the transcript directly next to the relevant text. Once all of the relevant data is coded, the researcher compiles a list of all codes generated and their associated extracts of data (Braun, et al., 2015).

Searching for Themes represents the third phase of analysis. A theme represents a broader level of meaning than a code and may consist of clusters of codes. To identify themes, the researcher examines the compiled list of codes to identify patterns of meaning and central organizing concepts. Candidate themes are then mapped out by listing each theme with its associated codes (Braun, et al., 2015). These themes are then reviewed in the fourth phase, Reviewing Themes. The purpose of this phase is to ensure that the themes appropriately fit the coded data and to reshape themes so that they provide a comprehensive picture of the data. The researcher checks the original data and coding to ensure that the themes accurately reflect the dataset. Aspects to consider at this point include whether the theme is actually an overarching theme or merely a code, the usefulness of the theme in describing the data, the boundaries of the theme, and whether or not the theme is coherent (Braun, et al., 2015).

Phase five, Defining and Naming Themes, allows for the refining of the theme's focus and scope. The researcher creates definitions of each theme and determines which data extracts best illustrate these definitions. The researcher finalizes the analytical narrative of the data, highlighting the significance of the data in answering the research question. Finally, each theme is assigned an appropriate name (Braun, et al., 2015). This phase leads into the final phase, Producing the Report. This last step involves the written production of a coherent, logical, and interesting story based upon the data analysis. Data extracts should be embedded within the narrative to illustrate and support themes (Braun, et al., 2015).

Findings

The findings presented in this section represent the opinions and experiences of graduate students required to rapidly transit from a traditional classroom environment into an online learning environment.

The analytical process revealed five predominant themes in the data: engagement, flexibility, technology, visual cues, and time. These themes are discussed separately.

Figure

2



Figure 2: predominant themes in the study data

Engagement

Participants in both settings elaborated the term “engagement” in a number of ways. Commonly used words and phrases associated with this term included activity, involvement, self-motivation, active participation, and contribution. One facilitator of engagement was the use of multiple teaching strategies by the instructor, such as visual aids, lectures, and discussions. Participant 7 from Egypt noted: “I feel I am more engaged, active and alert when our instructor uses more than one way of teaching techniques.” Likewise, Participant 3 from Saudi Arabia explained: “When the teacher uses mixed teaching methods and strategies such as group activities, games and discussion, it can enhance the production of the online lessons and the students will become more engaged and active, the learning process will be successful.”

A second facilitator of engagement common among participants’ answers was the frequency of involvement by the instructor in the class discussions. Participants were divided on the idea of the frequency of the instructor interaction with students during an online

class, as some noted that every five to 10 minutes was reasonable while others noted that this was too frequent, a common theme was that instructor involvement fostered student engagement and participation. Participant 5 from Egypt explained: “I like it when our teacher follows every idea explained with a question. It makes me alert as this happens nearly every 10 minutes, so there is no time to day dream.” Likewise, participant 14 from Saudi Arabia noted that “10 to 15 minutes would be okay to engage the students and make sure everyone is still following.”

Students adopted a similar attitude towards engagement regarding attendance taking. While all respondents agreed that attendance should be established at the beginning of the learning session, disagreement existed over whether or not attendance should be taken once again at the end to ensure student participation throughout the entire class. Regardless of the frequency of attendance checking, the act of taking attendance fosters engagement. Participant 10 from Egypt explained: “Checking attendance and assessing our understanding via asking us whether we understand or not from time to time, increases our engagement.” Participant 7 from Saudi Arabia stated: “Yes, I think so, because if the instructor checks the attendance every now and then, he/she will ensure that all students are present and involved in the learning process and not sleeping or distracted with any other stuff. As class success depends entirely on the students’ positive engagement and valuable contribution.”

One notable barrier to engagement was interruptions due to family demands. Participants noted that it was difficult to participate and remain engaged in online classes when children were nearby and needed the participant’s attention. Participant 12 from Egypt said: “I feel embarrassed as the instructor and my classmates listen to the sounds of my young brothers while the instructor is explaining. This embarrassment makes me lose concentration for some time. Then I get back into the mood.” Likewise, participant 13 from Egypt denoted: “I live in a busy, noisy area, so sometimes the sounds of vendors are heard when I am asking a question. So, I always mute until I want to ask a question. My colleagues are considerate, but still I am embarrassed.” Participant 5 from Saudi Arabia explained: “Since all of the family are staying at home because of the COVID -19 epidemic it is a disadvantage for the multimodal approach especially for mothers studying where their children keep on coming in the same room where she is attending an online lesson. Usually students get distracted when they hear their family speaking loudly.” Participant 4 from Saudi Arabia elucidated: “Even though I tried to be in a quiet room, sometimes I faced interruptions from my kids (they don’t understand what I am doing) and then I became confused and not

following the presenter, which caused me to feel embarrassed when the presenter chose me to answer.”

Flexibility

A second common theme was flexibility. This theme applied to three different elements, including place, time, and learning. Flexibility in place referred to the ability to participate in learning from a variety of geographic locations. Participant 19 from Egypt enforced his liking to the idea of flexibility saying: “I can attend the course in my room, in my balcony, or wherever I like.” Participant 7 from Egypt stated: “I can use my phone, my tablet or my computer as the tools can work on all of them. This is really convenient.” Participant 3 from Saudi Arabia commented, “One of the advantages of the multimodal theory approach is that it does not require the student to be at a certain place.” Participant 1 from Saudi Arabia noted: “The flexibility of this approach is great. I could attend the class from any electronic device. It offers comfortable environment; we do not have to worry about clothes, we could attend the online classes in our pajamas.” Participant 2 from Saudi Arabia opted: “From my point of view, as a person who lives temporary in Riyadh, one of many advantages of the multimodal approach is that this experience has given me the chance to go back home and continue my study in a different region. So those students who live outside Riyadh and away from their homes and families, most of them went back and have continued their study while staying with their families.”

Flexibility also existed with respect to time. Participants noted that they could learn at their own pace and there were few time limits with regards to learning. Online learning also allowed participants to be more flexible in how they spent their time. Participant 15 from Egypt said: “The great thing is that the teaching session is recorded so I can go back and watch it one more time. Even if I did not attend because of the internet malfunction I can watch the recorded session.” Participant 7 from Saudi Arabia commented, “One of the pros is that I can learn at my own pace, anytime and anywhere.”

Finally, flexibility in online learning was well suited for accommodating different learning styles and preferences. Participants noted that this modality of learning accommodated different learning styles, allowed individuals to participate in a variety of ways, such as speaking or written texts and chats, accommodated different types of personalities, and helped to overcome the lack of face-to-face communication to a great extent. Participants from Egypt and Saudi Arabia commented that the use of mixed teaching methods such as

lecturing, discussion, and group activities suited “students’ preferences” and “learning differences.” Participant 18 from Egypt stated: “I like the learning experience as it includes videos, images, power point presentations, and pdfs which I find interesting and suits any student’s learning style.” Likewise, Participant 8 from Saudi Arabia noted: “Yes, this of course will influence anyone’s online experience positively because each teaching method could match certain learning style and will help increase the quality of learning and learning outcomes.”

Technology

The issue of technology was the most frequently mentioned issue among participant responses. Technology was discussed in terms of familiarity by students and instructors, preferred types of online learning technology, and technology problems. In general, most participants reported that they were familiar with the types of technology used in online learning. For example, participant 3 from Saudi Arabia commented, “But honestly the majority of students are well trained in using the online classes and are very helpful to each other.”

Participants perceived that their instructors were adequately trained in using online learning technology. Several participants noted that the periodic integration of online classes with traditional classroom teaching would be beneficial in ensuring that students and instructors were well-prepared to use this format. With regards to instructors lacking training, Participant 17 from Egypt explained: “Most instructors mastered using the tools. Those who used the tools for the first time their classes did not go well.” Participant 8 from Saudi Arabia commented: “This is true with some instructors who suddenly found themselves forced to use technology and online classes. But other staff actually were well trained to the online classes and they did a good job from the first day. I think this could be avoided if there are online classes held regularly every week or 2 weeks.”

The study participants cited several different technologies used to facilitate online learning. Technologies cited by participants included Blackboard, Zoom, Google Classroom, Google Docs, Microsoft teams and Join Me. Advantages of most technology tools used included accessibility, simplicity to use, and allowing instant collaboration. Participants provided the greatest number of negative comments regarding Blackboard, noting that it had access issues, connection issues, and problems with logging on to the system. The greatest number of positive responses was associated with the use of Zoom. Participants noted that Zoom was easy to use and malfunctioned less often than Blackboard. Zoom is safe, easy to schedule, and allowed both video and chat. One disadvantage associated with Zoom was that it automatically

ended the session after 40 minutes. As for Egyptian students, they liked the tool Microsoft teams as it is easy to use and allows individual, pair and group work. One drawback of using Microsoft teams is the failure of the internet as it made it slow and inconvenient.

The study participants frequently mentioned technical difficulties with the online format. These issues primarily centered on Internet connections issues and sound problems. Participant 14 from Egypt stated: “Microsoft teams hangs a lot when a lot of people use it at the same time. This makes one sometimes unable to understand as the speaker voice is interrupted by the continuous breakage and return of the streaming.” Participant 13 from Egypt explained: “Technical problems make me lose interest and not happy with the experience.” Participant 4 from Egypt emphasized the idea of technology malfunction stating: “Sometimes, the internet would stop because of the surge and we cannot listen to explanation at real time.” Participant 7 from Egypt explained: “The internet speed was not that convenient most of the time so we could not send our assignments on timely manner.” Participant 16 from Saudi Arabia noted: “Technical issues were the biggest problem as online classes mainly depend on internet connection so if there are many people using the internet at the same time it becomes weaker and you might lose the connection. This problem can interrupt the class and students may miss parts of the lecture.” Participant 8 from Saudi Arabia noted “technical problems could affect our self-motivation.” Likewise, participant 11 from Saudi Arabia commented: “Sometimes the sound was not clear so you might misunderstand what others say. Also, the shared document upload is slower in other participants’ devices which can prevent them from following with the speaker.” Technical issues such as these interfered with submitting assignments, motivation, comprehension, and lesson flow.

Time

The theme of time, as with technology issues, was discussed frequently. Participants generally categorized time as either personal time or time associated with the class itself. In addition, time was associated with benefits and drawbacks. The participants perceived increased personal time as an advantage of online learning. With respect to personal time, the participants noted that they no longer needed to sit in traffic to commute to class, leaving them with more time to spend with family or doing enjoyable activities. Participant 6 from Egypt explained: “I wish that some of our courses would be given online after the end of COVID 19 pandemic. Online teaching save me the hassle of dressing up and

commuting.” Participant 2 from Saudi Arabia noted: “I believe I have had extra time with learning online, because there was no time spent on getting prepared and going to and back from university. Additionally, for me personally, 6-8 hours were added to my timetable because there was no more travelling.”

Several participants also commented that they did not need to prepare themselves for class and thus saved time in applying cosmetics or dressing up for class. A drawback noted by participants was difficulty managing class time with time needed for household responsibilities since the two now overlapped. Participant 6 from Saudi Arabia: “...from my point of view I think our responsibilities become more accumulated because in the traditional classes we can finish some of the lessons and do some homework, but now I don’t have time to deal with my responsibilities and on the same time do my homework or write the assignments as everything must be done while I’m in my house which gives me the feeling of pressure.”

Time associated with online class participation was generally viewed in a negative manner. Participants described the time associated with online classes as exhausting, time consuming, and requiring more preparation than traditional classes. Attending multiple online classes in a row without a break was described as burdensome. In addition, the time needed to complete a class was often extended due to instructors or students speaking longer than their allotted time. Long presentations during class were associated with boredom, distraction, and difficulty concentrating. Participant 11 from Egypt stated: “I am spending time on understanding how to use Microsoft teams. It would have been better to be trained on using Microsoft teams before using it. It takes a lot of time to upload my assignments because of the internet surge.” Participant 6 from Saudi Arabia noted: “The online classes take more time than the traditional classes. I think it also requires a lot of preparation and arrangements such as setting the time and the date. Submitting the materials to be shared etc. Also, when we try to present an outline we might take much time because we need the interaction to move from point to another fluently and clearly without leaving any point without explanation so it’s hard for the presenter to keep on the right time limit.” Participant 15 from Saudi Arabia elaborated: “In one of the sessions we were forced to attend three complete hours which was frustrating to us and hard to concentrate since the circumstances has changed. It is hard to stay focused for three hours on the phone or even the computer.”

Time also hindered the ability of students to participate in class, particularly in larger classes. While students acknowledged that participation by every student was beneficial to learning, they noted that

this was impractical in larger classes of about 20 students due to time constraints. Participant 4 from Egypt stated: “I like the face-to-face classes more as the interaction with the teacher is better. This is not the case in the online classes as she cannot speak to each one individually as in class.” Participant 2 from Saudi Arabia commented: “I don’t think so, in some courses there were 20 students, if the instructor gave enough time for all of us, we wouldn’t finish the course in the allotted time.”

Visual Cues

A significant disadvantage participants denoted was the lack of visual cues during online meetings. These cues included facial expression, body language, eye contact, and gestures. Participants noted that these types of visual cues allow for authentic interactions, the ability to more effectively elaborate on an idea, and the ability to better understand the instructor and peers. The lack of visual cues was a commonly cited reason for preferring face-to-face teaching over online teaching among those who expressed this preference. Participant 4 from Egypt explained: “I like the face-to-face classes more as interaction in face-to face is better. Everyone is highly involved and more alert.” Participant 7 from Egypt elaborated: “Face-to-face interaction is what I miss the most.” Participant 3 from Saudi Arabia explained: “As someone who believe in the importance of body language, I find presenting face to face much better and more effective. Also, when I presented online I felt there was disconnection between me and the listeners because of the absence of (face expression, eye contact, etc.)” Participant 7 from Saudi Arabia noted: “I have tried both types and I believe that the face to face presentation is way better than the online one, because it has authentic and direct interaction and communication, real-time engagement, body movement and eye contact. In addition, the teacher can make sure that everyone is involved and not easily distracted with phone, family matters and so on.”

To summarize the findings section, the key themes identified from an analysis of survey data included engagement, flexibility, technology, time, and visual cues. Within these themes, a number of strengths and challenges of the current online learning environment were noted. Strengths included increased engagement due to the use of multiple teaching methods; increased flexibility in time, place, and learning; familiarity with technology, and increased personal time. Challenges included reduced engagement due to family interruptions, technology problems, time devoted to online learning, and the lack of visual cues.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of under graduate and post-graduate students rapidly transitioning from classroom to online learning in order to uncover the strengths and challenges associated with this transition. This section discusses the findings through the lens of the Community of Inquiry framework, which includes cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, & Akyol, 2013).

The findings from this study indicate that the greatest number of strengths and challenges of this new online environment are associated with cognitive presence. The strengths of the online course included increased student engagement and increased flexibility in learning, both due to the use of multiple learning modalities. These findings align with those presented by Kovanovic, et al. (2015) in that high levels of student engagement lead to the successful development of cognitive presence (Kovanovic, et al., 2015). An additional strength within this area was prior familiarity with the technology used to implement the online course. These three factors, namely engagement, flexibility, and familiarity with technology, enable students to more effectively exchange information with their peers.

Despite these strengths, two notable challenges to the development of cognitive presence existed. Technology problems, such as connectivity problems and sound issues, prevented participation at times. In addition, student engagement was reduced at times due to interruptions from family members also located in the home environment.

With respect to social presence, one strength was the increase in personal time, while one challenge was the lack of visual cues, such as the ability to observe gestures, body language, eye contact, and facial expressions. Increased personal time due to not having to commute to class or maintain one's physical appearance may indirectly impact social presence by providing greater time to engage online with peers and a reduction in anxiety. The lack of visual cues appeared to be a significant challenge. Participants noted that the inability to observe body language and facial expressions contributed to decreased comprehension, concentration, enthusiasm, and willingness to elaborate on ideas. These findings align with Cunningham (2015), who reported that the establishment of social presence in an online learning environment includes the ability to see a visual representation of the individual. An additional outcome of the inability to visually see an accurate representation of peers and their body language may be reduced by cognitive presence, as the two dimensions support each other (Wang, et al., 2016).

Findings also indicated that course instructors demonstrated strengths related to teaching presence. Participants noted that most instructors were generally familiar and able to use the technology associated with online courses, and most instructors utilized multiple learning modalities when teaching. Teaching presence, which supports the development of social presence and cognitive presence, involves activities that provide interesting, safe, and engaging learning environments (Chakraborty, & Nafukho, 2014). Instructors that use multiple modalities when teaching, such as a combination of discussion, lectures, and activities, may be more likely to meet the needs of diverse learners with differing learning preferences and abilities. Students whose learning needs are met may be more likely to engage in the learning experience and thus build both cognitive and social presence.

Limitation of the study includes: The small sample size drawn from two courses one undergraduate and one graduate at a single university limits the ability to generalize the findings to other groups of students. However, external generalization may be less important than internal generalizability within the groups studied (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, self-report bias may exist (Maxwell, 2013). Given that the questionnaire respondents were students of the researcher, they may have responded with socially acceptable answers that could be perceived in a favorable light to the researcher rather than truthfully presenting reality.

In summary, the findings which emerged from this study that provide the greatest insight into the experiences of students who rapidly and unexpectedly transitioned into an online learning environment include the presence of:

Increased engagement and flexibility in learning due to the use of multiple instructional modalities.

Decreased engagement in learning due to family interruptions.

Disruptions in learning due to technology problems.

Increased personal time and time needed to complete classes.

Multiple modalities of instruction in the online environment.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of undergraduate and post-graduate students who abruptly transitioned to an online learning environment due to COVID-19, including perceived strengths and challenges associated with this change. Findings indicated that major strengths included increased engagement and learning flexibility due in part to the use of multiple learning modalities, prior familiarity with technology, increased personal time, and instructor

familiarity with technology. Challenges include technological problems, reduced engagement due to family disruptions, and lack of visual cues when interacting with peers. One limitation of this study was the small sample size, which may prevent the generalization of the results to other groups of students. Future research should examine the long-term impact of this unique situation on academic success.

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Students Survey (English)

What's your opinion on studying through a multimodal theory approach as compared to the traditional approach?

.....

Which app do you use for your online classes (please specify all), and which one do you prefer?

.....

..... What did you find to be the most exciting aspect of the multimodal

Literacy lesson?

.....

Please give your opinion on the following aspects related to the multimodal approach in terms of positive and negative effects, which you experienced during the COVID -19 epidemic, and you're locked down?

Students lack training in using online classes.

Instructors lack training in using online Classes.

Time management.

Self-motivation.

Family issues and responsibilities.

Technical issues.

Do you think that instructors' use of mixed teaching methods such as lecturing, discussion, and group activities, does have an impact on the success of your online experience?

.....

What problems did you face in understanding during the online session?

.....

Do you think that the instructor's involvement with the students every 5 or 10 minutes would contribute to the success of online experience?

.....

.....

Do you think if the instructor gives enough time for ALL the students to participate, it will contribute to the success of your online classes?

.....

Do you believe that instructress checking attendance at the beginning and during class is a matter of online class success?

.....

How would you find your experience in presenting online to be different from face to face presentation?

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Thank you, please feel free to add any other comments you would like.

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