

The Virtual Learning Space: An Inquiry on Academics' Transition Experience, Level of Engagement with Students and Digital Skills

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When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, higher education institutions have had to adapt to online and digital learning (ODL) and carried on. The classroom teaching experience which was familiar to lecturers and students alike was transformed into teaching and learning in the virtual space. One year on, how have the instructors adjusted to the ODL experience? This paper explores the transition experience; level of engagement with students; and digital skills of the instructors in a private university in Kuala Lumpur. During the initial stages of ODL adoption, available literature reported that instructors faced stress points attributed to lack of training and limited skillset, poor internet connectivity and frequent addressing of students' queries online. As the instructors transition further into the ODL experience, timely information sharing within the organisation, availability of pedagogy training and online support alleviated the stress. The instructors' ODL approach tend to be student-oriented, with concerns expressed by the instructors on the efficacy of the online learning space and students' internet connectivity. Student Engagement is something that all academics talk about and aspire to deliver: to create the engagement needed to facilitate learning. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the urgency for proper classroom engagement was exacerbated as students and instructors were forced into a remote and distant classroom experience. There is added responsibility of ensuring classroom management, handling an electronic meeting room of display pictures and distant voices, and keeping them engaged. With their students hidden behind electronic screens of devices such as laptops, tablets and mobile phones, engagement became a higher mountain that academics had to scale. Universities provided the platforms with which lecturers were expected to transition their classrooms into digital classrooms. These platforms were rich with tools that could aid a lecturer in creating engaging class sessions. The challenge lecturers faced was in mastering these tools. Mastering these tools meant that lecturers now had to add technology knowledge to their existing mastery of content knowledge together with increasing online pedagogical knowledge. The following skills are investigated: Digital teaching; Assessments' preparation and grading; as well as ideas and tools of engagement. Technical skills mainly focused on the usage of the university's Learning Management System and collaboration tools. This paper explores the lecturers' experience, challenges and private victories in the last 15 pandemic-ridden months: their experience in ODL transition, their challenges in keeping an increasingly distracted student audience engaged, and their attempts at mastering the technology tools that aid online classroom engagement and delivery. A sentiment survey was done throughout August and September 2020 to assess the lecturers' adaptation to ODL from the familiar territory of classroom teaching. Another

survey was conducted in July and August 2021 to measure similar sentiments one year on. The comparative findings revealed the instructors' increase in ODL confidence level; improved students' engagement and assessments' handling with more instances of medium and advanced skills; and management and peer-support were felt. Concerns were expressed in the work-life balance; screen fatigue; and the feeling of social isolation.

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