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# Towards flexible learning and teaching: Lessons learned from educator and student experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

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# Towards flexible learning and teaching: Lessons learned for blended learning and teaching post COVID-19 pandemic

## Abstract

*This discussion explores student and educator academic experiences of online learning and teaching (OLT) at the University of the Western Cape, South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose was to report on lessons learned during the pandemic, and how this may contribute to a flexible blended learning and teaching (BLT) approach within higher education post the pandemic. While most South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) used a BLT approach prior to the pandemic, the face-to-face component was used as the primary method of learning and teaching, with the online component used as a support or 'add-on' to face-to-face practices. We reflected on student social workers and their educators' academic experiences during the pandemic, and how these experiences may guide the planning and implementation of a stronger combination of online and face-to-face learning and teaching in higher education settings going forward. The findings describe study environments that influenced OLT, academic participation and performance during the pandemic when no face-to-face learning and teaching took place, OLT resources and support for OLT during the pandemic, and suggestions for BLT that could support flexible learning and teaching practices at HEIs post the pandemic. The discussion concludes with some recommendations for aspects to consider when planning and implementing a BLT at HEIs post the pandemic.*

**Keywords:** *blended learning and teaching, COVID-19, flexible learning and teaching, online learning and teaching, social work education.*



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## 1. Introduction

The severe nature of COVID-19 virus-related illnesses, and the aggressive way in which it spread affected the way in which learning and teaching could be continued at HEIs globally. Academic and administrative staff had to develop flexible strategies to ensure the sustainability of education during the pandemic, including making use of OLT (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2022). Prior to the pandemic, most South African residential universities made use of BLT methods where online platforms and traditional classroom methods

are combined (Bosch, Mentz & Reitsma, 2020). However, most HEIs depended more on the physical (face-to-face) learning and teaching component than the OLT component of BLT (Ubah, Spangenberg & Ramdhany, 2019).

The migration from BLT to OLT occurred within a short space of time, which did not allow time to HEIs to prepare the needed infrastructure, staff and students (Visser & Law-Van Wyk, 2021). Although OLT was not an unfamiliar approach in South African HEIs, for the very first time, the pandemic propelled HEIs to adjust and deliver curriculums utilising OLT methods solely without students and educators having extensive experience and training in OLT practices (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). Coman *et al.* (2020), however, report that exposure to, and experience in BLT prior to the pandemic enabled and supported students and educators to adjust to OLT.

This discussion reports on a study that explored the experiences of student social workers and their educators concerning OLT during the pandemic. A background discussion outlines the rationale and the theoretical framework on which the mentioned study was based, followed by a summary of the research methodology that was used and the research findings. The discussion is concluded with recommendations for the planning and implementation of BLT post the pandemic.

## 2. Background and rationale

Social work education and training in South Africa are well established and have been evolving in the last 30 years (Noyoo, 2022). The Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) is offered by 16 South African HEIs (Potgieter & Pitse, 2022). Social work is a human-centred academic discipline, and therefore its education and training consist of both theoretical and practice modules, as outlined by the South African Council for Higher Education (CHE, 2015). Due to the emphasis on the interrelatedness of theory and practice (CHE, 2015), on the one hand, face-to-face learning and teaching practices have been viewed as a preferred way of education and training (Hlatshwayo, 2021). On the other hand, Van der Westhuizen, Gawulayo and Lukelelo (2021) report on the potential value of BLT in fieldwork education, and found that BLT provides for the different learning and teaching styles of students. The authors, however, recommend that training is required to use online platforms effectively when implementing BLT.

The conversion to OLT during the pandemic required that learning and teaching centred around learning through technology to support the development of knowledge, understanding and skills (Al-Fraihat, Joy & Sinclair, 2020; Aparicio, Bacao & Oliveira., 2016). For OLT to be effective, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is used to provide for a variety of online learning systems and tools (Aparicio *et al.*, 2016) to enhance learning and teaching processes and experiences (Al-Fraihat *et al.*, 2020; Pham *et al.*, 2019). As a potential long-term advantage of the inclusion of OLT in traditional face-to-face learning and teaching practices, Pham *et al.* (2019) assert that OLT may improve educational access as students and educators can access the online system at any time and from any place, provided access to a device and an internet connection to access course content is possible. As such, various authors ask for a reflection on how the emergency OLT practices during the pandemic can inform the future development of learning and teaching practices in higher education, and report on how such development will also be responsive to the technological advances in society. Arguing for the inclusion of technology in learning and teaching post the pandemic, Safodien (2021) asserts that disciplines such as social work are not immune to the fast-paced

evolution of technology, while Tan (2023) asks that higher education learning and teaching practices embrace technology and innovation to thrive post the pandemic. Acknowledging the value of face-to-face education and training for fieldwork in higher education, Gad (2022) recommends that the ability to use technology effectively be included in practice modules to ensure that graduates can operate within virtual spaces to deliver services during times such as the pandemic, pointing to the inclusion of BLT practices.

The challenges experienced by students to access and engage with course content during the pandemic, however, posed a threat to the mentioned potential advantages of OLT. Tanga, Ndlovu and Tanga (2020) discuss the challenges with connectivity due to a lack of devices, data and technical training experienced by students. Supporting the previously mentioned requirement for training to use technology in learning and teaching effectively, Badaru and Adu (2022) and Chinengundu (2021) agree that continuous technical training for students and educators is a prerequisite for effective BLT post the pandemic. Mhlanga (2021) suggests that the digital divide, inequality to access technological resources, and a lack of digital skills experienced by students and educators that were highlighted during the pandemic require of HEIs to develop and prioritise policies that seek to address such challenges through a BLT approach post the pandemic. Hrastinski (2019) explains that the BLT concept accentuates that students get to experience aspects of online learning as well as face-to-face instruction. This description is expanded on by Chinengundu (2021), who identifies four priority areas for the development of BLT practices in HEIs, namely (1) planning, (2) preparation, (3) adaptation, (4) and conducive spaces for learning and teaching.

The COVID-19 pandemic unmasked the potential of the inclusion of OLT in learning and teaching practices at residential universities, pointing to a renewed interest in how BLT can be planned for and implemented (Maree, 2022). The findings of the research reported on in this discussion are aimed at making some recommendations for the development of BLT at HEIs post the pandemic. BLT supports flexible learning and teaching (FLT), and was used as the theoretical framework for the study reported on as well as the recommendations made in this discussion.

South African post-school education and training are aimed at a transformative FLT approach to obtain an education and training system that is diverse, user-friendly, and accessible (Republic of South Africa, 2013). This requires learning and teaching practices that provide educators and students with options where, when, and how they learn and teach (Huang *et al.*, 2020). However, socio-economic inequality has been identified as a threat to such an approach, as not all students will have the same access to the resources and skills required for effective OLT as a form of FLT (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019; Webb & Cotton, 2018) This inequality between students, then, became apparent during the pandemic, and informed this discussion.

### 3. Research methodology

Looking at FLT post the pandemic, Huang *et al.* (2020) argue for FLT that supports learning and teaching, and that is personalised or contextualised according to the unique needs of students within a particular higher education setting. This discussion was therefore aimed at exploring the academic experiences of student social workers and their educators during the pandemic, and how these experiences may guide the planning and implementation of a stronger combination of online and face-to-face learning and teaching in higher education settings going forward.

A qualitative research approach was followed and supported by the contextual, explorative and descriptive research designs. It was envisaged that, while the findings are reporting on student social workers and their educator's experiences, these experiences may be used to contribute to the development of BLT in higher education in South Africa in general.

Participants representing the South African social work education and training context were purposefully selected using non-probability purposive sampling. The sampling criteria for inclusion of student social workers were full-time, registered third-year BSW students at a South African university, and full-time social work educators in the undergraduate programme of the BSW programme at the university. Data saturation determined the sample size of 25 student social workers and four educators.

Primary data were collected from students through semi-structured interviews and through focus groups with educators. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data to identify main themes, sub-themes and categories, using the framework proposed by Creswell (2014). The data were verified focusing on credibility, dependability and confirmability (cf. Anney, 2014), supported by the method of data analysis, the transcripts and fieldnotes of the interviews, triangulation of data collection sources and methods, a comprehensive audit trail of the implementation of the research methodology, and the use of an independent coder. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university where the study was conducted, and focused on avoidance of harm, debriefing opportunities, voluntary participation and informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and privacy, and data storage and management protocols.

## 4. Student and educator experiences during the pandemic

Three main themes emanated from the analysis of the data, namely 1) the academic experiences of the participating students during the pandemic, 2) OLT resources available or lacking, and 3) suggestions for BLT post the pandemic.

### 4.1 Academic experiences during the pandemic

The way in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected student's attitude and motivation towards their studies has been acknowledged by Hermanto, Rai and Fahmi (2021). The findings support this statement, focusing on the impact of study environments on participation and academic performances during the pandemic.

Kapasia *et al.* (2020) mention a lack of internet access at home that impacted on academic experiences. Similarly, De Haas, Faber and Hamersma (2020) report on student dissatisfaction during the pandemic regarding not having access to the campuses and a lack of interactions with peers and educators.

In reflecting on the lack of access to campus, a participant shared the following, *"I must say that being on campus does make a big difference. Because you break away from all these distractions and you can focus there on your academics"*. Another participant concluded that the campus provided a more conducive environment, *"Honestly, being on campus is the best environment for you to learn. Also, when it comes to online learning to have internet"*. Although South African universities did provide devices and data to some extent, a lack of internet connectivity and data remained a challenge for students (cf. Chisadza *et al.*, 2021; Mpungose, 2020).

A lack of access to campus also meant a lack of access to academic resources, which was particularly true for students from low-income backgrounds (Di Pietro *et al.*, 2020). The participants referred to a lack of direct access to educators and the library:

*Before I could physically run to a lecturer's room, ask my question, got the answers and left.*

*You can't even get access to library, now you have to Google everything, just everything is online.*

The latter statement indicates that some students struggled to access online resources, which are contributed to existing issues among students from disadvantaged communities, such as limited social support, non-conducive living conditions, psychosocial factors, and high costs to access devices and data (Motala & Menon, 2020; Wangenge-Ouma & Kupe, 2020). Wilczewski, Gorbaniuk and Giuri (2021). Oluka, Musaiigwa and Nomlala (2021) conclude that the importance of conducive learning and teaching environments that are supported through access to campus infrastructure was highlighted during the pandemic.

Typical academic challenges experienced by university students include not managing time and distractions effectively and a reduced focus on studies (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). The following statement describes similar experiences:

*It kinda made me lazy. Cause of the data and the not having Wi-Fi... I ended up not feeling like doing the assignments.*

Due to economic challenges during the pandemic, some participants explained that they started to work, and that this further challenged their engagement with and participation in learning and teaching activities:

*So, then I would work a 12-hour shift, come home and I'd be tired. Sometimes I didn't even attend classes or tutorials.*

*If I'm at work, I didn't have time to engage with other students for that certain time.*

Within a FLT approach, the diverse learning and personal needs of students are acknowledged and catered for (Joan, 2013). The socio-economic circumstances of the participating students, however, limited their ability to make use of the choices available to them (cf. Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). The participants referred to being unmotivated, which lead to poor time management and procrastination, *"I was unmotivated, and I procrastinated like a lot"*. Procrastination, then, led to stress, *"Like I'd always end up leaving things to the very last minute and in turn get even more stressed"*. Considering the self-paced nature of FLT (Hodges *et al.*, 2020), procrastination and the inability to manage time effectively has a negative impact on academic performance (Batbaatar & Amin, 2021).

Low academic performance during the pandemic may be contributed to the difficulties experienced to transition to OLT (Chisadza *et al.*, 2021), as confirmed by the participants: *"If I compare my marks for last year and the start of this year it's been going down slightly"*. A student explained that she did not realise at first that her performance decreased: *"So, in my head I wasn't really failing, but I was failing"*.

Notably, a participant described how performance was linked to using feedback effectively, *“I just feel like if I had maybe gone through the feedback that my marks and my performance would’ve been better”*. This statement is supported by Yuan *et al.* (2021), who suggest that students need guidance and encouragements to review feedback to prevent that they remain ignorant of areas they need to improve in.

## 4.2 Learning and teaching resources

While the previous theme reports on challenges that were experienced, this second theme presents resources that assisted the participating students to engage effectively in OLT. Pather, Brown and Lawack (2021) and Abenes and Caballes (2020) confirm OLT tools as important for the implementation of FLT, but add that such tools require of students to have the needed devices and to have access to a stable internet connection. Salubi (2021) argues that this form of support during the pandemic assisted to prevent a digital divide among students. Student participants confirmed how university support to access to mobile data and devices assisted them:

*One thing that really helped was the data that we received.*

*I received the laptop from the university data for every month.*

Reference was also made to cell phones to support contact with supervisors and peers:

*Because when we were still on campus, I would attend lectures and supervision. But now I had to like go online [referring to having contact with supervisors and peers on her cell phone]. The phone became very important to me.*

Although BLT includes OLT practices, printed textbooks have been used primarily as a learning and teaching resource (Baragash & Al-Samarraie, 2018). Similarly, the participating students identified textbooks as a valued learning resource:

*I still have textbooks from the first year and very few from second year, and I think they were also able to give me more information.*

Other valuable online material was described as follows:

*We could access tutorials, videos on YouTube, and go to other sites to get more books and more readings on whatever subject we were doing.*

This statement highlights how online resources contributed to a positive learning experience.

The educators added that they used narrated PowerPoints as online learning material to provide students with a further online resource. *“Initially, we used predominantly narrated PowerPoints so that the students could read and listen.”* The online platform was also described as a way to engage with students to become aware what resources are working, and what not.

*So, I made a little video of my narrated PowerPoint. It took me an hour or more, and then the students alerted me that they could not hear anything. But it was nice that we could pick this up in the online chatroom. I felt it was more interactive than I expected.*

Learning and teaching platforms that were used with success to foster OLT during the pandemic were indicated as the university's official zero-rated data learning and teaching online site (iKamva, WhatsApp, and Google Meet.) Focusing on the official site, Petersen (2020) mentions that the platform provides 1) access to learning and teaching material and content; 2) an online platform to interactively connect with fellow students, educators and tutors; and 3) a central platform to upload assignments and to receive feedback. In this way, the institution promotes inclusive learning and teaching practices that supports participation (Lawrie *et al.*, 2017). The benefit of the university's official platform was described through the following statement:

*We know that iKamva is zero-rated. So, there isn't data that a person needs to access it and you do not have to worry if you have enough data.*

Confirming this viewpoint, an educator added that the sharing of information and structuring of module plans as another benefit:

*I think iKamva was a big help. I enjoyed the lesson plans to structure the module.*

WhatsApp was identified as an accessible platform that supported communication between a variety of role-players:

*I would say WhatsApp definitely worked well for me, because it's very convenient. Because tutorials were held there, lectures were held there. And there were also the group discussions. And another thing is WhatsApp doesn't really consume a lot of data.*

Prior to the pandemic, WhatsApp was described as a valuable communication platform that could be accessed at any time during disruptions in higher education, such as the student protests in South Africa (Mabaso & Meda, 2019). During the pandemic, this was confirmed by Nyembe (2021) who suggests that increased collaboration on WhatsApp supports FLT in that students have access to an easily accessible platform that may can improve learning and teaching outcomes.

Despite the advantages of the official online platform of the university (cf. Petersen, 2020), the participating educators reported that the meeting option did not work well:

*What didn't work well was the blue button [on the iKamva site]. It was often not working, disrupting the class.*

The Google Meet platform for online classes was valued by the participating educators:

*I tried a number of platforms. Later on, I discovered that I felt like Google Meet lectures became a better suited option.*

Not only did lecturers facilitate classes on Google Meet, but students valued the interaction with lecturers and peers and also arranged meetings among each other on this platform:

*And then Google Meet of course made things very easy for us because now we were able to see each other. And in the class, the lecturers were able to teach and explain things using Google Meet.*

To have a positive impact on the methods of communication between students and educators through OLT, Panergayo and Almanza (2020) explain that participants need to be familiar with and able to use the technology.



Academic support has been accentuated as a resource to assist students to address and overcome challenges and to achieve academic success by authors such as Brubacher and Silinda (2021) and Eloff, O'Neil and Kanengoni (2021). The role of academic staff to provide students with academic and personal support is stressed by Uleanya (2021), who explains that such support must be available throughout the course of their academics. Student participants reported on not only support from educators, but also on how they were supported by tutors and supervisors as a part of the academic team:

*The lecturers and tutors and our supervisors were very supportive. Whenever you need to ask a question, you just e-mail, and they will respond.*

Referring to the use of WhatsApp, a student also explained that support from peers became valuable on this platform.

### 4.3 Suggestions for BLT post the pandemic

The participants expressed the need to have face-to-face classes, as described by the following statement:

*I would love the live class again; this will make learning so much easier.*

They further reflected on the use of BLT post the pandemic, and made suggestions regarding how this approach should be planned and implemented post the pandemic, as discussed next.

As highlighted in the previous themes, the participating students again referred to devices and data needed to include OLT in future learning and teaching activities:

*The university will have to provide the necessary devices that students may need. And the data ... the lecturers sometimes give us videos to watch, that also costs data.*

*Definitely, the university needs to add more data because the data we get now is too little for everything that we have to do online.*

An educator participant expressed frustration regarding the fact that student data was primarily for nighttime use:

*So, if the students receive night owl data, it means that they need to work in the night, and the lecturer cannot be available day and night. Going forward, a better structure is needed to ensure all students can be active at the same time.*

Reflecting on the option of continued online learning and teaching activities as a part of BLT, a student raised a concern that the provision of data would not be continued post the pandemic:

*But my only concern is if the university would still provide everyone with that data. And I feel like in order to learn online, you need that data.*

The participating students acknowledged that the online library could contribute to effective BLT, but added that this should be in addition to access to the campus library:

*We could get some articles and books online, but it was difficult to figure out how to find the right material online.*

*I would love for them to open the library again. Textbooks are very, very expensive.*

While Walsh and Rana (2020) suggest that libraries should digitalise material, the findings in this study point to students wanting to have access to the hardcopies in the campus library. Referring to the online library being experienced as taxing during the pandemic, a participant suggested:

*You could have a tutorial of that as well, how to use the online library.*

Technology to be used in the classroom as an important aspect of BLT was highlighted by the student participants:

*The option of using the technology more ... even if we are going back to class, our university should consider buying good material ... mics and cameras that will record a lecture while it's happening so that some of the students that cannot be there can attend the class online. People have different issues. One might be sick, for example.*

This statement accentuates the need to consider FLT that ensures accessibility that considers different circumstances of students (cf. Van der Westhuizen *et al.*, 2021). A participating educator echoed the importance of upgrading venues:

*The problem is for that to happen our building needs to be revamped, we need ventilated rooms and proper equipment for hybrid teaching.*

BLT require that academic staff and students develop digital skills (Evans *et al.*, 2019). Participating students suggested that educators should increase their knowledge of online platforms, and students should be offered tutorial training:

*Our lecturers should upgrade their knowledge when it comes to these different platforms and the technological devices that we are using. And also, there should be training that are done also for students so that we can work online better.*

*Definitely tutorial videos on how to use these platforms. Because sometimes you need to see what he (the person doing the tutorial) was doing visually and follow all the steps that he is doing.*

The importance to use the experiences and skills obtained during the pandemic in future learning and teaching practices was described by an educator:

*So, I'm thinking blended learning in the future ... we are in a digital world. We are much better equipped now to use these tools. We should really reflect. I think we've learned to do blended learning in a much more creative and pedagogical sound manner for the future.*

As a conclusion to the findings, another educator accentuated the value of flexibility in support of BLT post the pandemic:

*Some students learn differently, and some lecturers teach differently. And so, I would like to see more flexibility. I'd like to see elements of face-to-face and online being infused in future modules. I don't think we now can go back. We've learnt a lot along the way.*

## 5. Recommendations for flexible blended learning and teaching

The promotion of BLT in higher education may be based on 1) an acknowledgement of and accommodating socioeconomic challenges of students; 2) accommodating different learning styles; 3) ensuring the availability and accessibility of resources required for BLT; and 4) skills development for students and staff to engage effectively with BLT.

Students challenged by socio-economic realities and who need to find employment to support themselves and their families (Baglow & Gair, 2018) should be considered post the pandemic. FLT practices, which include online learning and teaching to support the inclusion of students who are not able to attend on-campus learning and teaching full-time may be considered, while interactive participation is not compromised. This will require that employers are encouraged to provide student employees with time and space to access resources and classes during work hours. In addition, to support students challenged by socio-economic circumstances, work-study positions at HEIs can provide opportunities for them to work on campus to have access to academic infrastructure and resources, while also sustaining themselves. To accommodate different learning styles, it is recommended that online tools be utilised to provide students with a wider range of options to engage with their studies (Truong, 2016).

To respond to student needs during future academic disruptions that require off-campus learning and teaching, HEIs may reflect on how these students can be identified, accommodated and supported to be able to engage with OLT effectively. While BLT practices can provide students with exposure to the use of technologies and online resources to prepare them for such incidents, conducive learning environments are needed for them to participate successfully in OLT.

The flexible nature of BLT may present a challenge to students to manage time in such a way that they participate and engage successfully in BLT. Time management skills development can be included in curricula, and student support services could further provide students with guidance and support to manage time through webinars or face-to-face sessions.

Effective communication between educators, tutors, supervisors and students require guidelines for engagements on online platforms. Importantly, a protocol for communication and tutorials for the use of technology in BLT can contribute to the effective transfer of knowledge and the provision of support.

In conclusion, for FLT to become effective, and to respond better to academic disruptions in future, a BLT approach must consider resources, skills development, and an active integration of technology going forward. Learning technologies and learning with technologies should be integrated. *Learning with technologies* involves a pedagogical focus where the functions and operations of the tools enable learning and teaching. *Learning technologies* has to do with learning about the effective use of digital devices (Kifoil, 2015). Importantly, while an institutional approach to FLT is needed to plan and implement BLT, discipline specific requirements should be considered for further flexibility to ensure relevant discipline-specific responses to trends and societal needs.

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