

Online learning makes a quantum leap during the lockdown

by

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Today we are at Day 21 of the national lockdown in South Africa, indeed a short-term milestone for all of us, because we would have reached the end of the initial 21 days of the lockdown as originally announced by the President. As we all know, the lockdown was extended for another two weeks, but let us celebrate our first 21 days of commitment, compliance and perseverance to the lockdown regulations, in particular by staying home, washing our hands, practising physical distancing and good hygiene on a daily basis.

A leading psychologist and expert in emotional intelligence Dr Pieter van Jaarsveld says that it takes 21 days to form a habit. For instance, if you are unorganised and practise principles and commitment to become more organised over a period of 21 days, after that period the habit is entrenched in your behaviour and you will then continue to behave in that way. Well done to all of you who have managed to improve your hygiene and to comply with all the lockdown regulations as good citizens of our beautiful country, despite all the uncertainty, stress, inconvenience, interruptions and distractions.

I have not left my house for 21 days, not even going to the shops. Fortunately my wife loves shops, although I have noticed that these days she returns home within minutes. She has now proved to me that it is indeed possible to do shopping much quicker than in the past. You see, the 21 day changing of habit concept as mentioned by Dr van Jaarsveld is plausible. But today I want to shift the focus to the next two weeks, or let us extend that to 21 days (and much longer) of developing and using our new habit of making online learning work for ourselves and our country.

Over the past quarter of a century, the Association for Talent Development (ATD), previously called the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) has been the global champion of electronic learning (e-learning) all over the world. In recent times, the term online learning has been popular, but many other terms were used to denote learning by means of technology platforms: telematic learning, computer-based learning, multimedia training, technology-based learning, virtual learning, and digital learning. Since the advent of smart devices and the rapid growth in social media platforms, the terms mobile learning and social learning have also been used recently.

Initially, there were two broad schools of thought in the learning environment, i.e. traditional classroom learning on the one hand, and online learning on the other hand. When educational experts realised that the two paradigms should not be seen as two extremes on a continuum, a third school of thought emerged, once again a broad school of thought with some variations, but basically within a middle category of so-called blended learning consisting of different modes of hybrid learning. This third school of thought became popular, not only in South Africa, but all over the world. The blended learning mode is based on the premise that facilitators of learning should use different modes of learning and vary these learning methods to make learning more engaging for learners, and thereby leveraging different learning facilities, methods, technologies, learning styles, opportunities and contexts.

I had the privilege of lecturing at distance learning institutions before. These institutions have been at the forefront of online learning for more than twenty years. Likewise, the private sector has been using e-learning for almost three decades, while the government has recently embarked on e-learning for government officials, mainly through the National School of Government. Fortunately, contact campuses in South Africa has been on a journey to add online modes of learning over the past ten years, albeit at a slow pace. At Stellenbosch University, the SUNLearn platform has played a major role to leverage online learning for students. Thus, when the closing of schools and universities was announced by the President in response to the Covid-19 crisis, followed by the lockdown of the country, most universities were getting ready to make the transition to online learning. However, moving from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning requires a major paradigm shift on the part of lecturers and students alike.

On 20 April, online learning will officially start at most universities throughout South Africa. Ironically, any form of traditional learning involving face-to-face classes is like church and other religious services illegal during the lockdown. Fortunately, as responsible citizens and facilitators of learning, we do not foresee any illegal classes at universities, schools and other learning centres. Non-compliant religious ministers can learn from teachers and lecturers and be compliant with the laws of the land.

What I have learned about online learning over the past twenty years is that it depends on the commitment by lecturers and students to make it work. Two factors are key to the success of online learning, i.e. lecturer engagement and learner engagement. This means that the two parties must actively engage in the learning process to make online learning work effectively.

Let us remind ourselves of the benefits of online learning for students:

- Students don't need to carry heavy bags full of textbooks moving from class to class around campus, they simply learn from their laptops or smart devices at home.
- While studying from home, students are protected from being infected with the coronavirus and other viruses at campus.
- Students can now develop their own self-paced flexible learning schedule and access the learning management system from home and at any time of the day or night.
- By using online learning, students are being prepared for the modern global workplace, an environment in which online learning has become the preferred way of learning in business.
- Online learning is environment friendly, since it is no longer necessary to print learning material.
- Students can engage actively in online platforms and discussion forums, thereby enhancing and enriching the learning experience.
- In today's fast changing business world, things change on a daily basis, and students are now updated every day about new developments and changes pertaining to the subject matter.
- Active online students (those actively using the system) achieve better marks than passive students (those absent or reluctant to use the system). When I measured student performance at the University of South Africa in 2008, active online students performed on average 31% better than passive students with their assignments, and on average 20% better during examinations.

From the above benefits, it is evident that online learning has many advantages for students. In addition to the above benefits for students, online learning offers multiple benefits for lecturers and other facilitators of learning:

- Lecturers can provide high quality online student support to their students, especially during the absence of face-to-face contact sessions.

- While facilitating learning from home, lecturers are protected from being infected with the coronavirus and other viruses at campus.
- Learning institutions save unnecessary printing costs when facilitating online learning, thereby also contributing to the environment.
- Facilitators can post additional notes and use learning exercises for students on the online learning platform to enhance the learning process.
- Lecturers have more flexibility in terms of their own workload and can access the system when they are available to support their students, thereby blocking some time for research and other academic work.
- Discussion forums can be used online to enhance the learning opportunity for students.
- Facilitators can track student engagement in terms of participation, the type of questions posed and issues raised that will make it easier for lecturers to identify opportunities for improving student support, assessment and the quality of learning material.
- Lecturers use the national and international standard of online learner support that is required for the accreditation of learning providers by quality assurance partners such as professional bodies and international rating agencies.
- Academics achieve a sense of fulfilment when students enjoy the discussions, their inputs and feedback and the overall learning experience, and if they perform better during assessments.
- Lecturers can also learn from the inputs of students, in particular when some students display a high level of insight into the subject matter, and can provide additional student support when some students are struggling with their learning.

The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the adoption and growth of online learning, not only in South Africa, but all over the world. Companies, learning providers and universities were forced into lockdown by their governments and all conventional face-to-face classroom training sessions were replaced by online learning in an attempt to continue with learning. While university campuses are expected to return to a situation of contact sessions again in future, it will not be possible to return to the past. Lecturers and facilitators of learning and students have learned very fast to adapt to the use of online learning, and while all the advanced possibilities of online learning has not been budgeted or planned for, it is evident that the transition to online learning cannot be reversed. If anything, it will become the main form of learning facilitation in the future, while face-to-face sessions are likely to be reduced. The private sector has been at the forefront of online learning for decades. Online learning is one of the best areas in which significant public-private partnerships can be explored and optimised. Already progressive companies such as Vodacom offered their platforms to support online learning at schools while the SABC as a public broadcaster is ideally positioned to use its national capability to fulfil its role to raise awareness, share information and serve the nation with educational services.

Despite the absence of comprehensive change management interventions to properly prepare institutions for this rapid transition, an action learning approach to online learning has evolved and it seems to be working for most people over the short term. Facilitators and students have adapted quickly and will now rise to the occasion in making online learning work while physical distancing and staying at home in particular has become the most important of all the lockdown regulations. However, the lockdown is a temporary arrangement to deal with a national disaster and global pandemic and while most countries are in lockdown, learning cannot be locked down and needs to continue to complete the academic year. Classes can be cancelled, but learning cannot be cancelled.

Online learning is making a quantum leap during the lockdown. This first transition phase to online learning provides an opportunity for learning institutions to embrace the new world of work and to accelerate efforts of adapting to the Fourth Industrial Revolution - a world that is no longer in the future, but in the present. Advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning,

social media and robotics offer excellent areas for action research and development in making learning more relevant, meaningful and powerful in the new world of learning and work. Specialist online learning providers and consultants will play a key role as online coaches in enabling and supporting online learning in the workplace and education environment. Merely dumping traditional content onto online platforms is a superficial approach to online learning. Real online learning requires creativity, innovation and active learning engagement using a variety of technologies to advance sound educational practice.

The more we purposefully design e-learning to facilitate and promote real and meaningful learning, the more effective online learning will become for facilitators and learners alike. We are not trying to eliminate or replace the wisdom and insight of the lecturer, we are attempting to amplify and multiply the impact and the unique style and knowledge of the lecturer. The lecturer is not locked down, he or she is logged in, but we need students to be logged in and to be active participants in the learning process.

E-learning is not about the “e” - it is about learning. It is not about the technology, it is about the human touch enabled by technology. For students, think about how technology has made the impossible possible – your smart lecturers are on your smart phone, while both parties are at their homes. Similarly, for lecturers, your smart students are on your smart phone, while both parties are at their homes. And both parties are safe at home protected from the Covid-19 virus. In fact, a different virus you really need to worry about now is of course computer viruses given the prevalence of cyber security risks.

Successful online learning will make a quantum leap into this new period of accelerated technological transformation and its essence can be summarised in two words: Active engagement. Teachers and learners are now presented with an opportunity of accelerating online learning and to develop their skills as tech savvy change agents in a world requiring all of us to step up and deliver our best as active participants in the new world of learning and work. Online learning is not an event, it is a continuous and never-ending journey of discovery, learning and improvement of individuals, groups and society at large. Let us log in and make online learning work during and after the lockdown.

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