Online Learning in Pandemic Times

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Abstract: A global outbreak of a new disease, Covid-19, affects a large number of people in globe, it reshaping people lives and education is not an exception. This paper will look at how the education system deals with the challenges especially for women learners in this uncertain time, what are the barriers of the online learning process for them, and who we can overcome the obstacles.

Keywords: *online learning; woman learners; pandemic.*

How to cite: Chang, H.S. (2020). Online Learning in Pandemic Times. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 12(2Sup1), 111-117.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/rrem/12.2Sup1/296>

1. Introduction

A pandemic is a global outbreak of a new disease that is highly infectious and affects a large number of people. Some global pandemics are diseases that can easily be passed from one individual to the other. To curb the spread of such diseases, activities that bring people together are banned. For instance, schools and other educational institutions are closed down to limit the gathering of students to minimize the spread of such diseases from one student to the other. According to Lyons (2020), the world is currently experiencing a severe COVID-19 pandemic that has led to the closure of all schools and learning institutions to limit the spread of the deadly viral infection. Pandemics such as the COVID-19 discontinue the classic style of education, forcing the teachers and students to adopt new methods of learning, which disrupt the learning process involving human interaction and transfer it to forced virtualization (Taylor & Armust, 2020). Therefore, this paper discusses how the education system copes with the challenge of adaptation, what education does for people especially women during these uncertain times of pandemic, the barriers to the online learning process, as well as how the obstacles can be overcome.

2. How the Education System Cope with the Challenge of Adaptation

Usually, the education system relies on the classic style of education, where the students and teachers interact together. However, during global pandemics, the standard learning style is interfered with as people take appropriate measures to limit the spread and impacts of a given disease (Sharp & Sharp, 2016, p. 58). For instance, the education system must cope with the sudden changes in the style of education and adapt in real-time to ensure that the students can continue learning during the pandemic period (Hou et al., 2020, p. 350). Providing the students, teachers, and other stakeholders with relevant information on how the education system is preparing to handle education issues during a pandemic improve the mental preparedness of the students, teachers, and other stakeholders to the changes which will enhance their adaptation to the new changes (Na & Tasir, 2017).

As such online education can be an excellent source of information to ensure that the community continues to gain knowledge, skills and expertise without having to utilize the traditional classroom setting. By adopting effective education styles that students, teachers, and other education stakeholders can use, Horzum (2017, p. 506) asserts that teachers and students can digitally connect from different locations through the use

of virtual technology, which allows students and teachers to interact and learn directly. Additionally, the education system copes with the challenge of adaptation by investing in the necessary materials and technology that can allow students to continue learning from home (Novotny et al., 2016, p. 520).

3. How Education Continue in the Uncertain Times

During a pandemic, it is usually not clear when the situation will get better. As such, the education system should always find ways of ensuring that students can continue their studies. During pandemics, teachers and students actively get involved in education activities through the use of technology. According to Horzum (2017, p. 505), virtual classroom technology allows students and teachers to interact, communicate, and discuss educational ideas conveniently. The technology allows for both video and audio communications (Barnett-Queen et al., 2005, p. 230).

Despite the fact that the pandemic has hindered a lot of educational activities, life must go on and this means that knowledge acquisition cannot stop. Based on this realization, then it is vital to note that online education offers significant opportunities to people in these trying times. Particularly, online learning offers the opportunity for people to continue with career development even when the normal educational activities in the classroom cannot take place (Van Popta et al., 2017, p. 55). This is vital in ensuring the continuum of skilled personnel as well as preparing learners to work once the pandemic is over.

Perhaps one of the most vital elements that online education offers to people is the provision of a flexible schedule and learning environment. Learning from home is one of the most acknowledged ways in which people can gain knowledge while still taking care of their families. This virtual classroom is perhaps the most convenient for women who have to take care of children and families as it allows them to easily access digital learning materials (Panigrahi et al., 2018, p. 7). As shown by the National Center for Education Statistics, the year 2013, 56% of undergraduates and another 59% of graduate students undertaking online courses were female, an indication of how this learning system is favorable for them (Haynie, 2015). This means that these women learners can plan their schedules as they want and set aside time to learn at their own pace by choosing a desirable class workload and preferred period of the day.

Online learning also goes a long way in providing low costs and debts. Significant amounts of financial resources and time are required for

transport, access to libraries and other activities involved in physical classes. For instance, a university such as Arizona has its online rates ranging between \$530 and \$728 per credit hour for undergraduate and graduate rates at \$532-\$1,397 per credit. Similarly, Eastern Kentucky University offers graduate programs at \$535 per credit hour while on-campus degrees are at \$550 per credit respectively. However, the cost of traditional classroom learning comes even higher with the inclusion of transport, parking, housing, laboratory fees and even meal plans (Learn.org, n.d.). Online learning reduces this burden significantly as it allows individuals to pay for courses they can afford and cut the costs and time involved in movement, accessing resources and so on. At the same time, the progress of the students can easily be assessed through the use of virtual classrooms and other equivalent technologies (Supap & Viriyavejakul, 2019, p. 90). But with online learning comes self-discipline and responsibility which all people must strive to maintain in order to keep up with the class activities.

4. Barriers of Online Learning Process

The online learning process has been effectively used to ensure that students continue with their studies during a pandemic. However, there exist various barriers to the online learning process. One critical barrier to the online learning process is boredom. Prior *et al.* (2016, p. 95) argues that the online learning process quickly becomes monotonous because the interaction between learners is limited (Dağhan & Akkoyunlu, 2016, p. 200). A student who does not fully concentrate during the online learning process is less likely to grasp and understand new and complex ideas (Koonin, 2020, p. 7; Wu, 2017, p. 142). Distraction is yet another barrier to the online learning process. Students learning through the online process are likely to get distracted by computer games, social media, and other irrelevant online content that are easily accessible (Daly et al., 2019, p. 48). Another barrier to the online learning process is limited experience in technology. Students with limited technology experience find online learning challenging because they need help to use technology for learning purposes (Anekwe, 2017). Depending on others for support with the technological devices and software can be ineffective and time consuming to the students, which negatively impacts the quality of the outcome of the online learning process.

5. How to Overcome Barriers to Online Learning Process

To overcome the barriers to the online learning process, the education system should encourage the sharing of ideas. An improvement in

the sharing of ideas allows students and teachers to effectively work in online teams and groups which improve the learning outcomes of the students (Dixon *et al.*, 2017, p. 37). A functional relationship between the students and the teacher can be established to encourage rapport, the sharing of ideas and commitment during the learning process (O'Doherty *et al.*, 2018, p. 130). What is more, the education system can help the students and the teachers to overcome barriers to the online learning process by providing them with relevant technical training (Bezuidenhout, 2018).

Lastly, in this era of Covid-19 pandemic, there is the absence of hands-on learning activity and this is where online learning needs to introduce virtual laboratories and work simulation programs to supplement existing systems. This is why Rajendran and Veilumuthu (2010, p. 2174) mention that in a study on virtual laboratory learning, 90% of student participants indicated its effectiveness in E-learning.

6. Conclusions

In summary, online learning offers a variety of solutions in a time when traditional classroom learning has been disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. This system of education not only gives the opportunity to maintain quality dissemination of knowledge, responsibility and reduced costs but also flexibility for women who are cumbered with household activities such as child and family care. With this in mind, online learning keeps the education system running effectively and the obstacles to it such as distractions, complexity and reduced physical interaction can be solved by introducing online groupwork, easy to use technologies and training as well as virtual systems such as labs and work environments to enhance learner skills and experience.

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