Facilitating Student-Centered Learning or Violation of Equality? Student Attitudes about Online Sociology Lessons at the University of Colombo During the Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study explores student attitudes on online teaching that took place during 2020 in three sociology courses at the University of Colombo. A sample of 44 students who volunteered to write an essay about their online-learning experience was chosen for study from among the First, Third and Fourth/Final Year students. These essays were. analysed thematically to see the students' level of engagement, enjoyment and challenges faced. In general, a positive attitude was identified among students regarding online learning. The positive attitude emerged mainly from a sense of enjoyment that has been lacking in the traditional classroom. The e-library containing materials in Sinhala and Tamil was appreciated as it helped students overcome the barrier of not having access to the physical library. Students also expressed some negative attitudes and they were mostly related to challenges encountered. These challenges which included lack of internet access, affordability and lack of IT knowledge clearly violated the equity principle rooted in the country's free education policy. In the absence of these facilities, educational loss has been inevitable for some. The study proposes the need to improve infrastructure and students' IT skills in order to secure maximum benefits of the online programme and to sustain equality among different socio-economic groups in society. The need for developing a unique style of online teaching that takes into account the medium of instruction, students' IT knowledge and disability status while promoting asynchronous activities is noted. Financial assistance to students for overcoming affordability issues is also recommended.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought controversial changes to different aspects of our lives. Life, as we knew it in 2019, is no more. Many areas of human life and interaction are increasingly becoming 'virtual' or 'online'. The interaction between the teacher and students is probably one of the most challenged areas in the new 'virtual' way of life. For many years now, the system of education in Sri Lanka has been wanting to distant itself from the 'traditional' practices of teaching and learning. Covid-19 compelled educationists, teachers and academics to reconsider traditional face-to-face teaching and learning as students lost about three months of learning due to the pandemic. Sri Lanka could no longer ignore the virtual platform as a suitable alternative. As a result, the universities were the first to start online classes. Few months later, the schools joined in. Globally, virtual teaching and learning came to be considered a suitable alternative for reducing the risk of infection for students before resuming conventional activities (Kaur *et al.*, 2020). As a result, all nations had to take up online teaching irrespective of infrastructural and knowledge differences.

Many public universities in underdeveloped nations are suffering from a lack of technology and Learning Management Systems (LMS) to facilitate the interaction between teacher and students (Sobaih, Hasanein & Abu Elnasr, 2020). The Sri Lankan national universities are no exception to this, where an interest in the conversion from a traditional to a blended mode of teaching has been around for over a decade. However, the attempt has not been successful due to several issues. It is in this backdrop that the University of Colombo (UoC), had to make the conversion almost overnight by scheduling lectures via ZOOM and the LMS.

The face-to-face traditional classrooms were converted to virtual classrooms in a matter of weeks. The shift was difficult for both lecturers and students. For lecturers it was difficult as it meant on-the-job training for many who had not attempted any online teaching previously. For students, the shift from several years of in-class learning in school and in university was drastic and difficult to get accustomed to. However, the situation was brought under control considerably by providing in-house training for both parties.

In Sri Lanka, education has been considered a major means of providing equal opportunities for all social groups irrespective of their position in the social hierarchy (Karunaratne, 2009). The free education policy which provides education from Grade 1 in school till the completion of a University Degree without charging any tuition fees is based on this desire for equal access. The main criticisms aimed at the online education that has come into place without equal access to necessary infrastructure is essentially the fact that it violates the basic principles embedded in the free education policy. This situation is likely to result in a high rate of school dropout and/or virtual dropouts leading to long-term issues such as high unemployment and poverty (see Tsolou, Babalis & Tsoli, 2021).

Having said this, it is also important to understand that online teaching and learning is probably the only option available to minimise educational loss in a situation where onsite education is impossible. The teaching programme that is the focus of the current study is based on this premise and has adopted certain strategies to minimise the negative impacts of inadequate technology and exposure in the courses that were part of this study. The adopted teaching strategy used asynchronous activities, both English and Sinhala languages, practice sessions for activities counted in for the final mark, audio recordings of the activities for the visually impaired students and an e-library with readings in Sinhala and Tamil and also with audio recordings for the visually impaired.

The main objective of the present study was to explore student attitudes towards online teaching and learning that took place during the year 2020, when the influence of the pandemic has been at its peak. Accordingly, the study focused on examining the extent to which online education was perceived as a satisfying learning environment by the Arts undergraduates of the UoC. The study concentrated on three sociology courses at the Department of Sociology, UoC.

Before proceeding to the main findings of the research, a discussion of some key theoretical views that guided the research is essential. The researchers looked at online teaching as a means to developing a student-centred learning environment as opposed to the teacher-centred traditional approach that has existed in the Sri Lankan university system for several decades (Lakshman & Abeywardhana, 2021).

Put simply, student-centered instruction is when the planning, teaching, and assessment revolve around the needs and abilities of the students. The teacher *shares* control of the classroom, and students are allowed to explore, experiment, and discover on their own. This does not mean that the students are in control of the classroom, but rather that they have some influence in the decisions that are being made about their learning. Students are given choices and are included in the decision-making processes of the classroom (Brown, 2008).

It would be an exaggeration to say that the present study adopted the kind of student centeredness described by Brown (2008) and many others (Lunenberg and Korthagen, 2005; Rayens & Ellis, 2018; Williams, 2017). Many authors refer to John Dewey in the presentation of their views regarding student-centred teaching. Dewey was among the very first proponents of this idea. However, his ideas have been focussed on the development of young children in the USA. It is important to make certain socio-cultural distinctions when adopting his ideas of student-centeredness to the university context in Sri Lanka (See Lakshman & Abeywardhana, 2021). First of all, our focus is on matured adult students who have already completed a considerable amount of their cognitive 'development' in school. Secondly, the fact that these students have undergone 13 years of schooling entirely in the traditional mode almost without any exposure to technology-based teaching and learning has to be taken into account. As a result, the present study adopted a student-centred approach to teaching which does not necessarily provide, for students, the kind of democracy described in the above quote from Brown (2008). Activities were uploaded to the LMS without making it mandatory for all students to participate and without allocating marks for them. The mid-semester assignment and the final examination were the only compulsory activities for course completion. Completion of other LMS-based activities was entirely at the discretion of the students, i.e., students were made responsible for their learning.

COVID-19 presented a series of challenges for the developing countries in identifying suitable strategies for avoiding educational loss for secondary and tertiary level students. In a situation where the entire world was moving towards an online teaching and learning model, these countries had to follow suit. However, unlike in the developed countries, the infrastructure necessary for a successful online programme was not in place (Mahmood, 2021). The lack of network infrastructures, computers, and internet access are clearly reasons that hinder equal access to an educational programme that is carried out online (Dutta, & Smita, 2020; Katzman, & Stanton, 2020; Khan, Rahman & Islam, 2021; Sadiku, Adebo, & Musa, 2018; Sife, Lwoga & Sanga, 2007; Tadesse & Muluye, 2020; Tsolou, Babalis, & Tsoli, 2021).

Related to these inadequacies are the teacher and student attitudes that do not necessarily favour all students from various walks of life.

Hunt *et al.* (2014) report a reluctance on the part of academics to move into online teaching particularly due to lack of experience. A similar attitude has been recorded in a study carried out in Pakistan (Alhumaid *et al.*, 2020).

In spite of these drawbacks and negative attitudes, online learning has proven useful for learning in several ways. There is evidence to support that the use of digital material can improve student interest in learning (Walsh, Chih-Yuan Sun, & Riconscente, 2011). Lapitan Jr *et al.* (2021) record a blended learning approach that combined synchronous and asynchronous teaching that improved students' satisfaction. Asynchronous activities are capable of easing issues pertaining to internet cost and access. In another study, Felszeghy *et al.* (2019) have found gamification to be useful in improving student satisfaction and motivation. Muflih *et al.* (2020) record that 75% of the sample who took part in their study felt comfortable to actively communicate with classmates and instructors during online lessons.

Using a constructivist approach to teaching sociology online has been attempted by Clark-Ibáñez and Scott (2008). They suggest that preparing students in advance for online learning contributes to improved students' engagement. In another attempt to "flip" two sociology courses at the University of Western Australia, Forsey, Low and Glance (2013) have found students to be appreciating the classes more compared to face-to-face lectures due to its flexibility and variety of opportunities presented for learning which made the class more diverse. In another study, Driscoll *et al.* (2012) found that with the use of pedagogically sound practices, both online and face-to-face sociology classes can become equally effective. In a former study owned by the authors (Lakshman & Abeywardhana, 2021), it was found that the blended approach improved students' participation in lessons and involvement in their own learning. The present study is a re-investigation based

more on an exploratory design involving three sociology course units with special attention placed on students' attitudes regarding online teaching and learning.

Many researchers see student attitudes and beliefs towards e-learning, as well as their satisfaction with technology and past e-learning experiences as success determinants of future e-learning initiatives (Rhema & Miliszewska, 2014). In developing countries, student attitudes have been closely related to increasing technology awareness and improving attitude toward e-learning, enhancing basic technology knowledge and skills and many other factors pertaining to technology (Bhuasiri *et al.*, 2012). These researchers identify technology awareness, motivation, and changing learners' behaviour as prerequisites for successful e-learning implementation. In another study on student attitudes, anxiety towards online learning has been the most commonly mentioned attitude by a sample of 82 undergraduates (Unger & Meiran, 2020). The same study reports that the anxiety level dropped after three weeks of online learning; indicating that practice and training improve familiarity with online learning and thereby opening up possibilities for more positive attitudes. Likewise, Muflih *et al*. (2020) reported that geographic locations, and lack of past experience on using online tools as being identified by students as the main barrier to online education. A study in Pakistan reveals students' indifferent attitude towards online learning and infrastructural issues as significant challenges inhibiting the success of e-learning (Alhumaid *et al.*, 2020).

All in all, it is clear that in developing countries, availability of and familiarity with technology and knowledge is closely related to negative attitudes towards online learning. The situation seems grim as the technology-related constraints and negative attitudes seem to form a vicious cycle that is difficult to break without considerable amount of time and money being spent within a short period of time for structural adjustments. Without

such 'quick' improvements being made to the system, online teaching and learning in Sri Lanka is likely to be seen as a violation of the equity principle in the country's free education policy. As such online or blended learning in Sri Lanka, in spite of its possible advantages, is threatened with extinction after the end of the pandemic.

2. Materials and Methods

The research site was the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts at the UoC. Non-probability, voluntary response sampling was used to observe and explore the students' perception of online teaching and learning. An open invitation was extended to students enrolled in three Sociology course units taught by the principal author and those willing to participate responded voluntarily. Data was gathered during the initial stage of online teaching, i.e., towards the end of the first semester of online teaching.

Thus, a sample of 44 students who volunteered to write an essay (750-1000 words) about their online-learning experience was chosen for study from among the First (5 students), Third (12 students) and Fourth/Final (27 students) Year students. Students were given specific themes to focus on in their essays. The essay was also an activity for students to familiarize themselves with the process of uploading an activity to the LMS. The guidelines and themes provided are as follows:

> **What do you think about online teaching / blended teaching that is taking place these days? Describe your sentiments in 750-1000 words.**
>
> **Purpose:** *This is merely for a research purpose. But write your true sentiments. No reading/ referencing is expected. Just write an essay on your thoughts/ feelings. Also practice how to upload/ submit essays on the LMS.*

Include the following in your description:

1. *Level of Study (Year)*
2. *The subjects you are taught online*
3. *The procedures that you go through/ what sort of activities do you do online?*
4. *Do you like online/ blended learning? Do you enjoy it? Give reasons.*
5. *What sort of support/training are you given by the university/faculty/lecturer-in charge (specify in your description) for succeeding in this new mode of learning?*
6. *What are the problems that you encounter?*
7. *How do you think these problems can be overcome? What do you propose to overcome these problems?*

Above guidelines were given to students in Sinhala. The submitted essays were thematically analysed as per the objectives of the study.

The students wrote their thoughts about their online learning experience which was mainly about the activities that were presented on the LMS. These activities combined synchronous and asynchronous activities which included quizzes, recorded lectures, readings, written assignments, group assignments (written and oral presentations), forums, interactive videos and short video productions using smart phones. These activities also had instructions given as audio recordings to facilitate learning by the visually impaired. The lecturer had also set up an e-library containing reading materials for all the courses taught by her. E-library contained reading materials in Sinhala and Tamil as they were not commonly available on the net as is the case with materials in English. The materials uploaded to the e-library also had audio recordings of the same for use by students with visual impairments.

3. Results and Discussion

Students who volunteered to write an essay about their online learning experience submitted their essays through the LMS. The essays were thematically analysed to identify two main types of attitudes:

− **Positive attitudes** indicative of their level of engagement in the lesson and sense of enjoyment
− **Negative attitudes** formed around the challenges faced during online learning which are indicative of disturbing equal access to education

3.1 Positive Attitudes

E-learning, with its complex characteristics and diverse features, has the potential to improve the educational process. Teachers and students must understand how to integrate it into the teaching and learning process effectively to influence collaboration and performance positively (Coman *et al.*, 2020). Views expressed by students showed that the LMS has been appropriately utilised by the lecturer to ensure a comfortable learning environment for the students. Many students in the sample have had limited exposure to the LMS prior to the pandemic.

Positive attitudes were expressed in relation to two major areas, namely level of engagement and sense of enjoyment experienced during the online courses. Students were appreciative of the fact that the activities provided on the LMS were not monotonous.

We only knew that the LMS can be used to download lecture slides and fill in quizzes. But we never knew that this has features like chat rooms and forum. I think that after identifying these kinds of features our learning has not been the same. It is now a vibrant experience. This encourages us to spend more time in the LMS and learning has become much

easier than in the previous semesters (Third Year student).

Forum was a very good platform to share our knowledge and also to clarify subject matter. This made it easy to express our views outside of class time (Third Year student).

It is very good if we are given the kind of support we received in this course for other courses as well. During the first semester it was difficult for us to get used to the LMS, but the training we received during this course helped us enjoy online learning during the second semester (First Year student).

Online system provides many ways through which we can ask questions from the teacher. We are not very keen to ask questions in the classroom. But because of these various online methods we have become keen and encouraged to ask questions and share our views. We are also keen to follow the lectures properly as there is the expectation that an activity is likely to follow each lecture (First Year student).

The lecturer gave us various kinds of activities to ensure that we are not bored by the monotonous teaching done online. Of all the activities that we were assigned, the one I and my friends liked the most is the one where we were asked to make a small video using our smartphones (First Year student).

According to Tham and Werner (2005), three factors influence e-learning from the teacher's side; i.e., 1) teachers knowing how to use tools to enhance learning; 2) teachers interacting with students and creating a comfortable learning environment and 3) teachers creatively bringing students closer to capture their attention. It is important that the teacher is capable of making a sound relationship with the students and technology. As depicted in the above quotes,

the lecturer seems to have utilised the features in the LMS to pull students away from their "classroom passivity" (Lakshman and Abeywardhana, 2021) and create a more comfortable learning environment for them. For students who have managed 13 years of school and few years in the university as passive students, the face-to-face classroom environment which demands them to express their views in public seems to create a lot of anxiety (Lakshman and Abeywardhana, 2021). LMS features such as forum and chatrooms were instrumental in creating a learning environment that was not challenging or anxiety-causing for the students.

The students further pointed out the unfamiliarity they experienced in using the LMS during the first semester. However, going through the LMS-based activities that were designed for the courses under study have given them confidence in using the LMS for their studies. As discovered by Unger & Meiran (2020), anxiety towards learning online seems to have dropped through exposure.

The feeling that we have activities to actively take part in motivates us to join the lectures. I strongly believe that this is a very successful method for learning Sociology; making us learn through interesting activities must be appreciated. The attractive teaching style adopted by the lecturer also made us attracted towards completing the activities even though we were not very familiar with such activities (First Year student).

The lecturer kept her camera on even during the recorded lectures. This helped us get over the monotonous nature of 'audio-only' lectures and gave us the feeling that we are in a live classroom. That was really good (Third Year student).

The lectures that were done via Zoom was later uploaded to the LMS. This made it possible for those who missed the lecture to listen to the lecture. The lecturer paid careful attention to the difficulties that students encountered in joining live lectures via Zoom and started uploading recorded lectures to the LMS. We have to really appreciate the special attention she paid to students' difficulties. The recorded lectures made it possible for us to download and listen to the lectures offline again and again (First Year student).

The above statement indicates a close relationship between online activities and the teaching that is done prior to the activities. Effective teaching can be seen as an essential pre-requisite for successful completion of activities even under online circumstances. The "Community of Inquiry" (CoI) model for online learning environments developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2010) can be utilised for understanding the above positive aspects of learning encountered by students. The model is based on the concept of three distinct events namely, cognitive, social, and teaching and it presents the interrelated nature of all three components.

The CoI is a popular model for online and blended courses that are designed to be highly interactive among students and faculty through the use of discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and video conferencing (Picciano, 2021). Picciano (2021) further shows that the model's creators advocate for the design of online and blended courses as active learning environments or communities based on instructors and students sharing ideas, information, and opinions. "Social presence" which is mentioned here, means the social phenomenon that manifests itself through interactions between students and instructors. Accordingly, the presence of teacher and student in the online environment and the proper engagement in the courses have made students familiar and active in terms of learning online without any

hesitation. Apparently, the teacher-student interaction has made students active and

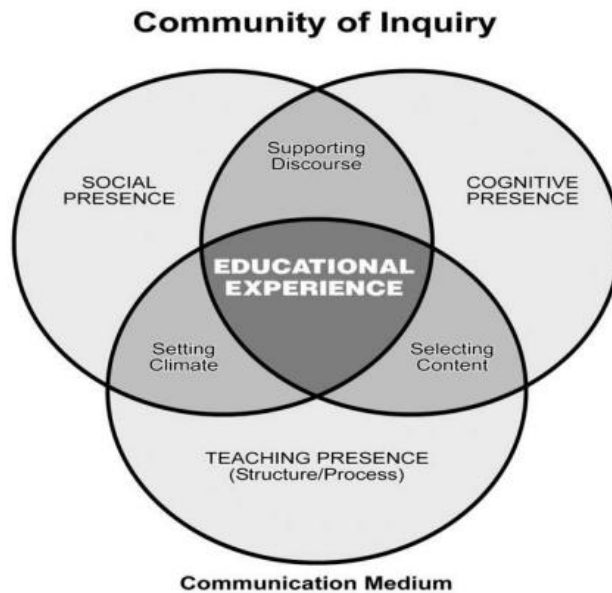enhanced their engagement in the course and the activities.

Community of Inquiry

Figure 1. The Model of Community of Inquiry (Garrison et. al., 2010)

Furthermore, the study reveals key factors that are able to keep students engaged in online learning without reducing their interest in it. One factor is the need to "see" the teacher while teaching online; i.e., many students reported that they expect the teacher to have his/her camera switched on while teaching. Most of the students have indicated the need for the teacher's camera to be switched on during online lessons to ensure that the learning environment is kept comfortable for them. The camera provides the "missing element" for students who are used to a learning scenario dominated by a teacher.

The 'teaching presence' discussed above is relevant here as it seems to be an essential element for effective learning even in an online classroom. Hence the image of the teacher coming via the camera facilitates students' engagement as does the physical

presence of the teacher in a face-to-face classroom.

Recognizing the LMS as a "knowledge archive" for the first time in the case of many students, was another factor that enhanced their level of engagement. The LMS was convenient for students who missed the live lecture as it contained recorded lecture repetition. This aspect of having access to knowledge more conveniently has improved their interest in online learning as opposed to the face-to-face classroom where a lecture once missed could never be heard again.

Students had also commented about the e-library in their essays. They appreciated the fact that they could now read for further knowledge from the comfort of their own home. Even though a lot of relevant material was already available on the net in English, referencing in English was quite a challenge for many who have studied in their first

language (i.e., Sinhala or Tamil). As such the e-library was considered another type of convenience offered through the LMS.

The pandemic left us with no alternative, but to read what is available on the net in English. Reading in English has always been a challenge for us, who have studied in the vernacular medium throughout our academic life. Thanks to the establishment of the e-library, we have a worthwhile online knowledge base, which we can refer in our studies now (Fourth Year student).

We were given certain activities based on English texts in this course unit. We are used to reading Sinhala documents. However, this course encouraged us to read in English and improved our interest on it. The availability of the e-library supported many of us to re-check and clarify the knowledge we gained from the English readings (Third Year student).

We were given, through the LMS, a document written in Sinhala regarding how to cite references in academic writing. It was very useful. It was very helpful for us, who were clueless about how to write an assignment properly (First Year student).

A lukewarm attitude prevailed among the Arts Faculty undergraduates during the early days of LMS-based learning due to inadequate English language and IT (Lakshman and Abeywardhana, 2021). The above quote is indicative of these difficulties. Therefore, it is imperative that any course taught either in the blended mode or the online mode take these concerns into account when planning their asynchronous and/or synchronous activities.

Cognitive presence indicates the extent to which students can construct meaning through a continuous reflection in a critical research community (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). As Harb and Krish (2020)

show through their research, blended learning can create a vibrant cognitive presence, which enables support for active language learning. For example, the e-library, on one hand, was an initiative that contributed to students' language ability while on the other hand ensured fair treatment for all, irrespective of their medium of learning. Both of these outcomes have directly and indirectly led to developing the students' cognitive presence through the online mode.

The positive attitudes identified are clearly related to the kind of diversification that can be brought into the traditional teaching-learning environment by blended or online teaching.

3.2 Negative Attitudes

Literature shows that e-learning is not entirely good. It has some inbuilt weaknesses that may not be conducive to effective learning. According to Sadeghi (2019), online students are more likely to become side-tracked, loose attention, or miss deadlines. Being heavily reliant on technology, such as the internet and computers, to which students may not have access is one of its greatest weaknesses (Dutta, & Smita, 2020; Katzman, & Stanton, 2020; Khan, Rahman & Islam, 2021; Sadiku, Adebo, & Musa, 2018; Tadesse & Muluye, 2020; Tsolou, Babalis, & Tsoli, 2021). Furthermore, disruptions or other system malfunctions that may occur during a course is also a drawback of online teaching (Sadeghi, 2019). There is also the possibility of students missing deadlines in the absence of teachers or peers to provide frequent reminders and support as in the case of a physical classroom (Bijeesh, 2017). These types of inconveniences, where (online) education was disrupted due to external causes beyond their control, were reported by students of the present sample too.

I'm originally from a rural area and I cannot afford a computer. My mother is taking care of my family after my father

passed away. I cannot continuously be a burden to her; she is already working so hard to cover-up my expenses for data cards (Fourth Year student).

I have never used a mobile phone prior to joining the university. So, the mobile phone and especially the smartphone is like a luxury to me. It's like a computer to me. Even though we don't have stable network coverage at home, I persuaded my parents to buy me a smartphone to cover my university lessons somehow. However, I hardly get an opportunity to make use of the data cards before they expire due to bad coverage (Third Year student).

We have to travel a fair distance to the town to buy 'data cards'. Our data bill comes to a fair bit and it is difficult for us to manage. Even though we like to learn, financial difficulties present a lot of issues for us in following online lessons. Expenses for mobile data and signal issues create difficulties for many of us hindering the possibility of joining online lessons. All readings necessary for our Final Year dissertation are available only on the internet and in English only. It is good if we could be at the university physically making use of the library facilities in order to overcome this language issue (Fourth Year student).

The above quotes explicate a scenario common in many developing countries due to financial difficulties and urban-rural disparities. Michael Apple (1990), in his work on social class and the school curriculum, explored the role of education in maintaining social inequities within society. He focuses on how the education system promotes the maintenance of social inequality in capitalist industrialized economies, drawing on neo-Marxist thinkers like Young, Bourdieu, and Bernstein (Apple, 1990, q.f. Brown, 2011). Moving into online teaching and learning, the University of Colombo was only concerned about the continuity of students' education.

However, this opened up the possibility of many economically deprived students, particularly from rural areas, being left out from their education at least for few months until the necessary devices could be purchased. This situation clearly violates the principle of equity and fairness that underlie the country's free education policy. If the Government and/or university authorities do not do anything to mitigate the situation, economically deprived students risk losing access to education and thereby all hopes of the breaking the vicious cycle of poverty by means of education. The pandemic would eventually contribute to the reproduction of the social classes as explained by Apple (1990).

Another challenge surfaced in this research is the hardships experienced by the students with special needs.

The pandemic is a difficult experience for many of us. But some lecturers are not sensitive to our needs. My friends with hearing impairments need the lecturer to have his/her camera switched on while teaching so that they can lip-read without an issue. The visually impaired are fine with the audio recordings. If online is to continue, our needs have to be recognized and catered to (Third Year student).

As a student with hearing impairment, I face several issues during online lessons. I follow lectures by lip-reading. So, it is imperative that I see the lecturer on the screen. Without the images it is impossible to follow the lecture. My friends send me their notes via WhatsApp and also text me any information about examinations and assignments. I feel I am being a burden on them when I have to depend on them throughout the semester for this kind of information (Third Year student).

The Third Year course that was part of this research had three students with visual impairments and one student with hearing

impairment. None of the students with visual impairments contributed to the data collection. Therefore, feedback on audio recordings made available on the LMS for their use was not received.

"Reasonable accommodation" as prescribed in the United Nations Convention on the 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities' is the way to handle the special needs described above (Petretto *et al.*, 2021). Reasonable accommodation provides the ground necessary for a person with disability to engage in activities by making certain changes to the system. For example, ensuring that the font used in LMS-based activities is compatible with the screen reader used by the visually impaired is a reasonable accommodation. The audio recordings made available in the e-library is also reasonable accommodation.

Technology and disability related concerns raised by the students point to two issues worthy of discussion. Firstly, these are clearly inhibiting students' rights for equal access to education. Sri Lanka takes pride in providing education free-of-charge from primary to the completion of a Bachelor's Degree for all its citizens. However, the anticipated policy of equal treatment has not been fully realised due to several issues, divisions and loopholes in the system (Karunaratne, 2009). Online education has introduced yet another form of discrimination into the system largely determined by people's geographical location, education levels and income. Secondly, it raises concerns pertaining to teacher awareness and knowledge, not just about online teaching but also about how best to handle unequal socio-economic and physical capabilities of students to minimise possibilities of discrimination. At the moment, in the absence of knowledge and experience about how best to handle students with these different capabilities, there is a tendency for teachers to completely reject online teaching in favour of the traditional mode.

Similarly, some students too seemed to prefer the traditional mode of teaching to the online mode due to various reasons. This nostalgic attitude is caused by several hours of teaching during a day which leads to fatigue and eventually boredom. The below statements are general comments about online teaching and not specific to the courses observed in the current study.

We are spending more than 10 hours per day in front of the laptop/ smartphone screen. It is quite hard as sometimes we get eye pain, headaches and so on. Listening to the lecture recordings is also boring unlike listening to a lecture in a physical classroom. In both situations we are listening and writing down a note. But I don't believe that online brings us the learning experience of the physical classroom at the university (Third Year student).

The online lessons do not encourage us to immerse ourselves in the learning process as does the two-hour physical classroom. The LMS-based activities are interesting. But having to go through several hours of lectures learning several subjects within a day is tiring both mentally and physically. This is not the case in the classroom where learning happens in a collaborative manner with friends. But learning alone at home is a difficult task (Fourth Year student).

To overcome this situation, teachers must be trained on how to effectively handle an online classroom in such a way that students experience a variety of activities. In the absence of such training or a reluctance on the part of teachers to opt for such training, certain practices from the physical classroom can be adopted in online classrooms. Promoting in-class discussions (by way of breakout rooms) and calling upon students by name to answer questions are some traditional classroom practices that can be brought into the online classroom to mitigate the effects of boredom.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

The present study showed that LMS-based online teaching can actually produce a novel and interesting learning experience for students. Research conducted by the authors in 2019 showed that lecturers and students were sceptical about the use of online or blended modes in their teaching and learning. However, the pandemic has made the conversion from onsite to online teaching and learning compulsory for all.

The new-normal brought in by the pandemic demanded that both teachers and students find effective means of teaching and learning online. Giving up the traditional approach to teaching and learning was made imperative. The data analysis showed that students possessed positive and negative attitudes towards this new experience. The positive attitudes were mostly related to the novelty of the experience which seemed to improve their engagement in their own learning while providing enjoyment. However, students were still seeking for certain elements that were present in the physical classroom, such as the teacher's 'visible' presence. Thereby, students were looking for ways in which they could re-interpret this novel experience in a way that it resembled a familiar experience. They seemed nostalgic of the traditional classroom where the teacher dominated.

The negative attitudes were mostly related to the unavailability of devises and access to the internet. This is a commonly identified issue in many developing countries. Furthermore, the need to address the special requirements of students with disabilities during online lectures and activities was highlighted. While the first concern required intervention from the Government or the university authorities in finding a suitable answer, the latter was about improving teacher awareness and training in such a way that equal treatment of all students was maintained across the board. The negative attitudes were commonly related to the idea of equal treatment which formed the base for Sri Lanka's free education policy. Disparities caused by the urban-rural divide and the social class structure were the root causes of all negative attitudes.

As things are, online teaching presents itself as a threat to equal treatment of students due to lack of infrastructure, knowledge and experience in spite of its potential benefits. If the situation is not remedied promptly while there is still a need for teaching online in order to prevent educational loss, online classroom practices will die away with the pandemic closing yet another opportunity to move into student-centred teaching. Sri Lanka university system has been desperately trying to move into the blended teaching mode since early 21st Century. If not for the pandemic, the system would still be largely teacher-centred and traditional. Therefore, rectifying the issues that hinder a successful online teaching programme will enable the system to move towards its desired target. Students' medium of instruction, and IT and English language abilities are also important factors to keep in mind in developing an online teaching programme geared towards securing equality.

The study proposes two main strategies to mitigate the negative impact of the above disparities. Firstly, the Government must improve internet coverage to the whole island while providing certain loan schemes for students to purchase devices. Secondly, the study highlights the need for frequent training for students and staff regarding online teaching and learning. Thirdly, keeping the activities asynchronous as much as possible will also help students to complete the activities without being online.

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