

Instructors' Coping Strategies for Effective Online Teaching at the Open University of Tanzania (OUT)

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Abstract

Online teaching, now widely regarded as an appealing method of instruction in higher learning institutions, is constrained by various factors, including technological, pedagogical, and financial challenges that hinder instructors' efficiency in teaching. This study explored the coping strategies employed by instructors to facilitate effective online teaching at the Open University of Tanzania. Employing a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design, the study involved ten (10) participants, comprising two instructors selected from each of the five faculties at OUT. These faculties include the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Business Management, the Faculty of Law, and the Faculty of Science, Technology, and Environmental Studies. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document reviews, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that instructors adopted various coping strategies to enhance the effectiveness of online teaching. These strategies included teaching in university premises, using alternative tools other than Zoom and Moodle, delivery pre-recording online lectures, distributing digital and printed copies of learning resources and using personal devices and internet bundles to support course delivery. The study recommends that instructors be trained in diverse coping strategies for effective online teaching. Additionally, they should be provided with essential tools such as personal laptops and provided with institutional bandwidth support. Furthermore, the university should establish mechanisms to motivate instructors engaged in online teaching.

Keywords: *online teaching, instructors, coping strategies, Open University of Tanzania*

Introduction

The adoption of online teaching and learning has increased in recent years. Educational institutions and learners have come to recognize the possibilities of this mode of instruction to democratize access to education. Online teaching is now seen as a more inclusive mode of instruction that aligns with contemporary lifestyles and meets the diverse needs of learners. It offers a more suitable

solution for individuals balancing work obligations and family commitments while skilling, reskilling, and upskilling to improve their career perspectives (Navarro & McGrath, 2021). One of the major advantages of online teaching is its convenience in terms of time and space. It allows students to pursue an internationally recognized degree without the need to attend classes on campus, reducing costs and offering flexibility (Sadiku et al., 2018). Moreover, online teaching systems promote interaction among distance learners, instructors, and affiliated institutions. The fundamental assumption of online teaching is that distance learners utilize electronic tools and digital resources to bridge the gap between instructors and learners. Distance learners actively engage with their peers, instructors, study materials, and institutions through online interactions (Liakou & Monousou, 2015). Electronic tools such as computers, calculators, tablets, and mobile phones have become essential to access applications, websites, and education platforms. The use of these electronic tools and software into the learning process has increased accessibility, interaction, and personalized learning experiences (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018). According to Casanova and Price (2018), online teaching and learning is defined as the teaching and learning that is conducted via the Internet, requiring access to electronic devices and reliable connectivity.

Online teaching is conducted through asynchronous and synchronous modes (Parveen, 2016). The asynchronous mode provides learners with readily available materials in the form of audio/video lectures, handouts, articles and PowerPoint presentations (Ní Shé et al., 2019). These resources are provided through Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as WebCT, Blackboard, Desire2Learn, and Moodle. An asynchronous mode of teaching involves tools such as file attachments, bulletin boards, e-mail, news groups and threaded discussions. It is important for instructors to have skills on how to use tools and assist students to learn. However, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) criticizes asynchronous mode of online teaching as it lacks the immediacy, spontaneity and visual cues, potentially leading to a sense of distance between the instructors and students.

On the other hand, the synchronous mode involves teaching and learning that takes place simultaneously, including text chats and video conferencing (Parveen, 2016). Synchronous mode of teaching may be conducted through Adobe Connect, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Cisco Webex, and Skype (Wang & Houdyshell, 2021). According to Liu et al. (2020), synchronous tools may include data and application sharing, virtual hand raising, live chat, audio/video conferencing, whiteboard, and joint multimedia presentations.

Both synchronous and asynchronous modes are very essential in online instruction delivery to students and instructors. For instructors, teaching can be done anytime and anywhere (Naidu, 2017).

However, the rise of online teaching has not been without challenges. It has been constantly criticized for lack of quality control and for depriving students of key aspects such as teacher-student interaction. Other concerns include unreliable internet connection, high bandwidth costs, limited instructor proficiency in online pedagogy, and inconsistent and power supply (Pedro &

Kumar, 2020). Almazova et al. (2020) identified several challenges faced by university instructors in implementing online education: computer literacy, the university's electronic environment and support, academic staff readiness, and students' readiness for online learning. Among these, the readiness of both staff and students emerged as the most significant impediments to effective online teaching. Additionally, the methodological work in a digital educational environment differs considerably from traditional teaching approaches.

Regardless of these concerns, online teaching has made great strides in recent years. More institutions of higher learning have introduced or reinforced their online education platforms, primarily to reduce cost for students and to expand recruitment amid rising competition (Pedro & Kumar, 2020). To address these challenges, instructors need effective coping strategies that empower them to deliver engaging and impactful online instruction.

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT), which for a long time relied on pure distance learning through correspondence and face-to-face instruction, is now offering options for blended distance learning. The university combines face-to-face teaching with digital platforms such as Moodle, which enables students to access learning resources, and Zoom, which facilitates real time communication with instructors. The university offers academic degrees, diploma, and certificate programs to approximately 75,356 students across 27 regional centers on the Tanzanian Mainland and four coordination centers in Zanzibar, Pemba, Kahama and Tunduru (OUT, 2022). However, instructors at OUT face different challenges, including lack of dedicated teaching space, unreliable internet access, high bandwidth costs, limited pedagogical skills for online instruction, technical challenges, low student attendance, insufficient access to internet bundles. It remains unclear how instructors manage to teach in online environment with the existing challenges. Therefore, this study intended to assess the instructors' coping strategies for effective online teaching at the Open University of Tanzania.

Objectives

Specifically, the study intended to assess the coping strategies employed by instructors for effective online teaching at the Open University of Tanzania. Online teaching is highly demanding and differs significantly from teaching in conventional settings, often causing stress for instructors, particularly when they are unable to meet learning expectations. The findings of this study add to the growing body of knowledge on teaching effectiveness in online environments. By assessing instructors' coping strategies, the study provides valuable insights for institutions and education policy makers seeking to improve the quality of online instruction.

Theoretical Underpinning of the Study

This study is anchored in Resilience Theory, developed by Norman Garmezy in 1974. Resilience refers to the individual's capacity to recover from adversity and to maintain adaptive behaviour after experiencing hardships (Garmezy, 1974). It is centered on people's capacity to rebound from hardships stronger

and more capable than before (Vella & Pai, 2019). In the context of this study, Resilience Theory provides a framework for understanding how instructors at OUT cope with challenges of online teaching.

From a systems perspective, Masten (2015) holds that the adaptation to disturbances that threaten the functionality or development of a system can be termed resilience. Applying this lens, online teaching can be seen as a system whose functionality is dependent on the ability of instructors to participate and adapt despite challenges. Similarly, Van-Breda (2001) argued that the important part of resilience lies in achieving better-than expected results in the event of hardships.

This theory is relevant to the study as it seeks to assess coping strategies of instructors for effective online teaching. It offers a lens for the researchers to successfully establish how instructors coped with online teaching when they experienced challenges.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach using a phenomenological design. The phenomenology design was employed to explore the instructors' experiences and the strategies they employed to curb the problems they encountered during the online teaching process. The study was conducted at the headquarters of the Open University of Tanzania in Dar es Salaam.

The Open University of Tanzania was selected as the study site because it is the only university established in the country mandated to provide certificate, diploma, degree and postgraduate programs through open and distance learning systems since its establishment in 1992. Since 2016, OUT is the only university that delivers all its undergraduate degree programs through blended learning mode (OUT, 2021). Although, OUT operates across 27 regional centers across mainland Tanzania and four coordination centers in Zanzibar, Pemba, Kahama and Tunduru (OUT, 2022), this study was conducted at the headquarter Dar es Salaam. This location was selected because it hosts all heads of department and instructional designers responsible for online teaching.

The sample size included 10 instructors, five males and five females selected from the university's five faculties: the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), Faculty of Business Management (FBM), Faculty of Education (FED), Faculty of Law (FLW), and Faculty of Science, Technology and Environmental Studies (FSTES). Instructors were selected purposively, with two academic staff from each faculty who had more years of experience than their colleagues and had experienced the university's transition to blended learning over time.

In this study, semi-structured interviews and documentary review were employed to collect data from instructors. Semi structured interview was employed for its flexibility and effectiveness in eliciting people's perceptions, interpretations and lived experiences. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), semi-structured interviews are valuable in disclosing nuanced and often hidden aspects of human and organizational behavior.

Documentary review was employed to complement and validate the data collected through interviews. Information from the reviewed documents was used to supplement, contrast, and cross-check the consistency of the primary data. The following documents were selected and reviewed for this study: the OUT strategic plan (RSP 2023/24-2025/26), OUT prospectus, facts and figures, and the orientation speech of Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic, orientation speech from teaching and learning units. These documents were selected based on their relevance and potential to provide valuable information into the study's focus. All documents were obtained at the Open University of Tanzania offices and official website.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic analysis, following six stages of data analysis proposed by Clarke and Braun (2013). The stages included familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a research report. Audio recordings and field notes from interviews were transcribed, listened to, and read several times to ensure thorough data immersion. Coded data were then reviewed and refined to identify major themes and recurring patterns. This data analysis technique helped the researchers to sort out similarities and differences in participants' views. Themes were developed in relation to the study's objectives and research questions, ensuring minimal overlaps. Relevant extracts from interviews were used to support key themes in reporting of findings.

Findings and Discussion

Semi-structured interviews and documentary review methods were used as source of data which helped the researcher to understand coping strategies employed by instructors for effective teaching in online environment. The findings from the study indicated that instructors employed different coping strategies to address different challenges they encountered when teaching through online mode. These strategies included: teaching in university premises, using alternative tools other than Zoom and Moodle, delivery pre-recording online lectures, distributing digital and printed copies of learning resources and using personal devices and internet bundles to support course delivery. Each of these coping strategies is discussed in the subsequent sections:

Teaching in University Premises

Online teaching depends heavily on technology. Online instructors have to possess adequate technological literacy skills to be able to utilize technology in a competent manner. Additionally, reliable electricity and stable internet are vital for effective delivery. However, many instructors reported that teaching from home pose challenges like the interruptions from guests and family members, unstable internet, and power outages. To cope with this challenge, instructors decided to teach in university premises. One of the participants reported that:

When I teach using Zoom, I usually encounter technological problem. For example, you find computer is updating and wasting

time or you find no internet, or no electricity and my laptop cannot save power for long time. So I prefer to teach while I'm at the university premises so as to get sure of technical assistance staff, to utilize university internet, reliable electricity because there are standby generator at the OUT headquarter. This actually release us stress of failing to teach due to technological problem and others. (Interview, Instructor 3 from OUT)

Another instructor shared similar concerns:

Sometimes when teaching at home, you may postpone the session because of guests and interruptions from family members. You have a session but children are making noise, when you are at the master bedroom you may need to put on video and students can see some of information which are not ethically to be seen. So to avoid all these I prefer to teach when I'm at the work although there is also some challenges you find that in the office we are four and two of us have Zoom session then one need to find another venue within the university. (Interview with Instructor 6 from OUT)

The choice of teaching location, particularly when using synchronous tools like Zoom significantly affects instructors' comfort and ability to teach uninterrupted lessons. Data obtained through observation revealed that while majority of instructors taught from the university premises, others were teaching from lodges while there were away from campus, or from their homes using their own laptop and internet bundles. The findings corroborate with those reported by Mesuwini and Mokoena (2024), who found that home-based online teaching often comes with additional distractions that reduce focus and attention. Sources of distraction include family members, mobile phones, and various external interruptions that occur outside of the classroom. To solve these challenges, instructors are compelled to find teaching spaces that are free from noise and interference, and offers easy access to technical support.

Using Alternative Tools other than Zoom and Moodle

Although Zoom and Moodle were identified as the main platforms for online teaching at OUT, both instructors and students frequently encountered challenges accessing Moodle. In order to cope with these challenges, instructors used alternative tools for teaching and communication. These tools included WhatsApp, e-mail, Telegram and Short Message Service (SMS). Findings indicated that instructors used WhatsApp subject groups and Telegram channels to conduct discussions with students, share materials and announcements, and hold virtual meetings. Some instructors used WhatsApp and email to receive assignments and give feedback to students when Moodle failed to function properly. They reported that it is compulsory that every subject should have a WhatsApp subject group WhatsApp invitation links are shared annually to all Director of Regional Centers (DRCs) to ensure that students can join their subject groups automatically. Email was used to send assignments for students who failed to upload in Moodle. SMS was employed to notify students regarding class postponements and schedule changes. One instructor emphasized the

importance of these alternative tools:

Out of Moodle and Zoom, we use WhatsApp subject group, Telegram and email and sometimes SMS or phone call. I use WhatsApp subject group to communicate with students, to share information, files, pictures, and videos, send messages and conduct real time conversation. Students use this platform to ask questions and receive answers from fellow students and instructors. (Interview, Instructor 4 from OUT)

Similarly, another instructor added that:

WhatsApp group is used to disseminate information pertaining to students' studies. The problem is that some students misuse the group by debating issues not related to learning by attacking others negatively which lead to some students wanting to leave the group but the group administrator who mostly are staffs and students leaders put guidelines to ensure the group discussions are not dominated by issues not related to academic purposes. (Interview, Instructor 1 from OUT)

Among the alternative platforms, WhatsApp emerged as the most widely used alternative tool among students and staff. Normally, WhatsApp is used as a social platform for professional networks, community groups, or social circles. However, it has been proven useful for academic purposes such as sharing study materials, disseminating information, and engaging in academic discussions. Similar findings were reported by Mahyoob (2020) who found that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners used WhatsApp to send and receive homework and other assigned tasks when Blackboard was inaccessible. Similarly, Barhoumi (2015) reported that WhatsApp instant messaging facilitates online collaboration and cooperation among online students in blended learning environments. WhatsApp is a free and user-friendly tool. Groups connected to WhatsApp instant messaging can share learning materials easily through comments and messages, regardless of location.

Delivering Pre-recorded Online Lectures

Lectures are recorded to video, audio or both and uploaded to a digital platform such as Moodle. This enables students to access course content any time and from anywhere, as long as they have an internet connection. Furthermore, students can also view recorded lectures offline using the OUT mobile application. Each course instructor has prepared a one-hour lecture for each knowledge area, which can be viewable via the OUT ODL YouTube channel. One of the participants explained:

At OUT, we have OUT ODL YouTube channel where all lectures which are recorded can be accessed and viewed by students. The problem is that not all lectures are recorded and uploaded but those courses which are in OUT ODL YouTube channel students are instructed to visit the channel and listen the lecture. So this

is an alternative when OUT e-learning services not available. However, at the moment recorded online lectures at OUT are available for level one course and it was done in 2016 and till now there are no recorded lectures of knowledge area two to knowledge area six. But this is an alternative for students to study in online environment. (Interview with Instructor 7 from OUT)

Pre-recorded online lectures help students to engage with learning materials at their own pace and time convenient to them. According to Perveen (2016), recorded lessons can be added to an e-library. Using the archived e-library, students can access and replays lectures as many times as necessary to master the material. Similarly, Manea et al. (2021) emphasize that online teaching provides the opportunity to record courses and seminars for later review. Mtebe et al. (2021) also suggested that instructors record live Zoom lectures delivered for learners who could not attend live Zoom class.

However, findings from this study show that only level one courses were recorded and made available on OUT ODL YouTube channel. To enhance online learning, it is recommended that all courses should be recorded and be viewable in Moodle, the OUT e-library archive, and the OUT ODL YouTube channel. Doing so would minimize the problems faced by online learners because students will have access to lectures at their convenient time.

Distributing Digital and Printed Copies of Learning Resources

Instructors decided to give digital materials such as lectures notes, journal articles, and e-books so that students can download and read offline. Some students download and print the materials to read them in hardcopy format for easier access and comprehension. For example, one of the senior staff at OUT said that:

Usually at OUT, students study through Moodle where they can access lecture notes, assignments, quiz, PowerPoint, recorded audio and video lectures, e-books. So students are usually advised to download lectures and save in their devices so that they can read in their convenience time when they are in environment where there is no internet or network. This helps to reduce stress among students and can continue with study without any obstacles. (Interview with Instructor 9 from OUT)

From the citation above, students often downloaded materials and printed materials to cope with challenges posed by unreliable internet access. This implies that all students need to download the material and have them in their devices so that they use when Moodle fail or when they experience challenge of device or when they can't study online. Distributing printed materials helps to bridge the digital divide, ensuring learning continuity even in low-resource settings, support active reading strategies like highlighting, annotating, and note-taking which can improve student comprehension and retention.

These findings are in line with a study by Johnston and Salaz (2019) who stated

that print materials provide an opportunity to write in the margins, underline or highlight important information, and allow ease of reference, particularly when reviewing multiple sources. Similarly, Hasby and Mohammed (2021) found that combined print and digital textbooks provides the optimum learning synergy.

Using Personal Devices and Internet Bundles to Support Course Delivery

It was found that instructors at OUT rely on their own devices such as laptops and smartphones to cope with limited institutional resources. Due to the nature of blended learning, possessing, laptops, smartphones or modems is not merely optional but essential for instructors to effectively deliver the courses. This was exemplified by one of the participants who said that:

Being an academic staff at the Open University of Tanzania, and due to its nature of providing its education through blended mode, own laptop is not an option but mandatory. If you don't have laptop it will be difficult to teach through Zoom anytime and anywhere. Most of computer that are available are desktop and are not enough and not movable and very few staffs own university laptop. (Interview with Instructor 5 from OUT)

Additionally, it was found that instructors use their own internet bundles to cope with challenges interrupted online sessions as reported by one of the instructors:

When you have a session, you must have your own bundle as a backup or you use it in teaching throughout the session. So, if there is no university internet or network, I use my own bundles so that the class can continue although the university paid Tsh 5,000 per session but is not sufficient and is even paid late not before the session. (Interview with Instructor 1 from OUT)

Two quotations above, indicates that instructors use their own devices and bundle to cope with shortage of computers and issues of internet and network. Being an instructor in online institution you must possess your own laptop, and you must have Smartphone or modem for availability of internet. Without doing so, you may fail to conduct the class.

According to Torres (2023), harnessing technology is imperative in the virtual classroom. Video conferencing software, such as Zoom, has proven to be an invaluable tool for conducting synchronous classes, facilitating group discussions, and conducting one-on-one meetings with students. Under this environment, Reyes (2022) suggested that the university should provide online teaching equipment like laptops, headsets, and webcams.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is a challenge for instructors to transition from offline to online mode, particularly in adapting teaching methodologies and managing time effectively. Developing content which not only covers the curriculum but also engages students adds to this complexity. Instructors face different challenges including

lack of designated space for teaching, unreliable internet access, high bandwidth costs, inadequate pedagogical skills for online instruction, technical difficulties, low student attendance, poor internet and lack of access to bundles. To address these challenges, this study identified different coping strategies employed by instructors that empowered them to deliver engaging and impactful online instruction. Thus, the following recommendations are presented by this study: 1. instructors need to be trained on different coping strategies for effective online teaching; 2. instructors should be provided with devices such as personal laptops; 3. the university should supply reliable internet access and bandwidth support; and 4. the university should develop mechanisms to motivate instructors who teach in online environment.

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