

A reflection on History Education in higher education in Eswatini during COVID-19

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Abstract

The closure of educational institutions following the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic called for the adoption of online teaching and learning. For decades, education has suffered in sub-Saharan Africa due to inadequate resources and the nation's inability to invest in continuous professional development that aims to keep practitioners abreast of the field. Most higher education institutions had not anticipated the shift to online teaching on such a massive scale and the sector was not well prepared for the challenge. This hands-on article is a reflection on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on History Education in higher education in Eswatini. The reflection intends to bring to light the challenges encountered and the opportunities offered for a new digital pedagogy for History Education in Eswatini as a new educational landscape emerged.

Keywords: COVID-19; History Education; Online teaching; Higher education.

Introduction

Life has never been the same since the World Health Organisation (WHO) pronounced COVID-19 a global pandemic on 12 March 2020. The proclamation brought fear and anxiety, particularly in the developing world context, where there are numerous socio-economic challenges engulfing not just the health sector but the education sector as well. Eswatini is a country that has never before faced a catastrophe of this magnitude. Even though the 1984 cyclone, Domoina, had a profound impact on the socio-economy of the country as it destroyed more than 100 bridges and disrupted transport leaving some areas isolated for several days (Davies, O'Meara & Dlamini, 1985), it was nothing in terms of its impact on the socio-economy of the country compared to COVID-19. During Cyclone Domoina, schools were affected for just a week or two while a concerted effort was being made to transport students and teachers from the most devastated parts of the country. The projected impact of the pandemic,

based on what was happening in developed parts of the world, caused fear and anxiety as well as psychological stress.

As a history educator who has worked in educational institutions in various parts of Eswatini, I wondered if the education system was going to cope as it had already experienced numerous challenges that directly impacted teacher motivation. I also became worried about how all the changes that were likely to take place were going to impact History Education in Eswatini, especially since the position of history as a discipline was unstable (Dlamini, 2019). In all honesty, I did not see the country coping successfully and I felt that the position of the discipline was going to be even more unstable as more resources were likely to be channelled to the preferred subjects (Dlamini, 2019) which included science, mathematics, economics, agriculture and business studies.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on History Education in higher education

When the first COVID-19 case was reported on 14 March 2020 in Eswatini, higher education institutions were already into their second semester of the academic year. Some were, by this time, in the last quarter of their academic year, having started the semester in early January. The pandemic's spread across the country and the subsequent closure of educational institutions revealed the strengths and flaws of the country's education system.

Policy initiatives

When the first case was confirmed in Eswatini, the national response team had already been set up to assist in mitigating the spread of the virus. However, no contingency plans had been made on how the education sector or even the higher education institutions were going to cope as other countries had done. The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) was non-committal in the initial phase of the lockdown about how educational institutions were going to cope whereas in other countries policies were promptly developed to address the crisis. By contrast, in Australia, for example, before the end of January some higher education institutions had already come up with a COVID-19 plan (Scull, Phillips, Sharma & Garnier, 2020) while in Portugal, the Ministry of Education developed a number of initiatives (Flores and Gago, 2020). Despite being overwhelmed by news

of the sudden closure of national education institutions, some countries at national level took the decision to adopt online learning with immediate effect (Donsita-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; La Velle, Newman, Montgomery & Hyatt, 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020). The switch to online learning was not instant in Eswatini, as there were no prompt initiatives to draw a roadmap that would ensure continuity in learning through the use of alternative modes. Even when the switch was eventually made, there was no proper plan that outlined an organised approach to the adoption of online teaching and learning by higher education institutions.

More concern seemed to be given to an initiative which aimed at broadcasting educational content on national television and radio to assist learners who were expected to sit for externally marked national examinations at the end of the year. A timetable was provided, and lessons were presented by teachers from Monday to Friday. This initiative assumed that all learners had access to either the television or the radio, yet quite a number of learners did not. Also, history was not aired on television as priority was given to the so-called core subjects.

Lack of autonomy

The lack of autonomy by higher education institutions like William Pitcher College delayed the adoption of new modes of delivery as they looked to the MoET for guidance. Despite the college administration's willingness to adopt online teaching and learning in preparation for imminent closure, the absence of the required resources and the MoET's perpetual silence on the issue of adopting alternative teaching modes for students in higher education stalled progress. Since there was no COVID-19 plan or policy that outlined the MoET's position on how learning was to continue while still adhering to the set COVID-19 guidelines, the college lagged behind in adopting online learning. It was also unclear whether government would support higher education institutions financially as they switched to online learning.

Adoption of virtual learning in higher education: Challenges and opportunities

Uncertainty over how long the closures would last eventually necessitated innovation to save the academic year. Higher education institutions were required to report to the MoET on how they maintained continuity in learning during the lockdown. The MoET's concern as to whether there

was any learning going on during the lockdown confirmed the need to transform the education system through the adoption of creative strategies that would enable trainees to learn remotely. Needless to say, the sudden adoption of remote learning by the college within a short space of time and under severe constraints most likely compromised the quality of education since the majority of the trainees did not have easy access to the internet and they had not been exposed to this mode of learning before. Despite the fact that the college had incorporated ICT and was considered to be well-resourced technologically, that is, it had desktop computers, laptops and computer laboratories (although not adequately equipped), as well as unlimited access to the internet (even though it sometimes became congested due to bandwidth-related challenges), the teaching staff was never pressured to revolutionise their pedagogic approaches to incorporate online teaching and learning. There was no policy in place that made it mandatory for the teaching staff to use blended learning, probably because of the lack of professional development opportunities for staff to empower them to embrace technology in their teaching.

Prior to the lockdown, a very limited number of educational institutions in the country used blended learning due to lack of resources and appropriate training in the use of technology for the teacher educators. Consequently, while self-directed learning was used by some, not much emphasis was placed on the use of technology when teaching. Some educators still had problems trying to integrate self-directed learning into their pedagogy. Consequently, such teacher educators suffered considerable anxiety as the pandemic necessitated an enormous transformation of pedagogic and assessment practices in educational institutions. The lack of organised training for staff impacted negatively on History Education, as not much teaching could be done during the lockdown period even after the MoET's directive to adopt online learning. The amount of work done during lockdown was dependent on the individual history educator's ability to embrace technology. Most were largely dependent on social media to post lessons and resources for their students while others used Google Classroom and Zoom to interact with students. Their low level of familiarity with remote teaching and learning increased staff stress and anxiety. In countries like Israel, "institutions offered their teachers a plethora of lectures, training sessions and even private tutorials in order to help them learn how to use these tools and even more so, how to use them effectively in their courses" (Donsita-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020:2).

Eswatini has much to learn from such countries.

The rapid move to online teaching and learning without properly trained educators, materials or even the technology required, compromised the effectiveness of online learning in Eswatini. Similarly, the lack of equity made it impossible for trainees to benefit in the same manner as there were no mitigating measures provided to cater for the disadvantaged trainees. Attempts made by government to support all trainees during the lockdown with data bundles were unsuccessful. The restrictions imposed as part of the containment of the spread of the virus impacted negatively on the trainees because some parents could not afford to support online learning – they were not even able to afford daily essentials such as food. COVID-19 resulted in many people losing their jobs overnight, making them unable to support their families. History trainees from rural areas suffered the most as they could not access the remote lessons due to financial constraints and also to poor network coverage.

No real initiatives were made by the MoET to address the challenges that were likely to interfere with online teaching and learning during the lockdown. The teaching staff had not been prepared to teach online and there were no clear professional development policies that could have ensured that staff revolutionised pedagogical approaches by relocating to online platforms. There was also lack of appropriate resources, such as adequately equipped computer laboratories, computer technicians, and access to a stable internet with good quality and speed of internet services. There was congestion on some platforms in use. Moreover, there were no online manuals or guides for use by both staff and students. Such challenges, in addition to increased teacher workload, were exacerbated by students' varying levels of access to the numerous modes of remote learning and willingness to venture into new terrain.

It is important to note that some staff members had already started engaging trainees remotely through the various platforms when the MoET issued the directive to adopt online learning. However, all the adopted remote learning approaches provided minimal engagement in terms of meaningful human interaction. Yet, human interaction is critical in history since trainees are expected to develop historical skills and demonstrate certain competencies. Even though trainees, as future history teachers, were assigned tasks to work on to demonstrate understanding of taught concepts, very few attempted to do the given tasks thus demonstrating lack

of motivation. Lack of motivation to learn among students has been found to be one of the barriers to change in Eswatini (Dlamini, 2019).

Even though the current history syllabus promotes inquiry as well as teaching and learning for skill development, very little has been done to ensure that educational institutions embrace technology. For history students, internet access is paramount to enable them to engage in doing history as it promotes independent inquiry that reinforces the acquisition of historical skills. The shutdown of higher education institutions affected history teaching and learning at all levels. It compromised the very reasons for teaching history. Students could hardly be exposed to skill acquisition and the use of multiple pieces of evidence since remote lessons were instructor-dominated, with trainees only listening and reading but doing minimal independent work. The inability to use appropriate pedagogical approaches, as required by the history curriculum when teaching online, is likely to inhibit trainees' development of essential historical skills. History is an interpretive and inquiry-oriented endeavour that should impact classroom practice (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Online lessons that have been inadequately planned are likely to result in teachers who have an impoverished understanding of history.

Anxiety and fear

The subsequent prolonged lockdown brought a lot of uncertainty, including fears of income losses and pressure to ensure that the economy did not come to a halt. There was anxiety, uncertainty, fear and isolation within staff and student communities caused by the demands placed upon them by their employer or by the trainees' instructors. Debates on whether to open schools and tertiary institutions did not help the situation as the number of new COVID-19 cases was escalating. Such debates were fuelled by concerns about how to enable students in the later stages of their courses to graduate seeing that remote learning was not effective.

Support for staff and adaptation

The staff members who seemed to cope well were those who had previously received training from other institutions that used blended learning such as the University of Eswatini's Institute of Distance Education (IDE). Both staff and students at IDE receive continuous training on the use of online platforms like Moodle because IDE offers distance learning programmes. Online learning was therefore not new for IDE staff and trainees. However,

trainees still encountered internet access-related challenges at their various places of abode, which made it difficult for them to participate fully and do all the assigned work as scheduled.

Professional development programmes became essential to equip all staff members with computer skills. However, since these programmes were underfunded and lacked continuity, they could not have the necessary impact on staff. Such training was only done after the lockdown. Both staff and trainees received very limited training on the use of the new mode of delivery. In theory, both staff and trainees have been able to adapt but there are recurring complaints from staff and trainees emanating from their inability to keep up with virtual learning activities. It remains to be seen how academic staff utilise the platforms to fulfil institutional requirements.

Teaching online proved to be an almost impossible task for staff and trainees who lacked both the knowledge of online learning and the resources such as the necessary gadgets required by this mode of learning and internet access. Moreover, the bandwidth available in Eswatini did not favour most trainees as most came from remote parts of the country. Even those who had network coverage could not afford the required data bundles for downloading and uploading the required work. A larger proportion of our trainees have disadvantaged backgrounds with about 63 per cent of the country's population living below the national poverty line (WFP, 2018). Consequently, trainees could not easily adapt to the new mode of learning.

Assessment and practicum

The pandemic not only necessitated changes in pedagogic practices but assessment practices were also affected and that put pressure on institutional systems of quality assurance. No appropriate assessment procedures that would be in line with the way students were taught were developed; as a result, the college had to resume face-to-face classes to ensure that learners were assessed despite educators fearing for their lives. The pandemic also influenced the teaching practicum as all national education activities had been suspended. As a result, trainees could not do their practicums in schools. The college had to adopt innovative approaches that would enable trainees to demonstrate a certain level of competence in teaching. Trainees were required to peer-teach on a specific topic or concept of their choice and these lessons were recorded for moderation purposes.

Lessons learned

COVID-19 should have facilitated technological transformation in our education system. It seemed, however, that despite the alarming media coverage of the global spread of the pandemic, the education fraternity in Eswatini was caught unawares. Instead of strengthening educational institutions' online systems, for them it seemed to be only the beginning of a long journey that was riddled with serious challenges that included limited resources and which, in turn, seemed to defeat the very purpose of online learning and teaching. Efforts made were challenged by staff resistance, which was motivated by fear, anxiety, psychological stress and lack of technological expertise. Developing countries like Eswatini suffered a huge blow because of the challenges that had been manifesting in the education system for decades. Even before the pandemic, the education system had been struggling as demonstrated by the lack of access to the internet for most student communities due to limited resources (Dlamini, 2019) and by the inability to capacitate staff on the use of digital technology to ensure that they embraced blended learning.

Conclusion

Although great gains have been made in improving education in Eswatini over the years, much remains to be done to elevate education to the digital age. The pandemic highlighted the challenges that overwhelmed the education system in the country. The crisis caused by COVID-19 should be viewed as a wake-up call for the MoET to adopt continuous professional development programmes that will keep educators abreast of technology and innovation and therefore motivated to embrace change. A motivated staff is less likely to resist innovation as confirmed by Donsita-Schmidt and Ramot's (2020) assertion that although the switch to online learning was instant in Israel, lecturers were eager to learn and to share their knowledge with their peers. History educators' feelings and fears need to be considered to ensure that they are satisfied with their jobs. As Okeke and Mtyuda, (2017) observed, teachers can only perform at their best when they are satisfied with their jobs. History educators' dissatisfaction may result in some quitting the profession, which may lead to the loss of experienced history educators. Furthermore, prolonged experiences of stress can lead to burnout (Kim & Asbury, 2020).

Greater effort should be made to invest in appropriate resources and the training of staff about how to use new technologies to improve the quality of online education. The effort made by the MoET to assist staff and trainees to improve online learning with some essential resources such as data bundles after lockdown should have been implemented before the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has accelerated and intensified online education trends, indicating that such innovations will be valued even beyond the COVID-19 crisis. It is crucial, therefore, for government to evaluate its policies with the aim of revolutionising the education system in Eswatini at all levels to realise parity with other nations in digital education.

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