

# **Covid-19: A Liability or Serendipity for Teacher Education? Exploring Lockdown as an Opportunity for ‘Innovative Disruption’ in TEPs.**

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## **Abstract**

The sudden onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic around the globe has forced the shut-down from the outside world, compelling everyone to review existing practices at all levels. The norms derived from life – personal and professional – as it used to be lived, are no longer relevant during the pandemic and new practices are being adopted to cope within confinement measures. This paper studies the impact of confinement on Teacher Education Programmes (TEPs) within a Mauritian Tertiary Education Institution (TEI) where, for years, management invested massively in technological resources and attempted to bring about a paradigm shift in teaching, but with little success. It was, however, noted that, following the lockdown, teaching shifted from prevailing and predominant face-to-face sessions to online modalities within a span of days. With teacher educators having been propelled out of their comfort zones and being currently engaged with new modes for course delivery, the authors sought to understand how the lockdown has unleashed new potential and possibilities with regard to TEPs, at the level of curriculum content and transaction. Rather than adopting a deficit view of the situation, knowing fully well that the abrupt shift to online teaching inevitably carries its dose of liabilities and problems, the authors deliberately focused on positive expe-

riences and fresh perspectives that may serve to revamp TEPs as far as scope and currency are concerned.

The case study on which this paper is based, was anchored in Appreciative Inquiry and adopted a grounded approach to data generation and analysis. To allow for the production of rich textured data emanating from varied perspectives, participants constituted teacher educators with different areas of specialisation. The findings revealed that the forceful shift to online learning brought about an awareness of opportunities afforded by online teaching and learning modes as well as more willingness to continue along these lines in the future. It also provided insights into the shortcomings of the TEPs with regards to skills and attitudes to be developed.

**Keywords:** Teacher Education curriculum, disruption, online teaching and learning, Appreciative Inquiry

## **1 Introduction**

The paradox of closure and simultaneous opening up has perhaps never been more evident than what academics are living during the Covid-19 pandemic. As shutters rolled down all over the world and crisis hit the Mauritian shores, awakening its people to the harsh reality that geographical insularity is no longer a saving grace in the global world, academics have had to engage forcibly with new modes of teaching. Academics at the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE), where the study from which this paper emanates is situated, are currently experiencing what their local and foreign counterparts are undergoing. Ironically, it must be acknowledged, what constant encouragement and entreaties from Management to adopt more technology-based pedagogy and massive investment<sup>1</sup> did not succeed in doing on such a scale, the pandemic has achieved. Overnight, the modality changed to online teaching to reach out to students. As academics moved out of their niche and took on the challenge of e-teaching, it could be noted that the paradigm shift was not as turbulent as may have been expected. Albeit some hiccups that were,

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<sup>1</sup> Over the past few years, the institution invested in such tools as laptops with Office 365 for all academics, interactive whiteboards and interactive TV panels as well as ran capacity-building workshops for academics to help them develop the requisite technical know-how.

for instance, related to online registration, some difficulties encountered by part-time lecturers, and conducting practical sessions, most academics displayed a positive attitude as they navigated through their online courses. This situation prompted the authors to study lockdown as a trigger for ‘innovative disruption’, to borrow Clayton Christensen’s concept. ‘Innovative disruption’, which was initially a business theory, eventually broadened towards an application in the field of education where Christensen *et al.* (2006) brought out the possibilities of online learning. In this chapter, while we remain in the sphere of online learning, the concept is used to describe how the disruption of customary teaching practice (namely face-to-face sessions) due to confinement, proved to be an opportunity for academics to,

- (i) adopt new pedagogical resources and thereby discover new possibilities and potential within that area; and
- (ii) reflect critically on the relevance and currency of the type of pedagogical know-how they aimed to develop in their trainees in the current times where order and the known may no longer be the norm.

## **2 Literature Review**

The advancement in information and communication technology (ICT) has greatly influenced our lives. The exponential use of emails, WhatsApp, and Skype to name a few, reveals the extent to which the global adoption of the internet has transformed the way people communicate. The fundamental change visible in social life, commerce and governance is echoed in the education sector, as seen through the steady proliferation of online education worldwide. In this connection, Ho and Kuo (2010) opine that e-learning has become a major form of training and development within organisations. Concurring with them, Arunachalam (2019), Palvia *et al.* (2018), and Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) posit that many Higher Education Institutions offer fully online and/ blended courses, combining online instruction with face-to-face teaching. They further stipulate that virtual learning environments provide healthier learner interactions for students. In fact, Trust and Horrocks (2017) mention that, not only students, but academics too benefit from this mode of teaching as it is time saving and helps with course management and student tracking. Furthermore, online teaching and learning at Higher Education Insti-

tutions offer potential for addressing critical issues such as growth in student numbers, the inconveniences arising from the timings for courses (Hoven 2006), and cost effectiveness (Richardson *et al.* 2017; Van Mourik Broekman *et al.* 2014). Under such circumstances, online teaching provides a practical solution for all stakeholders. Further highlighting the benefits of online teaching and learning, Arunachalam (2019) and Liaw and Huang (2013) contend that it provides students with the opportunity of accessing the course at a time and place that is convenient and comfortable to them. Moreover, with asynchronous interactions, discussions can remain on track since learners have the opportunity of crafting their responses. Such a mode thus creates the space for them to work collaboratively by creating online groups to share conversations and discussions. It can then be argued that online teaching not only reconceptualises content delivery, but also redefines traditional educational roles and provides opportunities for learning, thereby leading to learner autonomy. Palloff and Pratt (2013:30) corroborate with the above claim, stating that 'the online classroom is a potentially powerful teaching and learning arena in which new practices and new relationships can make significant contributions to learning'. However, it cannot be denied that, just like in brick and mortar classrooms (Seaman, Allen & Seaman 2018), online teaching needs a strong pedagogical practice. Thus, Palloff and Pratt (2013) emphasise the need for training so that tutors, not only use technology, but also shift from the customary ways in which they organise and deliver material. However, Blin and Munro (2008:489) go a step further and call for '(m)ore radical transformations of the overall social and cultural context of the university teaching practices', especially since factors such as inadequate understanding of online pedagogy and online learning styles, as well as lack of administrative support for online education (Kentnor 2015) can adversely affect students' learning.

The momentum that online teaching has been gaining over the years reflects how the educational sphere has been adapting to changes in the wider context. Similarly, the nature and goals of education have evolved over time, in line with these changes. 'Education should always be about preparation for the future, but the future is uncertain and unknowable. It has always been this way. Presently, the key characteristic is the intensity of change and the super complexity of the world that humans navigate' (Burden *et al.* 2016: 4). This statement could not be more than apt to describe the current upheaval and chaos into which the education sector has been thrown with Covid 19 compelling countries across the globe to go into lockdown mode. Teacher Education has

been the subject of much research in the past decades (Darling-Hammond 2012; Dengerink & Lunenburg 2020; Loughran & Hamilton 2016) and much has been said about how it should be conducted and improved. Emphasis is laid upon the fact that TEPs need to align themselves with the complexity of an ongoing changing societal system (Bentley 2012; Griffin 2013). Moreover, some researchers have also argued that the future of TEPs resides in understanding that contemporary teacher trainees construct their knowledge by making use of technologies as well as social media which is a paramount tool in their learning (Williams 2005; Royle *et al.* 2014). Burden *et al.* (2016:8) claim that ‘(w)hat is beyond question, however, is the global impact of (the) technological changes which are set to confront many of the fundamental assumptions and tenets upon which teacher education is constructed’. They further stipulate that some of the ways that technologies can impact on teacher education will be to destabilise the temporal space of learning. In the twentieth century, it was assumed that TEPs would be delivered within one spot and at one specific time. However, the authors argue that the advent of current technologies and social media will have an impact on the temporal space within which teaching and learning is conducted and boundaries will no more be fixed and rigid, but will be flexible as teaching and learning happens beyond the notion of a fixed temporal space. Such shifts entail reviewing existing TEPs and how/how far current technologies are embedded within its design and construct. Although online teaching and learning has evolved considerably in developed countries, Jaffer, Ngambi and Czerniewicz (2007) argue that multiple levels of challenge exist in developing nations with regard to online teaching and learning. Small island developing states like Mauritius are no exception to this condition. It therefore goes without saying that a sudden shift from traditional methodologies is inevitably ‘disruptive’; the term being here understood as meaning a serious transformation or alteration of the structure of teaching and learning activities taking place in formal education, with a particular focus on those transformations arising from an institution-wide deployment of e-learning technologies (Blin & Munro 2008:476). Until now, Blin and Munro (2008) believe, technology – in the form of PowerPoint presentations and the interactive whiteboard, for instance – has predominantly been used to support traditional teaching approaches and ‘when the introduction of a new object or of a new tool ... results in *a serious alteration of the internal structure of the teaching activity system*, we can infer that the activity system has been disrupted’ (ibid., 477 – e.a.).

Change is hard, as Earl *et al.* (2018:1112) posit, citing research that indicates how individuals are limited ‘because of force of habit’, and adopting digital education involves jumping into ‘a site of struggle and intense conflict ... on a number of fronts – from the allocation of resources and maximisation of profit, to concerns with epistemology or equality of educational opportunities’ (Selwyn 2013:2). And yet, when evolving circumstances bring out that working smarter is the only way out, isn’t disruption a necessary evil? Can ‘creative disruption’ indeed ‘facilitate the ‘creative destruction’ mode of education into realising its full potential’? (Zainuddin *et al.* 2012:34). As Richardson *et al.* (2017:18) point out, ‘True disruption occurs when existing institutions fail to embrace the forces of transformation’. Thus, at a time when the online mode of instruction is the call of the day, we attempt to understand academics’ successful use of technology in a Higher Education Institution and the emerging personal and professional innovation in online teaching during the Covid crisis.

### **3 Methodology**

The study on which this paper is based was situated within the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism is built upon the premise of a social construction of reality (Adom *et al.* 2016; Reed *et al.* 2008; Ehrich 2006; Gregory 2003; Honebein 1996), and one of the advantages of this approach, is the close collaboration between the researcher and the participants which is key to enabling the latter to tell their stories (Baxter & Jack 2008). These stories, which bring out the participants’ views of reality, enable a better understanding of the individuals’ action. Furthermore, the three concepts of Appreciative Inquiry: appreciation, inquiry and wholeness (Bushe 2011; Cooperrider *et al.* 2008; Fineman 2006) that provided the framework for the study are epistemologically rooted in constructivism. Thus, guided by the prescript of our philosophical assumptions, we undertook a case study, which Ebneyamini and Moghadam (2018), Yin (2014), and Crowe *et al.* (2011) posit is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, to explore and understand teacher educators’ experiences of online teaching and learning in a tertiary institution during the lockdown period.

Given that data production took place during confinement, convenience sampling was opted for and participants with whom we had already

established a rapport (Etikan 2016) were singled out. The literature abounds with arguments highlighting how the researcher-researched relationship is crucial in allowing the smooth production of rich qualitative data (Blackledge & Creese 2010; Feldman *et al.* 2003; Heller 2008; Wanat 2008). Therefore, the choice of participants was founded on these premises and twelve teacher educators were chosen to take part in the study. Care was taken to select teacher educators with different areas of specialisation— such as languages, Performing Arts, Home Economics, Business Studies, Physical Education, Education Studies, Curriculum Studies – to get a deeper insight into the phenomenon. This not only allowed for relative ease in producing data while homebound, but also enabled the production of thick textured data that brought forth varied perspectives of the phenomenon.

Fedyuk and Zentai (2018:172) claim that interviews are ‘essential to scholarly endeavours that pursue collaborative knowledge production and participant research (and are) used to carve a space directly for the respondents’ voices and analysis of the situation’. They further elaborate on how different types of interviews such as unstructured interviews or informal conversations allow ‘the researcher to map out those areas not originally seen as part of the inquiry’. Thus, for this study, we chose to have informal conversations with the participants to allow for the individual voices of each participant to shape the research inquiry. These conversations established a discursive space within which we used our emanating reflections to probe further into the participants’ responses, thereby leading to the generation of rich data. In a reflexive act, the tools for data production were adapted for the circumstances and online modes were used so that communication took place through phone calls, emails, WhatsApp chats, as well as Teams interviews which were recorded with the participants’ permission. Despite sharing the reality of the participants, we did not step into the field with *a priori*s, preferring to allow the data to emerge. For data analysis, a grounded approach was adopted to identify recurrent themes. It must be pointed out, that even though the participants did mention constraints they were facing, the positive aspects were focused on, in line with the purpose of the study and research methodology.

## **4 Findings**

As the lockdown compelled teacher educators to shift from customary teaching practices, several benefits of online teaching emerged. In the first instance, the

**flexibility** online applications afforded became more obvious, with teacher educators realising that they could henceforth record sessions for students who could not attend classes due to illness or other reasons, as well as during times when classes were suspended due to climactic conditions. In the current context, a student who had to go to the Social Security office was able to catch up in her own time. Such a measure thus helps cut down on tutorials. On the other hand, both the teacher educator and students could later view the sessions to identify areas that require clarification. Taking the idea further, a teacher educator pointed out that the gradual development of a repertoire of recorded lessons could be a valuable and time saving tool for use with future cohorts. In fact, pre-recorded lessons could also be used as a precursor to highlight important points to be tackled in the forthcoming session, thereby laying the foundation for teaching a topic.

Online tools do not merely allow teaching and learning to transcend time and space; they also allow teacher educators to **push the boundaries** and embrace innovative pedagogical practices. While a Home Economics teacher educator was able to conduct a practical cookery session on Teams – something she would never have envisaged previously – a Performing Arts teacher educator capitalised on the circumstantial constraints to trigger enriching insights. By prompting the students to record their monologues individually – in lieu of a group performance – and experiment with different ways of structuring these ‘instalments’ to produce an extended story, she enabled a better understanding of the effect of genres. Not only did students have the prospect of playing around with chronology, but they could also reflect on such technicalities as the direction each person is facing, how the use of different props can enable one person to play different characters, and even the need to memorise dialogue as they do for a live performance. Online learning even allowed her to debunk certain notions that students had of stage performance. At her own level, the experience made her more conscious of the ‘audience’ when preparing her PowerPoint presentations so that these became more ‘humorous’ with the insertions of comments – some with a touch of humour – directed at the students so that they felt that someone was talking to them. Further, the distancing confinement brought about was curbed through the shift from ‘basic’ to interactive PowerPoint presentations on Teams that directed students to get back ‘to class’ after watching a video. Infusing the presentations with ‘a voice’, to an extent allowed the students to experience the authenticity of drama sessions.

As seen above, with no alternative than to move out of their comfort zones, teacher educators had to reinvent the way they taught. This shift led to their **professional growth** with respect to their dispositions, attitudes, as well as personal skills. One teacher educator mentioned how the realisation that she could handle online teaching made her more confident in her teaching, which in turn impacted positively on her interaction with the students. Another teacher educator explained how having to resort to online teaching forced her to revisit the materials she had been using in face-to-face teaching. The process empowered her to create new materials that were more meaningful for online teaching sessions. As they started navigating out of their comfort zones, teacher educators grew more confident in deconstructing their own understanding and knowledge of their practices and reconstructing them to meet their students' needs on online platforms.

Online teaching during the lockdown also culminated in **more effective management of online teaching and learning** sessions through the optimal use of applications available on Microsoft 365 as well as the other online platforms such as Moodle or Google classrooms. Given that he had to cater for pre-primary trainees who had a number of issues engaging in the online mode, which was foreign to them, a teacher educator had to devise means of making his online sessions as effective as his face-to-face sessions. This meant he had to 'grapple with content' and ensure that all the readings and slides that he sent to his trainees were 'meaningful' as he would not be present to provide additional information. Moreover, he also availed himself of the different chat options to enable his trainees to interact more effectively with him. Further, to accommodate the different types of questions, he used the chat options for short answer questions available within Microsoft Teams while the Moodle forum discussion platforms and google classroom were used for survey style open-ended questions.

Moreover, delving into online teaching during the confinement has encouraged teacher educators to reflect on and be **open to new possibilities** that are now available to them in future. Given that the current BEd primary course is being taught predominantly online and with few face-to-face sessions, a teacher educator suggested that the use of Teams – which she had just been introduced to – would pave the way for more 'interactive' sessions than the more 'static' ones that are on the Moodle platform which is being used. Speaking of his ongoing research on the variety of tools that are available for use during online sessions, a teacher educator also mentioned that, in the future,

he would use the support of both audio resources and videos to encourage further interaction. Online sessions, according to several participants, were also a convenient way of addressing attendance problems for students who had to leave their evening classes early due to transport constraints, especially in winter. This mode of teaching would allow trainees to use their time more productively and engage better in their learning.

While most participants admitted that they were familiar with certain features of Moodle and Teams but had previously used them only occasionally, preferring the face-to-face modality, the unprecedented situation created by the lockdown provided an opportunity for both teacher educators and students to **develop their pedagogical know-how** with respect to the use of technology for teaching and learning. Being compelled to use new methods of online teaching allowed teacher educators to discover and sharpen their skills, which probably would not have been the case otherwise. A teacher educator who had used Teams for group presentations was encouraged by the fact that this had worked exceedingly well with a big class and intended to use this format in the future. Another teacher educator added that the online method of teaching and learning had allowed Performing Arts students to record and view themselves, thereby enabling them to discover a novel way of documenting their introspection and awareness of self in their reflective journals. Viewing themselves had given the students the possibility for critical self-reflection and self-evaluation.

The participants believed that the lockdown, which had forcibly prompted teacher educators and students alike to adopt the online mode, had a silver lining. They observed that this new mode of teaching made **learners autonomous** in their learning. One of the teacher educators stated that the students were now more engaged in self-study and took ownership of their learning. This autonomy in using the new tool was experienced by the teacher educators as well. Some of them pointed out that the various features and applications of 'Teams' made them rely less on technical support, especially from other colleagues. **Encouraged by the nature of the tool**, another participant added that they could post materials, readings and videos on Teams, thereby allowing probing and further conversations among learners. Although most of the teacher educators felt that the online mode of teaching cannot replace face-to-face sessions, they were of the view that the lockdown had opened avenues for adopting a new mode of teaching by making them reflect on and realise the opportunities that online teaching and learning provides. For

instance, virtual workshops for trainees as well as the integration of digital technology and social media in their practice would broaden the spectrum of learning experiences and enable trainees to learn from one another through the use of research-based instructional and learning strategies.

Another salient outcome of the forced lockdown and ensuing turn to a new teaching modality was its contribution to the **development of a better rapport** between teacher educators and trainees. A teacher educator who works with large cohorts of part-time trainees indicated how she is often unable to listen to students' personal and professional problems due to time constraints as trainees tend to rush away after evening classes. Holding classes on Teams provided the students with opportunities to share personal anecdotes and professional experiences, leading to a better understanding on both sides. Had it not been for the lockdown, she would not have been able to address the emotional and psychological needs of her students. The lockdown had undoubtedly prompted teacher educators to see their students from a fresh perspective. Unsurprisingly then, for another teacher educator, the most positive aspect of this situation was the development of empathy towards his students. Unable to remain insensitive to his students' 'actual physical, financial and familial challenges', he engaged in restructuring the learning process for them. This entailed revisiting not only the content that he had to deliver, but also carefully thinking through how to deliver that content so that it made sense to his trainees who were navigating with online learning for the first time. What can be noted then, is that the pandemic has allowed teacher educators not only to revisit the way they taught but their own persona as teacher educators.

Last, but not the least, confinement and the turn to online teaching awakened teacher educators to the **shortcomings of the TEPs** on offer (and to the development of which they were party), where no provision was made to develop the students' ability to undertake online teaching. Yet again, programme development was conceived within traditional boundaries where only face-to-face sessions prevailed. Teacher educators realised that, at no point during their training were students given the opportunity to prepare and trial or conduct e-lessons. Thus, their training needs had also been premised on the belief that stability would always be the norm or that the only method of teaching is in a physical classroom. As a teacher educator commented, even though ICT modules are taught at the MIE, these fail to develop the practical skills and know-how that trainees require to undertake online teaching. The

shortcomings are even more blatant in a context where decisions in that direction emanating from the Ministry of Education created ripples among the teaching community. The present circumstances however partly addressed the issue with trainees having hands-on experiences with online modes and ‘learning by doing’. Their involvement has made them more conscious of the potential as well as difficulties of e-teaching and learning. Nevertheless, teacher educators did acknowledge that this lacuna in the TEPs should hereafter be addressed in an explicit manner, more so as the students are now more inclined to adopt this mode and pre-service trainees<sup>2</sup> learn fast and have a predisposition for the use of technology.

## **5 Discussion and Conclusion**

This study has shown that disruption can indeed act as a catalyst and trigger a transformational experience whereby academics (also creatures of habit) adopt and appreciate new ways of teaching and learning. Disruption, in this study, is seen to occur at three levels: pedagogical, attitudinal, and relational. At the pedagogical level, teacher educators explored new vistas, displayed an appreciation of the possibilities thereby afforded, and developed confidence in an area they had previously explored in a limited manner. Their professional growth is seen through their willingness to embrace online resources henceforth and adopt a blended teaching approach, which in turn reveal that they are gradually developing adequate mastery of the tools they had earlier been grappling with. The compelling shift in paradigm also brought about more criticality which culminated into an awareness of the limitations of the TEPs (with regard to the skills and attitudes trainees were equipped with) and a reflection on the requisite changes.

With respect to the teacher educators’ attitudinal shift, this is not only seen on the pedagogical front but also in the way the teacher educators took to the new work culture online teaching brings in its wake. In addition to adjusting to new teaching methodologies, they understood the need for and accommodated themselves within new relational parameters whereby learner autonomy and responsibility replaced the more regimented structures that exist within physical classrooms. With teacher educators growing more humane and

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<sup>2</sup> Pre-service trainees are those who have just completed their schooling and can be described as ‘digital natives’.

empathetic towards trainees, necessary modifications were made to ensure that learners had positive learning experiences.

As pointed out previously, change never occurs seamlessly. However, anchoring the study within the Appreciative Inquiry framework provided the scope for an *alternative* to discourses of deficiency and foregrounding prospects. Bearing in mind the fact that this study was undertaken during the first month of confinement, the transformative result of disruption should not be undermined – more so as teacher educators operating from their homes had only limited technical support. The outcome leaves us with little doubt that the creative potential of disruption is a valuable asset for innovation and professional growth. In the context of the institutional drive for the promotion of technologically oriented methodologies, it can be said that the teaching and learning experiences during the lockdown have provided a fertile terrain for the shift to materialise. As the world gradually settles into the ‘new normal’, it may be expected that online teaching will gain grounds.

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*Exploring Lockdown as an Opportunity for 'Innovative Disruption'*

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