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**Dynamics of Online Instruction and Implications to Learners: Focus on lecturers at two universities in Bindura, Zimbabwe**

By

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**Abstract**

This study was conducted to explore how university lecturers at two selected universities in Zimbabwe engage students during online practical presentation lessons in the Covid-19 period. A qualitative research approach employing the case study design was used to collect data from lecturers in the education departments of the universities through a semi structured in-depth interview. An inductive thematic analysis of data was done. The major findings from the study were that participants were not impressed with the level of student engagement during online practical presentation lessons. Findings revealed that WhatsApp was the platform used for online education. The participants indicated little or no skills with online strategies for student engagement and lamented the level of institutional support with digital strategies. Based on the findings from the study, it was recommended that institutions should provide the necessary support needed in terms of online resources and skills required for effective student engagement during online practical presentation lessons and also have standardized platforms that are constantly evaluated for effective utilization.

**Key terms:** Zimbabwe, student engagement, university lecturers, online learning, technologies, online platforms, technology tools, resources

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**Introduction**

The main objective of this article is to share the experiences of lecturers at the selected universities in Zimbabwe with student engagement during online practical presentation lessons in the Covid-19 pandemic period. The article reflects on the effectiveness of strategies employed by lecturers with online platforms and tools available for engagement with students as well as the available institutional support for online teaching and learning. That online learning has become the new normal worldwide is undisputable.

The advent of COVID-19 saw the introduction of measures such as lockdowns in order to prevent the spread of the virus and abate its impact. Educational institutions closed their doors to teaching and learning. Caught in such a dilemma, in a context in which schools have had to close their doors to educational activities, movement from conventional face-to-face contact sessions to fully online learning interactions became inevitable for many countries in order to continue education during the pandemic. Zimbabwe was no exception to this new normal. Different strategies are used with different online platforms and tools to engage students. The current study seeks to explore how university lecturers in Zimbabwe engage students during online practical presentation lessons using the available platforms. The first section of the article puts the study into context by conceptualizing online learning. Data collection processes, analysis and thematic discussion of findings follow.

**Background**

Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus (Dzobo, Chitungo and Dzinamarira, 2020). It was originally identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020 and as a pandemic on 11 March of the same year (Dzobo et al., 2020). According to Dzinamarira, Mukwenha, Rouzeh Eghtessadi, Cuadros, Mhlanga and Masuka (2020) the first COVID-19 case in Zimbabwe was reported on 21 March in the resort town of Victoria Falls. Dzinamarira et al. (2020) note that by 31 March 7 more people had tested positive and 1 death had been reported. As the number of cases continued to sour, measures such as a ban on all public gatherings including church services, weddings, and all international sporting fixtures were put in place to curb the spread of the virus and its impacts. The government also ordered an immediate closure of schools and tertiary education institutions

At the time of writing of this paper COVID-19 has had massive impacts on education around the world. United Nations (2020) noted that by April 2020 many schools, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, universities, adult learning, and skills development establishments had closed their doors to the traditional face-to-face method of teaching and learning as a way of preventing the spread of the virus and mitigating its impact. In order to ensure that there was continuity of education during the pandemic, there was a swift and massive shift to online modalities worldwide. Anderson (2011a) cited

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in Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guardia and Koole (2020) defines online learning as a type of teaching and learning situation in which (1) the learner is at a distance from the instructor (2) the learner uses some form of technology to access the learning materials (3) the learner uses technology to interact with the instructor and with other learners (4) some kind of support is provided to learners. Means et al., (2009) in Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) refer to online learning as the educational usage of technological devices, tools and the internet. Rapanta et al. (2020) add and describe online teaching and learning as implying a certain pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), mainly related to designing and organising for better learning experiences and creating distinctive learning environments, with the help of digital technologies.

Literature indicates that for some institutions in developed nations, the use of digital technologies, specifically virtual tools was already engrained in them before the advent of Covid-19; for others, it was rather breaking new ground but for all of them, it all of a sudden became the normal way of conducting business. Different online platforms were resorted to worldwide depending on the availability, affordability, usability and level of education among other things. For example, Mistar and Embi, (2016) cited in Maphosa, Dube and Jita (2020) note that WhatsApp has become one of the most popular apps for teaching and learning as it allows cheap and instant sharing of ideas in a faster and easier way. Cetinkaya (2017) agrees and points out that WhatsApp, is one of the most common instant messaging applications which operates on smartphones.

Backing Mistar and Embi, (2016)'s argument on the use of WhatsApp for teaching and learning, Maphosa et al. (2020) notes that for users to adopt a system, it must be easy, simple and demands less effort. Mistar and Embi (2016) in Maphosa et al. (2020) point out that once an individual has a smartphone with internet access, using WhatsApp is a very simple operation which does not require meaningful effort. Church and de Oliveira (2013) concur and note that WhatsApp is simple, accessible, efficient and cheap compared to other tools which can support teaching and learning. Bouhnik and Deshen (2014) again in Maphosa et al. (2020) corroborated and highlighted that WhatsApp was the only technology so far which had found itself in the classroom without any training offered to teachers, students and administrators.

Maphosa et al. (2020) commenting on online teaching and learning platforms stated that one major challenge with the use of systems such as Moodle, Blackboard, Claroline and Sakai among others is that they require substantial training. Sahu (2020) however, noted that from the onset of the pandemic, teachers were immediately tasked with implementing online approaches to teaching and learning often without sufficient guidance, training, or resources. It is not known how those who have little or no experience at all with digital technologies negotiate the dire, unexpected pedagogical shift from traditional methods to the modern approaches to teaching and learning especially when engaging students on line during practical presentation lessons. Commenting on online teaching and learning, Mishra, Gupta and Shree (2020) note that online classes are problematic in that in certain subjects where the content is abstract, many concepts exist that need real face to face interaction for complete understanding.

Mulla, Osland-Paton, Rodriguez, Vazquez and Plavsic (2020) reiterate that online teaching and learning has its own problems including inter-alia instructional design and no or less interactivity. Suggested interactive learning helps learners engage in critical thinking. It improves their problem-solving and decision-making skills and helps mastery and retention of information. Interactive learning is synonymous to active learning and includes such activities as role-play, group discussions and case studies among other activities which help

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promote higher-order thinking skills as well as engage students in deep learning. In the same vein Sahu (2020) argues that activities such as practicals, field trips and internships in companies are not possible to be conducted online. Agreeing with Sahu (2020), Robinson and Hullinger (2008) cited an example of the teaching of accounting online as having many challenges given the practical nature of the discipline.

The question remains therefore; how do teachers or lecturers engage students during practical online lessons? Stone et al. (2014) aver that the more students engage in the learning, the more likely they are to acquire knowledge and achieve higher grades. Responding to this, Harbour et al. (2015) and Abayadeera et al. (2019) suggested the use of effective teaching practices to optimise the level of active student engagement in learning. They however argue that the effectiveness of teaching practices and level of student engagement vary according to the mode of delivery and hence, bemoan the switch from traditional face-to-face delivery to online learning as throwing up many challenges for educators (Harbour et al., 2015; Abayadeera et al., 2019).

Robinson and Hullinger (2008) submit that many academics find online student engagement daunting. McBrien and Jones (2009) agree and point out that online courses lack interaction and effective student engagement as many educators do not have the requisite skills and experiences for online teaching. Thus, this study seeks to find out how university lecturers at the sampled universities in Zimbabwe engage students during online practical lessons in the Covid-19 pandemic period. The idea is to come up with recommendations for the utilisation of the full potential of the different online platforms and technological tools to ensure optimal and quality online learning experience for students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

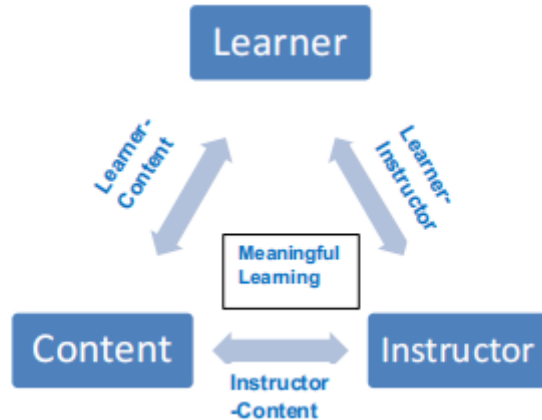
While literature has it that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions worldwide to rapidly shift to online formats from the traditional face-to-face classes and student support with little or no experience for practitioners or resources for some institutions, absent from the literature is how, with the unexpected pedagogical shift, such practitioners and institutions engage students online especially during practical presentation lessons. This study is therefore aimed at exploring how university lecturers at two selected universities in Zimbabwe engage students during online practical presentation lessons in the Covid-19 pandemic period.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For an in-depth understanding of the research topic the current study will be guided by Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory. The theory postulates that online learning is most effective when the perceived pedagogical distance between the instructor and students in the course is minimized with increased interaction; Interaction occurs through learner-instructor communication, learner-learner collaboration, and learner-content engagement (Kyei-Blankson, Ntuli and Donnelly, 2016). Kennedy and Cavanaugh (2008) and Moore (2007) cited in Kyei-Blankson et al. (2016) concur that all three levels of interaction have important implications for effective online learning.

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Figure 1. Moore's interaction framework



Source: Adopted from Moore, M. J. (1993)

### **Learner-to-Learner Engagement**

According to Moore (1993) learner-to-learner interaction is extremely valuable for online learning and leads to student engagement which results in meaningful learning. To prevent online students from experiencing potential boredom and isolation in the learning environment, it is essential to build activities that enhance engagement (Moore, 1993). Kovach (2011) and Banna et al. (2015) cited in Martin and Bolliger (2018) found that traditional technologies for engaged learning, such as discussion boards, chat sessions, blogs, wikis, group tasks, or peer assessment, have served well in promoting student-to-student interaction in online courses. They highly recommended the use of web-based applications, such as Twitter feeds, Google applications, or audio and video technology like Wimba Collaboration Suite, in order to improve engagement in online courses (Kovach, 2011 and Banna et al., 2015). Banna et al. (2015) suggest the use of videoconferencing and discussion boards in synchronous and asynchronous activities respectively citing that they enhance learner-to-learner interaction

### **Learner-to-Instructor Engagement**

Dixon (2010) and Gayton and McEwen (2007) note that, learner-to-instructor interaction leads to higher student engagement in online courses. According to these authors, the use of multiple student-instructor communication channels, rapport and collaboration between students and instructors in an interactive and cohesive environment, including group work and instructive feedback, are important for online student engagement resulting in learning success. Dixon (2010) and Gayton and McEwen (2007) recommend that online instructors pay special attention to student-instructor interactions as they may affect learning outcomes. Dixon (2010) and King (2014) concur that there must be cooperation and collaboration between students and instructors in online courses in order to increase online student engagement. Revere and Kovach (2011) and Robinson and Hullinger (2008) cited in Martin and Bolliger (2018) suggest the use of well-established technologies, such as discussion boards, chat sessions, blogs, wikis, group tasks, Twitter, Skype, YouTube, and Ning networks, to foster student engagement through course design and technology integration. These technologies are also used for effective social-networking activities in online active



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learning for increasing student engagement (Revere and Kovach, 2011 and Robinson and Hullinger, 2008)

### **Learner-to-Content Engagement**

Moore (1993) describes learner-to-content engagement as the process of intellectually interacting with the content, which can change a learner's understanding and perspectives. In the same vein Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, and Tamim (2011) in Martin and Bolliger (2018) suggest that student-to-content interaction can occur while watching instructional videos, interacting with multimedia, and searching for information. According to Britt (2015), real-world application of projects that enhances subject mastery and critical thinking skills is one strategy related to fostering learner-to-content engagement. It refers to authenticity of the course content shown through real-world examples (Britt, 2015). Revere and Kovach (2011) recommend the use appropriate technology in order to make the content come alive so as to enhance student engagement. Online students should not merely be given a list of resources, but instead instructors should design authentic activities that provide opportunities to examine the tasks from different perspectives and that encourage students to wisely use relevant information in the process (Revere and Kovach, 2011).

The use of Moore's framework for the current study is justifiable because it helps to have a better look into the problem in that in trying to ascertain the level of student engagement during online classes at the selected universities, the researcher investigates learner-to-learner engagement, learner-to-instructor engagement as well as learner-to-content engagement as these help to provide positive learner experiences as well as active learning opportunities.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Ridley (2008), referring to literature review, stated that it is where there is extensive reference to related research and theory in your field; it is where connections are made between source texts you draw on and where you position yourself and your research among other sources. You can use the literature to support your identification of a problem to research or illustrate that there is a gap in previous research that needs to be filled. The literature review, therefore, serves as the driving force and the jumping off point for your own research investigation." (Ridley, 2008). According to Gash (2000) a literature search is "a systematic and thorough search of all types of published literature in order to identify as many items as possible that are relevant to a particular topic"

Student engagement has been defined by Newmann, Wehlage and Lamborn (1992) cited in Martin and Bolliger (2018) as "the student's psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann et al., 1992). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) cited in Kahu and Nelson (2018) also define student engagement and say that it is an individual student's psychosocial state: their behavioural, emotional and cognitive connection to their learning. Martin and Bollinger (2018) note that, student engagement in online learning is very critical because online learners seem to have fewer opportunities to be engaged with the institution. They further reiterate that strategies for student engagement aim at providing positive learner experiences including active learning opportunities, such as participating in collaborative group work, having students facilitate presentations and discussions, sharing resources actively, creating course assignments with hands on components, and integrating case studies and reflections. Banna, Lin, Stewart, and Fialkowski (2015) stress that engagement is the key solution to the issue of learner isolation,

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dropout, retention, and graduation rate in online learning. Bernard et al. (2009) identified Moore (1993)'s framework of interactions to boost student engagement during online learning. Supporting Bernard et al. (2009), Lear, Ansorge, and Steckelberg (2010) cited in Martin and Bolliger (2018) say that interactions with content, peers, and instructors help online learners become active and more engaged in their courses. Interactivity and sense of community result in high-quality instruction and more effective learning outcomes (Martin and Bolliger, 2018).

Various studies have been carried out around the globe on online learning in higher education before and during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Some of the studies focused on online learning in general while some focused on student engagement during online learning. In a study to investigate the importance of engagement strategies to online learners with students at eight universities across the United States, engagement strategies that support interactions with instructors were valued more than strategies that aimed at interactions with learning material and other learners. Students who participated in the study expected instructors to assist them in their learning and create meaningful learning experiences (Martin and Bolliger, 2018).

Farrell and Brunton (2020)'s study to explore the themes that are central to online student engagement experiences in Irish higher education revealed that successful online student engagement was influenced by formal and informal community; time management and organisational skills; engaging and supportive online teachers; multiple means of interaction, not just forums; opportunities for skill development, confidence building and self-regulation. Another study was conducted in Australia to find out perceptions and experiences of students in higher education on online learning undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the researcher Martin (2020), students raised concerns that engagement with teaching and tutoring staff was insufficient and that they expected much more interaction with individual students than had occurred. Students also commented that they missed the informal interaction with lecturers before or after lectures and tutorials that often occurred when they were studying face-to-face (Martin, 2020).

Martin (2020) revealed that some of the staff needed development in how to present content and to use the IT capabilities effectively in the online environment. Students also complained about the breadth of exposure to particular professional skills and practice which included the difficulty in practising orchestral or other performance pieces with other students and performing in choral groups using Zoom or its equivalents, problems with uploading visual displays of works of art and other educational artefacts, engineering and science practicals which require laboratory spaces that are not easy to simulate in a virtual environment, teaching quantitative studies such as mathematics and physics over Zoom and difficulties with visual representation of symbols and equations and internships which could not be run as they would in a face-to-face mode of learning either on- or off-campus among other practicals varying among disciplines (Martin, 2020).

In another study conducted with various universities in Egypt to examine social media usage for sustaining a formal academic communication platform in the nine colleges that provide hotel and tourism bachelor degrees after the COVID-19 pandemic and the stopping of traditional classroom learning, it was found that all faculty members in the study made use of social media, mostly Facebook and WhatsApp for formal academic communication (Sobaih, Hasanein and Abu Elnasr, 2020).

According to Sobaih et al. (2020) faculty members agreed that social media helped them in achieving their course intended learning outcomes however, they expressed difficulties in teaching practical courses using social media because they said these courses

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often required physical evidence and attendance. The majority of faculty members stated that practical courses such as cooking, food service, housekeeping or practical museum cannot be taught online or with social media tools (Sobaih et al. 2020). A study conducted in Parkistan to explore the lived experiences of university teachers who participated in online teaching for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic Abid, Zahid, Shahid, and Bukhari (2021) revealed that through online teaching, some important aspects cannot be met that is, inculcating social skills, networking, and relevant employability skills appear to be difficult as students do not give presentations in online teaching, they do not liaise with different people from the industry, and these important soft skills cannot be taught online (Abid et al., 2021). It was also found that out that due to little exposure to online lecture delivery, instructors encountered several complexities in terms of designing, structuring, and organizing the course modules, making sessions interactive, and identifying augmented resources and tools Abid et al., (2021) although student engagement required instructors to make sure that the lessons are more interactive and interesting to the students (Abid et al., 2021).

Motaung and Dube (2020) carried out a study with South African rural universities to explore the experiences of students and tutors on student engagement in online tutorials using WhatsApp, findings revealed that students had difficulties with understanding audios recorded on various lessons and posted to them on WhatsApp groups by their tutors as part of the teaching and learning as they did not have the opportunity to ask for clarity on difficult concepts. Participation was limited. Another finding was that tutors did not have training on handling tutorials through WhatsApp as a result delivery of effective tutorials was not possible. There is a gap in the literature on the experiences of lecturers in Zimbabwean universities with student engagement during online practical presentation lessons in the Covid-19 pandemic period. This study is unique in that it explores how lecturers at selected universities in Zimbabwe engage students online during practical presentation lessons with the view of recommending strategies to ensure effective student engagement and academic success through online platforms and tools.

## **Methodology**

This study proposed a Constructivist paradigm to establish how lecturers at the sampled universities engage students during online practical presentation lessons. A paradigm is simply a set of beliefs that guide research. The choice of the constructivist paradigm was necessitated by the methods that consider the experiences of different individuals as well as the focus on participants' experiences of a social phenomenon in this case; student engagement during online practical presentation lessons.

The study adopted the qualitative research approach which seeks to understand the experiences of people as well as the meanings and insights of their experiences in real contexts. Leedy (2004) describes qualitative research as focusing on collection and analysis of full and rich data about a phenomenon and the data collection as not limited to numerical facts but includes data obtained through observation, interview and participation. Data for this study was generated through in-depth interviews. The adoption of the qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this research since investigation of the participants' experiences is done in natural settings.

The phenomenology research design was chosen for this study. Chilisa and Preece (2005:44) describe phenomenological research design as studying people's experiences in an attempt to gain the meticulous details of their social circumstances. The phenomenological research design was considered appropriate for this study because it renders the researcher



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the opportunity to explore the experiences of participants with student engagement during online practical lessons. The current study employed purposive (purposeful) sampling in order to target and select information-rich cases for in-depth study. 8 lecturers (4 male and 4 female) were sampled from each of the two universities and semi structured interviews were used to conduct in-depth interviews with the lecturers over the phone.

### **Trustworthiness of data**

Unlike quantitative research where emphasis is on reliability and validity of data, qualitative research is concerned with trustworthiness to enhance the quality of data (Schwendt, Lincoln and Guba, 2007). According to qualitative researchers, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are key criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Anney, 2014). All the four measures of trustworthiness of data were ensured in the current study in order to establish the rigour of qualitative findings (Schwendt et al., 2007).

Credibility refers to confidence in the truth of the findings that is, how the research measures what it is supposed to measure. In the current study, credibility of data was ensured through selection of context, participants and appropriate data-gathering instruments. To further ensure trustworthiness of data for this study, the researcher made sure that transferability of results for the research was possible through generation of thick descriptions provided for through detailed methodological steps and purposive selection of research participants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher kept all data collection instruments and the data collected from all the participants as a way of ensuring dependability in the current study. This is supported by Guba and Lincoln (1982) who suggest that raw data such as interview observation notes, documents and records collected from the field should be kept for cross-checking the inquiry process.

Conformability refers to the objectivity, that is, the potential for congruence between two or more independent people about the data's accuracy, relevance, or meaning (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Confirmability of data for this study was achieved through an audit trial

### **Presentation and Discussion of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to explore how lecturers at the selected universities in Zimbabwe engage students online during practical presentation lessons. In this section the findings of the study are discussed in relation to Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory, the research question as well as the existing literature.

Findings from this study show that effective student engagement during online practical presentation lessons was impacted by the online platforms used for student engagement, lack of online resources for student engagement, strategies used to support online student engagement as well as lack of support for lecturers on the use of digital strategies.

### **Online platforms for student engagement**

Out of the platforms used by lecturers for student engagement during online teaching and learning at the selected universities, WhatsApp was mentioned the most. Participants described WhatsApp as handy, cheap and easy to use. This was in concurrence with the findings from Maphosa, Dube and Jita's (2020) study that WhatsApp was easy and convenient to use. During the interviews, the following views were shared by most of the participants:

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The University does not have standardised online platforms for teaching and learning, authorities just expect lecturers to conduct lectures online. WhatsApp becomes an option because it is easy to use, the data bundles are affordable and considering that students are all over, learning can take place at anytime and anywhere. I use it because of these advantages but honestly there is no meaningful engagement with students especially during practical presentation lessons.

Participant 3 corroborated the general observation as captured in the excerpt below;

We tried to use Google classroom but it presented many technological challenges to both lecturers and students. We had to resort to WhatsApp and to date it's the only platform that we use for teaching and learning although it is difficult to engage students during practical presentation lessons via this platform (Participant 3).

The above direct voice as revealed by participant 3 was in agreement with Maphosa et al. (2020) who noted that WhatsApp is more feasible as it does not require training of the staff and students, no administrative and costly infrastructure.

Further investigation into the issue revealed that although there are other indigenous online platforms that are affordable for universities to utilise for teaching and learning, some institutions cannot commit to paying the charges required by service providers for example, Google classroom and as a result they end up being closed out. Participants believe that some institutions are failing to embrace technology or move with time, they are still stuck in the traditional way of doing things. This reluctance to embrace online learning was also noted for providers of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) in the United Kingdom, Bangladesh and Brunei Darussalam (ILO, UNESCO and World Bank, 2021). The researcher could however, not establish this from university authorities as it was beyond the focus of the study.

### **Lack of online resources for student engagement**

The interviews also revealed that the majority of lecturers and students did not have enough resources to enable effective online engagement. Participants concurred that most lecturers and students did not have laptops and that some students did not have smartphones. They also agreed that access to Wi-Fi was a challenge for many students and lecturers alike. The following words by participant 4 was shared by most of the participants:

Most lecturers do not have gadgets that run efficiently especially with platforms like Google classroom where students can have active learning experiences collaborating in group work as well as engaging in practical presentations and discussions which promote student-to-student interaction in online courses. Lecturers are forced to just do something on WhatsApp because the platform does not demand much but there is no meaningful engagement of students (Participant 4).

The above words are consistent with Dube (2020) who laments the lack of digital devices as limiting students' engagement with technology in the classroom. ILO, UNESCO and World Bank's (2021) report (Skills development in the time of COVID-19: Taking stock of the initial responses in technical and vocational education and training) recorded that the lack of

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appropriate platforms and tools deprives students and teachers of an effective common space to learn and work and may lead to a less effective learning experience. In line with this, Kovach (2011) and Banna et al. (2015) suggest the use of web-based applications, such as Twitter feeds, Google applications, or audio and video technology for meaningful engagement in online courses.

### **Strategies to support online student engagement during practical presentation lessons**

Another area of concern was the strategies used to support student engagement. All the interviewees echoed the sentiments that strategies employed during online teaching and learning were not effective for student engagement during practical presentation lessons. The comment that was given by participant 5 was that:

It is very frustrating to record audios for lessons where practical demonstrations are needed for clarity as well as listen to audios from students where practical presentations as well as interactive learning are required. WhatsApp has its own limitations in that both content and activities lack life and these result in learners losing the motivation to learn. Some aspects of teaching and learning require physical presence for meaningful learning to take place (Participant 5).

The view shared above was consistent with Motaung and Dube's (2020) study findings which revealed that students had difficulties with understanding audios recorded on various lessons and posted by their tutors on WhatsApp groups as they did not have the opportunity to ask for clarity on difficult concepts. Similar sentiments were shared by TVET providers from both Canada and China in the ILO, UNESCO and World Bank's (2021) report that student motivation and engagement online especially in programmes where practical activities are emphasized were greatly affected by passive methods of engaging with content. To support this view, Velasco et al. (2012) and Yazici (2004) submit that collaborative learning experiences within pair or group work involving problem-solving tasks, classroom debates or case studies help to engage students and drive their enthusiasm contributing to improve generic skills such as critical thinking and communication (Arjomandi, Seufert, O'Brien and Anwar, 2018).

The findings above are however in contradiction to Ujakpa, Heukelman, Lazarus, Neiss and Rukanda (2018) who argue that teaching using WhatsApp promotes student-tutor academic intimacy and allows students to open up and ask questions on lessons which they may have never asked in the usual classroom setting (Motaung and Dube, 2020). Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory suggests that when learners intellectually interact with the content online, their understanding and perspectives are changed by the process. It is the lack of learner-to-content engagement that the participants expressed concern about as affecting effective student engagement during practical presentation lessons. Revere and Kovach (2011) recommend that content must be alive in order to enhance student engagement. Participant 6 said:

Group discussions on WhatsApp do not flow because people have to download audios, listen and record responses. Sometimes network affects the flow of typed messages and audios and when they finally go through, the discussion is distorted and this affects students' understanding of content. Discussions cease to be natural (Participant 6).

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The majority of the participants concurred that lecturers were unable to develop pedagogical resources for use during online teaching and learning as well as operate online learning platforms efficiently due to little or no digital skills. This was not surprising because a similar finding came up in Martin's (2020) study which revealed that some of the staff lacked skills in how to present content and to use the IT effectively in the online learning environment. TVET providers from countries such as Canada, India, Morocco and the Republic of Korea reported lack of staff capacity to support distance learning through quality pedagogical resources (ILO, UNESCO and World Bank, 2021).

In the current study it emerged that the lecturers' lack of skills in developing online pedagogical resources and activities affected interaction among students, students and content as well as students and lecturers and ultimately effective engagement during online practical presentation lessons. Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory suggests that learner-learner collaboration, learner-instructor communication as well as learner-content engagement are vital for online learning and lead to student engagement which then results in meaningful learning. Kennedy and Cavanaugh (2008) and Moore (2007) agree with Moore's (1993) theory and state that all the three levels of interaction are important for effective online learning. Supporting the importance of interaction for student engagement in online learning, Banna et al. (2015) suggest that technologies such as discussion boards, chat sessions, blogs, wikis, group tasks, or peer assessment, ensure student-to-student interaction and effective engagement is promoted.

### **Lack of support on the use of digital strategies**

All participants agreed that they moved from face-to-face to the new normal of online teaching and learning without being prepared. Participants acknowledged that institutions provided some form of financial support to purchase data to conduct online lessons on WhatsApp but lamented that no support was given in relation to training required to handle effective online student engagement through WhatsApp or any other online platforms. During the interviews, it was also revealed that some institutions do not support lecturers with digital devices to use for online teaching and learning. The following came out from one of the interviews from participant 7:

People were not inducted on how to facilitate using WhatsApp. We were left to find our way as individuals. The assumption was that both lecturers and students are familiar with the platform and therefore there was no need for training. It's more than a year now since we have moved to the new normal but we are still struggling to engage students meaningfully especially during practical presentation lessons. WhatsApp does not allow engagement. There is definitely need for training because technology can be intimidating (Participant 7).

The comments above resonate with the ideas of Martin's (2020) study which revealed that some of the staff needed training on how to present content and to use the IT capabilities effectively in the online environment.

The majority of the participants agreed with the view that, as stated by participant 8: The university assumes that all lecturers have devices to use for online classes. No support is given to staff in this regard. Data provided to lecturers per month is also not enough considering the amount of downloading and uploading that is involved. Students submit

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assignments through email and marked assignments are sent back to students the same way therefore, this demands a lot of data. The issue of data is a problem for both lecturers and students and it greatly affects online teaching and learning (Participant 8)

The statement by participant 8 above is consistent with Takavarasha et al. (2017) who argue that lack of devices is a serious threat to online learning and that lack of infrastructure, material and instructional support affects effectiveness of online learning (Motaung and Dube, 2020). ILO, UNESCO and World Bank's (2021) report also captured lack of network capacity to cope with increased data usage and data usage costs incurred by the students and lecturers for distance learning as adding to the challenges of the online teaching and learning. Mukute, Francis, Burt and de Souza's (2020) study in Southern Africa revealed that many educators, learners and parents in southern Africa have inadequate or no access to computers, laptops and cell phones, which are necessary for online teaching and learning

### **Conclusion**

Making use of the qualitative approach to explore how university lecturers at selected universities in Zimbabwe engage students online during practical presentation lessons in the Covid-19 pandemic period, issues were revealed that hinder effective student engagement. Due to the limited choice of online platforms for student engagement and other challenges that include lack of online resources for student engagement, lack of institutional support on the use of digital strategies as well as the strategies that are used to support online student engagement during practical presentation lessons, lecturers resorted to the WhatsApp platform to continue education because of its convenience and ease of use and also just because there were no standardized platforms. This article has argued that, although WhatsApp sustained educational activities during the most challenging times, it was not the platform of choice for lecturers because of its limitations with student engagement during practical presentation lessons.

### **Recommendations**

Emanating from the findings and above conclusion, the study thus proffers the following recommendations to ensure effective student engagement and academic success through online platforms and tools:

First, higher education institutions should provide support to lecturers and students to enable effective engagement during online lessons. Second, universities need to offer online training and skills development and enhancement workshops for students and lecturers to improve competencies in the use of technology to compensate for face-to-face activities during online practical presentation lessons. Third, institutions should invest in proper and standardised platforms for online teaching and learning.

Fourth, universities should support lecturers with resources such as laptops or other devices that run efficiently with different online platforms as well as enough data to enable them to deliver meaningful lectures online. Fifth, there should be constant evaluation of how platforms are being utilised by both lecturers and students to ensure effective use of the platforms and meaningful learning. Finally, technical support from the IT departments should be readily available any time through phone calls, online live chats or text messaging to respond to concerns from lecturers and students



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