

WhatsApp platform as pedagogical intervention: Experiences of Masters in Education (Languages) students under Covid-19 at a selected state university in Zimbabwe

Jairos Gonye¹ & Jeriphanos Makaye¹

¹Great Zimbabwe University
Robert Mugabe School of Education
Curriculum Studies Department
Masvingo, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author: jgonye@gzu.ac.zw

Abstract

With the Covid-19 pandemic wreaking havoc globally, the world locked itself down, creating an apparent standstill. Zimbabwe closed all her universities and other learning institutions on 24 March, 2020. However, despite the apparent standstill of certain activities, life itself did not stop. This qualitative study reports on the experiences of 11 Masters in Education (M.Ed. Languages) students at a selected state university on their use of WhatsApp as a pedagogical platform during the Covid-19 lockdown period that coincided with their March to August 2020 semester. A case study was decided as the most useful design. All the 11 students taking the two English modules by one of the researchers were conveniently and purposively selected as the sample but focus was delimited to only one module. Since there were sensitive ethical issues surrounding a study of this nature, due diligence to ethical considerations was followed. Data were collected through semi-structured WhatsApp interview questions. Questions covered participants' experiences with the platform, including possible challenges and solutions. Researchers also had the opportunity to analyse some of the WhatsApp chats for the particular group of students. The major findings of the study showed that students acknowledge that despite being a social media platform, WhatsApp could be conveniently used as a learning platform with great opportunities. They identified its potential to enhance active and self-directed learning off-campus, and even in remote areas. They however noted that WhatsApp presented technical, viability and credibility challenges that compromised the platform as one that could promote critical thinking. The positive and negative payoffs from WhatsApp as a pedagogical intervention platform invite further research, not dismissal of the platform as an alternative to teaching/learning platform. The study thus recommends the meaningful combination of WhatsApp platform with other e-learning modes and with on-campus face-to-face learning approaches.

Keywords: Affordances; Covid-19; m-learning; pedagogical intervention; WhatsApp

Introduction

In late-December 2019 a dangerous viral respiratory infection was confirmed in Wuhan city, Hubei province of eastern China. The virus, SARS-CoV-2, commonly known as coronavirus, was found to be causing the respiratory disease now known as Covid-19. It was realised that the coronavirus was rapidly spreading around the globe, causing sickness and sometimes painful death. Covid-19 was immediately and accurately declared a pandemic. In effecting the World Health Organisation's (WHO) stringent regulations the world locked itself down and created an apparent standstill. Likewise, Zimbabwe shut all her universities and other learning institutions on 24 March, 2020. However, despite the lockdown apprehension and seeming stoppage of certain activities, life itself continued – though not as usual. The Government of Zimbabwe instructed all state run universities to expedite on-line learning. For most of Zimbabwe's education institutions the directive was unprecedented, and the online terrain, under-researched. The use of renowned online learning platforms such as Google Classroom, Udemy, Moodle or Coursera was relatively new at the institution under study, and – at that moment– impractical for logistical and connectivity reasons, considering the students clientele. It is in the backdrop of this pedagogical expectation that the researchers decided to explore the experiences of students undertaking Masters in Education (Languages) lectures via the digital space on the WhatsApp group platform, accessible through their mobile phones. The students were studying the module *Theories of Literature and Criticism*, among other modules.

Rationale of the study

While distance education or online programmes were voluntary programmes whose efficacy was hinged on proliferating technological and internet facilities, especially in developed countries with well-resourced institutions, such was not the case with Zimbabwe and other nations from the Global South, particularly under Covid-19 lockdown. Some students in technologically well-connected countries have opted to enroll for online programmes in order to ensure career security, educational growth from anywhere any time, save on expenses, and fulfil preferred individual learning style (Sagedhi, 2019). However, this was not the case for many Zimbabweans in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Taking learning out of the lecture room had not really become an option for many higher education institutions in Zimbabwe. Up till Covid-19 struck, not many Zimbabwean university lecturers would have boasted of solely conducting lectures through social media, let alone WhatsApp. Indeed, to do so might have been construed as professional negligence, shortchanging the paying students and informalising pedagogy.

In most conventional Zimbabwean universities, however, blended learning (BL) had been possible mostly on campus. At the target university, for instance, students would be logged on university gadgets in the university's library or computer laboratory, or, alternatively, be connected onto university Wi-Fi through their personal laptops or other mobile technologies. This changed dramatically when universities were closed on 24 March, 2020, followed by a grinding lockdown which prevented even those who had personal laptops (lecturers and students) from visiting commercial internet cafes. This scenario testifies to the paper's claim that in Zimbabwe, up till Covid-19, the notion of weaning the student from the traditional mode of learning had not yet enjoyed serious consideration.

The above scenario led universities to embrace any mode of teaching/learning at their disposal. Thus, this study explores the experiences of Master in Education (M.Ed.) (Languages) students who had conducted their lectures through the WhatsApp platform. The researchers contend that the place of social media in Zimbabwe's higher education had not been fully assessed up till Covid-19, hence its urgency in higher education. Globally, however, research on the significance of social media, particularly WhatsApp, in facilitating education has been accumulating. Because social media affordances enable users to create, share, comment and discuss digital contents, they "are often seen as means through which to deeply transform teaching and learning practices as more social, open and collaboration oriented" (Manca & Ranieri, 2016:217). Alberth *et al.* (2018:297) have researched on how blending social media with face-to-face training provides opportunities for teachers "working in remote areas" to achieve professional development through supporting "one another...to implement new skills and gradually change their own teaching practice." Their study shows how WhatsApp as one of the social media platforms could be harnessed productively.

Gon and Rawekar (2017) researched on the effectiveness of WhatsApp as a teaching and learning tool for a group of Indian medical students. They established that the platform encourages students to ask questions and share information. They also realised that students use a variety of emoticons while learning (like emoticon, clap emoticon, smiley emoticon, confused emoticon, wish emoticon, etc.). All this enlivened their learning while separated from each other. Gon and Rawekar (2017:21) also found that students were satisfied with the "professional as well as comfortable learning environment [that] was created on WhatsApp" and also because "the facilitator promoted critical thinking and self-directed learning and handled distractions during the sessions appropriately."

At Makerere University, Baguma *et al.* (2019) undertook to establish how WhatsApp Enabled Learning (WAEL) could facilitate development of higher order thinking skills. In their conclusions on the significance of the WhatsApp applications the writers note that: Through use of WhatsApp, students may illustrate alternative views and create new ideas in response to comments from others (critical thinking and problem solving), they may reflect on materials to appraise their suitability to the topic of concern, and appraise comments from others to gauge their personal capabilities (critical thinking). Students may also reflect upon their own personal experiences in the light of comments received, to assess their relevance (critical thinking and transfer of learning) (Baguma *et al.*, 2019:104)

A cursory look showed that research on social media, particularly WhatsApp's educational potential was still pending in Zimbabwe. This was despite widespread use and enjoyment of mobile chatting among citizens.

Notwithstanding the apparent benefits extant in mobile learning, Covid-19 appears to have caught Zimbabwean universities unprepared for a smooth transition to formalised virtual online tuition. It was a big challenge to integrate online learning into university learning systems overnight in Zimbabwe in general and at the target research institution in particular. While a few lecturers at the university the researchers are based had been co-opting internet based learning during their traditional lectures, formal blended learning became impossible since students from diverse backgrounds and locales had been evacuated from campus. However, with university administration convinced that their academic staff were ready to deliver online lectures despite most lecturers being unable to link their students

on the preferred Google classroom, most lecturers and students rather settled for the use of WhatsApp.

Is the future in the smartphone?

Mobile teaching and learning (m-learning) gained traction in education worldwide in the 2000s as the smartphone mobile devices penetrated the world. Mobile technologies have brought along interesting changes in how people communicate, socialise and do business. Smartphones are minicomputers that can perform multiple functions ranging from business, social, and military to educational, from any place anytime, provided there is internet connectivity. Commenting on their predicted educational function, Cochrane *et al.* (2014:2) observe that “mobile devices can be used to rethink collaboration and develop the potential for enhanced engagement and learning outcomes”. This paper discusses how WhatsApp application could exhibit such representative educational potential.

As late as 2000 new smartphones compatible with 4G, endowed with relatively wide/long screen, and adjustable font and screen brightness were available. In addition to using these mobile phones to make a call or text someone, people use them to “take and send pictures, listen to music, record video, watch TV, play games, surf the Internet, check email, manage their schedules, browse and create documents, and more” (Zhang, 2019:336). Mobile devices are thus endowed with various applications that the users could deploy for educational purposes. The functions cited above could be harnessed in education, especially via various social media platforms. Picking on ‘browsing’ and ‘creating documents’, for instance, we realise how both the lecturer and student can create, send and access educational material through the mobile device’s WhatsApp social media application.

Effectively, mobile learning is upon us and is no longer a prediction for the future. The increasing penetration of mobile devices and interest in mobile learning (m-learning) “has caused scholars to focus on ... technical and pedagogical issues that need to be addressed in order to effectively leverage mobile technologies in education”(Power, 2019:3). Though increasingly pervasive, m-learning has its own drawbacks. Zhang (2019:15) identifies the following as affecting the implementation of mobile learning: poor Internet access in some remote areas or high built urban areas, poor quality of signals for certain devices and providers in certain localities and high costs of data. Notwithstanding their ‘anytime anywhere’ conveniences, mobile devices present challenges, for example, when it comes to educational videos. Though videos are effective in online learning “they are cumbersome and inefficient on mobile devices in terms of file size and downloading time[...] Transfer of video content is slow or costly if the user is connecting with 3G [and] [It] may be difficult to read the subtitles on a small screen too” (Zhang, 2019:18). Blewett (2016) bemoans the challenge of transiting from offline to online reading. While the web reading option is from top to bottom of page, e-books also offer an option of the familiar “skeuomorphic right-to-left flicking” of pages which is severely limited by the page size of the offline book (Blewett, 2016:268). The same applies to information presented visually as infographics, which is rendered unreadable on the mobile device.

Back in 2012 Castro (2012) had predicted that social media would play a crucial role in future teaching and learning by encouraging participant creativity and increased sharing of educational material across time and space. However, people are generally conservative and resistant to change or innovation, especially where it involves migrating from established teaching methods. For Cochrane *et al.* (2014:2) “some form of catalyst is required to bring about pedagogical change.” They conveniently cite Kukulska-Hulme

(2010) in order to buttress their argument that “mobile social media is such a catalyst” that could enable “a pedagogical refocus from teacher-directed content delivery to student-generated content and student generated learning contexts” (Cochrane *et al.*, 2014:2). In our paper, we believe, the catalyst for pedagogical shift was both the fear and circumvention of the Covid-19 pandemic. The WhatsApp platform became a convenient affordance. The mobile device proved to be the only feasible way available for the immobilised students to study during Covid-19 and, of all social media, WhatsApp appeared to be relatively more common and accessible to the participants. It is for this reason that Zhang (2019:569) claims that social media has positively transformed the way of teaching and learning, weaning the learner from being “a message receiver that learns from teachers or books” to one who is supposedly involved and engaged online. The problem, however, remains how to push this “online learning [... to be] effective, and not simply efficient” (Blewett, 2016:265).

The problem in context

Zimbabwe’s state universities found themselves in a quandary since the country had been locked down because of the threat of Covid-19. In the circumstances, most of the universities could no longer fully utilise the formal online modes of learning that relied on larger, expensive and more technologically complex devices such as computers, laptops and accessories meaning therefore that it would be difficult for most students to access Google classroom, Moodle, Canvas and Blackboard, teleconferencing or zooming. But following world trends, the Ministry of Higher and Tertiary Education, Zimbabwe, directed that all state universities implement online modes of conducting lectures that should benefit all students, since traditional on-campus modes of teaching were currently impracticable for students located in different places. Quality implied that students had to interact constructively with module content, amongst themselves and also with their lecturer. The paper thus examines whether the WhatsApp chat platform could be considered an effective pedagogical intervention in the case of a cohort of M.Ed. Languages (English) students who were spread around the country. The paper poses the following questions:

- How has the transition from face-to-face to WhatsApp impacted on students’ access of relevant information?
- How has the adjustment to the new learning style been?
- What quality of learning is gleaned through WhatsApp?
- How can challenges encountered through this WhatsApp platform learning mode be addressed?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative case study involving 11 participants from a cohort of Masters in Education students. This was employed with a view to getting a better understanding of the selected Masters’ students on their experiences with the WhatsApp platform their lecturer used to interact with them. Participants were all M.Ed. (Languages) students in the first-year second semester (1.2) of their study programme, having completed their first semester (1.1) learning through face-to-face mode. These were conveniently and purposively selected (Yin, 2003). All the eleven participants responded to semi-structured interview questions which were sent on WhatsApp. To complement the interviews

researchers also observed and analysed some of the WhatsApp chats. This gave them an opportunity to authenticate the quality of learning which went on through the platform. To ensure confidentiality, responses were in-boxed and were treated with the strictest confidentiality. The participants were coded P1 to P11 as distinguishable by their phone numbers. To augment the direct responses to the interview questions the researchers, as already hinted, also analysed the participants' group lecture chats, chats that demonstrated the authentic experiences of students as they processed and discussed the presentations together. Participants' responses and in-group educational chats were analysed textually and thematically, merging around the research questions. Texts and excerpts were presented verbatim in the presentation and discussion of findings to ensure credibility and trustworthiness.

Results

The results below express the experiences of the selected M.Ed. Languages (English) students as they went through their module 'Theories of Literature and Criticism'. Their responses addressed issues that coalesced around how the Covid-19-induced transition from traditional on-campus learning to WhatsApp platform impacted on their access to module-related information, adjustment logistics, quality of learning derived, the challenges met in using WhatsApp, and ideas to strengthen the WhatsApp space's pedagogical prospective. Since participants were typing on their mobile devices they often used social media shorthand that we have tried to retain here. The results of the study were typical of the group, however, they could be transferred to other similar settings or/and contexts.

Challenges and opportunities of transiting from face-to-face to WhatsApp in relation to accessing module-related information during Covid-19 lockdown

Of significance were most student-participants' comments on access to material during the lockdown period. They noted that their lecturer availed the module outline and all other course expectations in soft copy meaning that there was little difference between the old normal and the new normal of teaching/learning. One of the participants (P3) however expressed mixed feelings of satisfaction and dismay in these words:

Despite COVID, I hev managed to access module materials. However, I hev encountered some problems with accessing information because of issues of storage, data, network problems and power challenges with my fon. I have mistakenly deleted some docs while downloading, larger docs and audios have cost me. (P3)

Another participant (P5) whose feelings also echo a number of her colleagues wrote that:
Though it proved to be difficult at 1st it didn't affect my access to course outline and notes. The c/outline was provided early and it gave a telescopic overview of the lecturer and module expectations. Detailed notes on lit. theories to be learnt were also availed to us in which we familiarised ourselves to each theory prior to indi. presentations.(P5)

Similar views on WhatsApp platform as an access point for lecture material are given by P11 below:

It was a very disturbing, confusing and draining transition. Failed to quickly adjust coz of 'technical faults' e.g. phone battery problems, network BUT transition was necessary. Notes, module outlines and material were received to download your whole sem.'s work and then strategise on way forward. (P11)

The privately 'in-boxed' submissions above were corroborated in the actual chats on the general WhatsApp group platform where the presentations experienced a false start. Actually, the first presenter only 'tweeted' an excuse when the whole class was already expecting her to lead in presentation. She prefaced her upload with a weep emoticon and wrote *Am sorry Prof and group, may you please allow me to polish up my presentation. I had challenges with my phone.* One of the colleagues jocularly tried to reassure her thus: *You are in panic mode coz of this new thing, dear. Pliz relax and don't die.* There were also hiccups as expressed in the following, where a prospective contributor seemed to take forever to finish typing while the class waited: *Sorry I was typing, phone pads frozen. May I be allowed to record an audio? (P6)*

Adjustment challenges to the new learning style

Most participants noted the challenges of adjusting to the new WhatsApp mode of learning and how they tried to make things work - away from campus. Participant P9 observed that:

Unlike for a face-2-face lecture where I have to present myself physically, I hev adjusted and hev 2 make sure that my gadgets are charged before the presentation kick starts. Bt it's expensive n demanding, I hev to ensure that there is enough data to use during the lectures and sometimes have to travel to Wi-Fi hotspots. I've to spare time to revisit the WhatsApp lecture chats after lectures, which is a bit time consuming.(P 9)

P10 shared this view:

Adjusting was a challenge, especially for us women. Eventually, I created a t/table for household chores and online work. Waking up early was a challenge at 1st but my family supported me. The group was there to edify and encourage each other... Confusing as it was....eventually it began to make sense. Lecturers became very serious and strictness made us take it seriously. But some feedback and comments by colleagues would be delayed in coming. (P10)

A similar view was expressed by P6 thus:

The new normal during Covid-19 was rather hectic. It was 'a-learn-as-you-go' experience for me, regardless of lecturers chipping in to address hazy matters. I'd a hard time trying to adapt to the learning platform. Even this late, I'm still following up on the old chats as some concepts were discussed in my absence or rushed over. But using a mobile fon, I can browse even while in bed. (P6)

As we went over the group discussion chats on the *Theories* presentations (as researchers) we realised that the students tried to make their debates as lively and realistic as they normally are during face-to-face sessions. We found that students used a number of

emoticons and symbols to humanise the WhatsApp class interactions. One student wrote: *Slowly getting something now....when are the exams?* (Accompanied with the emoticon of weeping). Another appended his *Thanks for clarifying on this theory* with the clap emoticon. Other emoticons used included happy, excited faces, faces showing surprised, thoughtful or confused expressions and symbols such as supplicating palms, large double ticks, question marks and various other communication symbols and icons or extra-linguistic exclamations such as *Eeishhhh didn't realise that angle; This pressure will kill me wooooooh; Yaaah! Yeaah or kikikikiki.*

Commendable quality of learning derived from WhatsApp

Participants gave varying responses regarding the issue of the quality of education students received through WhatsApp. Some few expressed lack of confidence that students could derive quality through using the WhatsApp platform as a sole mode of instruction. This can be seen in the response:

I don't feel fully convinced on issues of quality and excellence of learning entirely through this 'social' platform, also considering it was the first time for both tutors and students. Yet learning did occur. And on the whole even though not all of us were ready to embrace WhatsApp, if I were to enumerate the quality I would say 45%, as many factors worked against the platform. (P4)

However, most respondents seemed contented with the quality of learning derived from the WhatsApp platform. The following responses represent their more positive views:

We received quality education despite Covid-19 lockdown conditions. The lecturer provoked us with questions and also clarified on sticking issues. I personally benefited a lot from WhatsApp lectures. He responded to every question raised on the platform and I got to understand the theories and their application to set books. (P7)

Information was accessible and of acceptable quality. Making notes from the phone chats, though burdensome, challenged me to be analytical especially as I scrolled through the chats contributed during the lesson vis-à-vis the presentation uploaded earlier. I'd compare all the comments, likes, retweets and criticisms and found myself revising my earlier understanding of the issues raised. (P1)

There were two responses which pinpointed the nature of quality that was critical to students of literary studies, thus:

The spontaneous exchanges we uploaded, promoted critical thinking. EG when we were discussing various theories, the lecturer created greater room for peer discussion by redirecting questions. I was made aware of the connection and relationship between the classical theory and other literary theories of later, rather than just focusing on one theory in isolation, which enhanced my analytical skills. (P2)

WhatsApping stimulated critical thinking, particularly viewing the manner in which the lecturer's probing questions were handled. Now, I no longer approach a text to just merely describe the themes and characterisation. WhatsApp debates have motivated me to not only use but justify the choice of literary theories. I can then go deeper and critique the text-type, value, approach, language and various angles upon which a text hinges, and above all trace the foundations from classical to modern theories of appreciating various writings. Since

participating on the platform, I can now confidently apply literary theory to discuss literary effects and weigh how particular tenets of different literary theories can be useful in interpreting the same literary text. (P5)

We gleaned the students' comments from the main WhatsApp group chat platform and found comments that related to the quality of learning going on. Some of them read:

We are no longer scratching the surface. This is a deep-end struggle;

Yes point taken. I think you can assist us further by throwing in real exam type questions so that we can use these to practice the application part;

Oowkay, though not sure heeyii. Could it be meaning that when we analyse literary texts our targets are their form, content and value then... I get it (emoticon of index finger joining the thumb).

The same search through students' class WhatsApp chats revealed that group members actually engaged in extended debates. For example, in a deliberation on whether the emergence of Africana Womanist theory was not an expression of reflexive racism, one member argued: *I don't think it is racist. It came to be as a result of the racism the black women were experiencing at the hands of white folks. Feminism was, on paper, about all women but on essence the black ladies (sic) were being neglected, hence Africana Womanism.* Once the debate warmed up, students would pose probing questions and redirect discussion amongst themselves, leading to statements such as: *Noted (clap emoticon). Can you assist me on this one? Is it correct for one to say that Maiguru in Dangarembgwa's NC represents the aspect of Africana Womanism of being nurturing, considering how she is gentle to relatives and concerned about everyone in the extended family? She has once stayed overseas but still remains defined by her traditional role as African woman etc.* Colleagues often responded to such kind of requests with a like emoticon or a large, double bold tick. It became evident that these innocent looking emoticons and symbols actually oiled and provoked further discussion and collaborative learning.

One student expressed her satisfaction with the quality of a just ended presentation in the following words:

I thot I knew everything and I thot lit was just about reading a text identifying themes, characters, etc. but these WhatsApp sessions have changed me lots. The discussions provoked me to think n realise that there is more to lit than blind criticism. Now am a better teacher than I was before this module. I'll never read a novel the same way again. Vachandiona after Covid kuclass nekustaffroom (They will recognise a different person when schools reopen after Covid-19) (treble clap emoticon).

Teething problems with learning through WhatsApp

All participants raised the issue that since it was the first time for most of the students and lecturers to solely deliver and receive material through WhatsApp, technologically-related challenges were bound to arise. They also raised non-cooperation as a challenge where some members would choose not to participate while certain students were presenting. This behaviour seemed linked to poor social relationships. The general views of the group can be summed up in the words of two of the members:

Myself, reading e-books was a challenge at first coz I had to stare on my fon for hours causing health hazards....and sometimes the tiny font of the books would strain my eyes...but all the same, both face-to-face and online have loopholes. Interacting with the group was quite erratic at first but we gradually adjusted. For example, some students would be offline

and others would not contribute on the official platform....deafening silence sometimes.... We created our timetable...obviously, some colleagues in remote rurals failed to be online but most of the times ¾ of the class was available. (P8)

It was a bit slippery and misty for most of us but since exam dates had been set already and non-attendance meant you would forfeit your fees, we embraced it. Practically, contributing on the WhatsApp platform meant you were constantly asked to add minute detail in your chat contribution since there was no room for ellipsis and nonverbal or facial support...So? What do you mean here? Explain your point, blah blah blah... Also data was a big enemy especially where the lecturer opted to use voice recordings per concept. I found myself squandering a weekly data bundle in a matter of hours. The other challenge for the platform is the network coverage problem. I'm in the heart of remote Binga where network is rationed (sic) and in some cases I spent 3-4 days without network and during that time lessons are going on. To follow-up on the work done and at the same time attend ongoing lectures is rather stressful. Time management was poor. As a result, you would see some students still typing comments 7 hours after the presentation had ended. Learners had also to balance online learning and social demands on the same mobile device. (P3)

The fact that it was difficult to have all members online during the presentations was evident in some comments such as the following, uploaded onto the group platform by those who would have connected a bit late:

Sorry colleagues for joining late;

Network problems ma!

Following though, will comment after going through the chats already.

WhatsApp platform can be improved into an educational platform

The students suggested a number of things that the institution could do to improve WhatsApp as a learning platform. These ideas could address issues mostly on network connectivity, data costs and power. They exhort the institution to:

- Assist students to purchase smartphones with lesser problems of connectivity and power retention
- Get into partnerships with network providers to allow students to get private network connections at their homes
- Provide data bundles at subsidised rates since students would have paid fees but not receiving face-to-face tuition or related on-campus services/amenities.
- Infuse concepts of mobile learning in some taught modules
- Think about designing a workable timetable considering the challenges of communicating turns on platform
- Be stricter on students' discipline and behaviour while on online mobile class
- Never think of dumping face-to-face tuition but use them together.

Discussion

Generally, participants were cognisant of the debilitating effects of Covid-19, and hence realised the inevitability of embracing online learning platforms. The participants' responses show that they largely believed that m-learning guaranteed student access to module information during the transition. The results show that all the students registered for the module possessed smartphones, though of different make, durability and performance

and could access learning from whatever point in Zimbabwe, including the ‘heart of remote Binga’. Hence, as Zhang (2019) notes, the mobile phone was no longer restricted to social or business communication but pedagogical as well, utilising its ‘anywhere anytime’ advantage as opposed to the ancient “same time, same place” approach” (Turbill, 2019:40). The responses indicated that the module outline, with content and expectations, other relevant notes and materials such as e-books and scanned scarce source materials were also availed using the WhatsApp conveniences of generating, sharing and downloading. Some of this vital information might have been more difficult to access and share in the traditional face-to-face tuition, especially in under-resourced nations such as Zimbabwe. Some participants, however, noted that the transition was rather abrupt, leaving students prone to challenges such as poor network, expensive data costs, anxiety and inexperience in the use of the platform for purposes other than social.

The participants’ responses regarding how they adjusted from face-to-face tuition to WhatsApp platform learning show that it was not easy at first but students gradually realised that their mobile smartphones afforded them the opportunity to proceed with their education, supporting one another from different points in Zimbabwe. Although the onus was on the student to quickly adjust, students’ responses reveal that their lecturers, colleagues and families supported and encouraged them. Similarly, Alberth *et al.* (2018)’s study found that mobile learning enabled in-service students in remote areas to support each other’s professional growth. Students had to adjust to the reality that for them to benefit from m-learning, they had to constantly have enough battery power, be connected to the area network provider and have sufficient data bundles. It was also the student’s responsibility to track all the chats in case s/he had missed the points due to tuning out or being offline. In fact, this opportunity to follow-up on authentic pre-recorded chats and audios was a freely given advantage that other forms of learning may not offer, say, a colleague’s notebook or reported summary.

Students also had to manage their timetable and whole way of life. Although Covid-19 lockdown regulations had inadvertently given family members more family time together, higher education students were still expected to manage demands of social life and those of their education programme. As adults, they had to ensure that their trafficking of social media messages would not compromise their participation in the group class chats, reminiscing the need for group discipline provided in the social media *control* affordance (Blewett, 2016). Participants’ responses also indicate that students had to learn fast some taken-for-granted skills of operating some of the smartphone applications as well as the actual conduction of an educational discussion on a WhatsApp platform. Hence, students’ gradual success in making their ‘written’ discussions flow in just an enlivened manner as those in a live oral communicative event through borrowing emoticons, symbols and paralinguistic features and mannerisms from social media communication. The use of a variety of emoticons to facilitate normal communication between distantly positioned WhatsApp interactants were also confirmed by Gon and Rawekar (2017) in their study with medical students in India.

Though participants’ responses on the quality of learning they gained through WhatsApp platform during Covid-19 lockdown attracted mixed feelings, the majority participants were of the view that educational discussions on the social media outlet promoted quality learning. Reservations on the quality and excellence of learning via WhatsApp were based on the challenges that came with the technological platform that

ranged from connectivity, data bundle costs and relative newness of m-learning as well as on the idea of it being the sole mode and source of information during lockdown, particularly for poor students. However, on the positive side, participants were excited to note the benefits that came with learning through the WhatsApp platform. Responses suggest that lecturers were eager to make the m-learning experience a success for students by availing relevant and scarce reading material including current e-books, prepared notes and also by continuously monitoring and encouraging the exchanges through uploading discussion questions and follow-up, probing and redirecting questions.

While related research (Zhang, 2019; Cochrane et al., 2014) seems to overrate social media learning as liberating learners from teacher-content directed and student-message receiver to self-regulated learning, in our study the students seem to appreciate lecturer interference, guidance and control. According to responses, such interest of lecturers in students' performance and achievement directed them towards development of higher order thinking skills. That supervised WhatsApp learning eventually leads to development of critical thinking resonates with Gon and Rawekar's (2017) study which showed that professional, strict and concerned lecturers spurred students to learn comfortably yet critically on WhatsApp. Baguma *et al.* (2019:104), in their study at Makerere University established that use of WhatsApp Enabled Learning, a relation to WhatsApp, engendered "critical thinking", "problem solving" and "transfer of learning" among students. Similarly, in our current study, a number of participant responses to interview questions and the testimonies from the common group chats indicate there is a high correlation between engagement in WhatsApp class discussions and improvement of critical skills. Participants' responses indicate that students believed that if they actively participated in discussions with colleagues on the general group platform and if they also patiently followed-up on the previous group chats, they would acquire important digital communication and thinking skills. Such skills include developing and sustaining an argument, rejecting a co-student's position, supporting own position and supplying evidence when responding to probing and supply-of-proof questions from lecturer and colleagues, comparing and evaluating the application of literary theories as well as synthesising information presented. These could be the educational opportunities extant in social media that Gleason and Manca (2020:5) see as promoting "increased engagement, building class community and making connections among co-learners" and sharpening skills and competencies for a digital citizen.

The student who rated the platform lowly had allocated it 45% quality. Her reasons were that many factors militated against the WhatsApp platform. Regarding the general challenges, all participants identified almost similar problems which were rooted in the abrupt nature of transition caused by the Covid-19 pandemic panic, and the technological nature of the application. It can however be deduced from the responses that problems were not only nonhuman/technological but also of a human social nature. Participants complained of technological challenges such as erratic network connectivity, power outage and expensive data bundle costs, especially where it involved downloading large files, educational videos and audios. This study's results echo those of Zhang (2019) and especially Dziuban *et al.* (2018:4) who note that access benefits may not be "experienced evenly across demographic groups." Other technological issues that respondents raised concerned the strain of reading e-books, scanned books and infographics on the mobile phone screen. Zhang (2019) reports similar challenges and Blewett (2016:268) bemoans how the e-books "skeuomorphic right-to-left flicking" of pages allure is scuttled by the page size

of the offline book. Problems of a human nature related to deliberate non-attendance or delayed joining online, inadequate and incomplete responses, uploading ‘cuts and pastes’ or delayed uploading of contributions by members. According to the responses such challenges compromised access to and quality of the information discussed on the platform. It was for these challenges that the students suggested a number of solutions that could improve the WhatsApp platform as a pedagogical intervention not only during disasters as Covid-19 but in an era where technology advances faster than society.

Overall, it has emerged that mobile learning has made it possible for distantly situated students experiencing unprecedented Covid-19 epidemic conditions to proceed with their learning. Although elsewhere m-learning has been adopted as early as 2000, for most Zimbabwean students, including those at the institution under study, this new normal had not yet been embraced and Covid-19 ironically became the spur. M-learning being largely new, the results have also shown that there is no consensus on the quality and excellence of learning the students have received via the WhatsApp platform. This suggests that for less technologically endowed countries such as Zimbabwe, there is still need to seriously review the taken-for-granted efficiency and effectiveness of mobile learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It can be concluded from the study that the Covid-19 pandemic was an inadvertent catalyst to the abrupt migration to online and particularly mobile learning at the institution under study. The results also suggest that WhatsApp platform applications such as sharing, receiving, downloading, browsing and chatting, among others, were found to be amenable affordances that facilitated the learning of the university students who were scattered across the country following the Covid-19 lockdown regulations that directed that formal on-campus learning be suspended. From the results it can be concluded that the transition from face-to-face to WhatsApp mobile learning, however, saw all registered students accessing module information and discussion points, though sometimes intermittently due to technological, power supply and financial challenges. It can also be concluded that, overall, and notwithstanding the pertinent challenges, the WhatsApp group class discussion platform was a means to promote and perfect quality education through drawing out students’ debating instincts and stretching their skills of comparing, analysing, evaluating and synthesising as demonstrated in the progressively improving exchanges of the M.Ed. students of a *Theories of Literature and Criticism* module. The respondents have, however, expressed apprehension at the prospect of m-learning replacing the other modes of learning which they still hold as of complementary importance.

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the researchers recommend the following:

- (a) Lecturers and students embrace the increasingly popular m-learning platforms to augment the existing traditional modes of teaching and learning.
- (b) Lecturers and students continue to study the affordances/applications on their mobile phones so that they remain abreast with the new educational opportunities their gadgets offer.
- (c) Institution supports students to access affordable, durable smartphones and mobile data bundles
- (d) Institution liaises with internet providers to improve connectivity and accessibility across the country since online learning is fast becoming the new normal.

- (e) Departments infuse aspects of mobile technology and pedagogy in existing modules such as Computers, Communication, Instructional Technology or Pedagogics.

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