



Blended Learning in the New Normal. The Case of Kondo Cluster Mudzi District

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Abstract: *In the wake of COVID 19, teaching and learning flopped and proved to be an unsurmountable task with the old and most common face to face teaching methodology. Pupils lost their learning time with almost every school facing closure. Needed was the most relevant and fruitful strategies to gain back education. Nonetheless, with the development of technology in education, various methods of teaching have been adopted across the world. Many countries have made technology a fundamental part of their classroom, and some nations have toiled hard to integrate it in innumerable ways. Through a literature review, this paper explores the fears, challenges and opportunities in blended learning in rural and remote schools. This study finds how blended learning helps schools balance teacher demand and supply issues in rural and remote areas of Mudzi District. The present study revealed that blended learning is considerably more favourable as opposed to face-to-face only, home-schooling, and pure online education and offers several benefits for pupils such as use of ICT gadgets, accessing internet, teacher retention and improvements on schools available in their community. This research concludes that blended learning is an excellent approach to teaching and learning in rural areas regarding teachers' availability, pupils' time to travel to the city, and pupils' interaction with their teachers and colleagues. Conversely, challenges including unavailability of internet connection in schools, unavailability of or intermittent electricity supply, unavailability of ICT gadgets in schools and home, poor radio and television signals, and poor uptake of radio and television lessons by pupils in remote rural schools among other things have been the causes for concern in fostering blended learning in Kondo Cluster in Mudzi District.*

Keywords: *Blended learning, online learning, retention, technology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Blended learning has developed into a widespread teaching and learning methodology in today's didactic world. Resultantly, various institutions have begun using blended learning in their regular academic programs. Nonetheless, some schools in remote and rural areas tussle to find an appropriate teaching approach in their regular schedules and have faced teacher retention issues in those communities. That is the reason why many schools have been forced to permanently close, while others have chosen to adopt a hybrid instructional approach called blended learning, which is a complete mix of traditional and contemporary methods that have abetted significantly solve the problem in remote and rural communities. While various institutions explain blended learning differently, the most common definition is "a combination of traditional face-to-face and online instruction" (Graham, 2012, p. 334). Likewise, Neumeier (2005, p. 164) defines blended learning as "a combination of face-to-face and computer-assisted learning in a single teaching and learning environment". Thus, pupils learn from home by using technology in their flexible time and the classroom. In the same milieu, Hockly (2018, p. 97) argues that "the use of computer technology as part of blended learning is usually understood to take place in another location to the face-to-face teaching, and most likely in the pupils' own time". In modern world, numerous pupils are learning from home. Consequently, they meditate that home-schooling is the best preference for them which runs exclusively online. However, those pupils and parents who have experienced blended learning prefer blended learning to online education. Based on a survey conducted by Tayebinik, et al. (2012, p. 1), it is concluded that blended learning is "an efficient approach ...in terms of pupils learning experience, pupil-pupil interaction as well as pupil-instructor interaction and is likely to emerge as the

predominant education model in the future”. Although many schools globally have embraced this approach, there is still much more to be done to make it more effective. To begin with, the training of teachers, pupils, and parents is vital as it is completely a new phenomenon to all stakeholders (Barbosa, et al. 2021). Also, technology plays an indispensable role, so all patrons should be cognisant of online safety rules. In addition, blended learning is neither absolutely face-to-face, nor traditional learning nor entirely online; it is the amalgamation of both, hence “assessments need to be designed to test for the content presented in various formats” (Watson, 2008. p. 14). The rationale of this study is to find the teaching and learning disturbances due to COVID 19, introduction of compressed syllabi, fears, opportunities and challenges of blended learning and provide some possible solutions based on the research and experiences. This research is essential because it will elaborate findings from various literature on this topic and its application. Correspondingly, it is evident that in rural and remote areas of Mashonaland East province of Zimbabwe, particularly Mudzi District, there is a high demand for certified teachers, and the schools are operating in very difficult understaffed conditions due to the lack of qualified teachers. There are also persistent electricity and network challenges. Most schools in the district are not connected, hence, they cannot afford online learning. Notable teaching and learning disturbances due to COVID 19 include but not limited to very short terms, limited teachers, poor pupil attendance, and large drop outs of pupils, coverage of syllabi, and the continuation of examinations. Compressed syllabi, radio and television lessons as well as modules from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education were some of the strategies put in place to abate the disturbances. Consequently, this study will provide different strategies to the schools in these areas to continue classes in rural and remote schools without disturbances.

1.1. Key Inquiry Question

To what extent does blended learning affect the teaching and learning process in rural and remote schools?

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does blended learning improve teaching and learning in schools during the Covid-19 era?
2. What are the fears in implementing blended learning in remote rural schools?
3. What are the challenges in implementing blended learning in remote rural schools?
4. What opportunities are derived from the implementation of blended learning in rural remote schools?

2. HISTORY OF BLENDED LEARNING

Research has revealed that there was no precise date when blended learning started. However, it appears that this is a hybrid package adapted from traditional face-to-face education and online learning. According to Horn et al. (2014 p. 4), “the emergence of blended learning is one-way online learning in marching upmarket”. Barbour (2014) introduces the term ‘Correspondence Education’, the first form of distance education used in different schools worldwide. In Canada, British Columbia started open and distance learning in 1919 (Barbour, 2014). New Zealand followed in 1922 (Rumble, 1989; as cited in Barbour, 2014). Pappas (2015) claims that there were different learning approaches before we came to the blended learning model in the 21st century. According to Pappas (2015), the first “Distance Course” (para 2) started in the 1840s, followed by “Mainframe Computer-Based Training” (para 3) in the 1960s and 1970s and then “TV-Based Technology to Support Live Training” (para 4) in the 1970s and 1980s with “CD-ROM Training and Rise of LMS (Learning Management System)” (para 5) in the 1980s and 1990s. Pappas (2015) further notes that the “First Generation Of Web-Based Instruction” (para 6) developed in 1998, and from around 2000 to until today, “blended learning has a proven track record of bringing traditional classrooms into the tech-friendly 21st century” (Pappas, 2015, para 9). Regarding the use of blended learning in teaching and learning, Hockly (2018) states that the term ‘blended learning’ has been widely used in English language teaching since at least 2007 when Sharma and Barrett published their eponymous teachers’ resource book” (para 1). Research demonstrates that blended learning is the continuation of distance learning with online and face-to-face education modifications. Therefore, it is understood that blended learning has been used in institutions ever since the start of the 21st century after the development of the World Wide Web (www) (Kintu et al., 2017).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Pupil engagement, defined as the involvement of the pupil's cognitive and emotional energy to achieve a learning task, has been found to relate with imperative educational aftermaths, including academic achievement, persistence, satisfaction, and sense of community (Conrad, 2010). Such relationships have provoked researchers to refer to pupil engagement as "an educational bottom line" (Coates, 2006, p. 36). Hitherto many pupils are not engaged in their own education, resulting in high attrition and in low interest, motivation, and academic outcomes (Rumberger et al. 2012). As teachers hunt for ways to escalate pupil engagement, some have yearned that blended learning might more effusively engage pupils in their learning (Graham et.al. 2007). They may possibly include increased flexibility and personalization due to diversified learning pathways (Horn et.al. 2015); expanded opportunities for interactivity, technical advantages, preservation of the humanness and spontaneity in face-to-face instructional activities; and increased learning time and instructional resources (Means et al., 2013). Blended learning may support enhanced cognitive engagement through reflection and critical discourse; agentic engagement via added learning pathways; and emotional engagements (Reeve, et.al 2011). Nelson, et al. (2005) discover a robust affirmative rapport concerning use of information technology for educational purposes and indicators of engagement, as per the National Survey of Pupil Engagement (NSSE). Even though scholars and practitioners display interest in the potential of blended learning to increase pupil engagement, few of the top-cited authors in blended learning are really addressing it in their research questions and problem statements (Halverson, et al. 2014). Thus, more research is required to understand pupil engagement in blended contexts.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Blended learning does not have a pedagogy of its own, but it draws its strength from the three basic theoretical perspectives on learning: behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism. Therefore, a review of all these three basic learning theories and a few other theories derived from these that have relevance to the design of pupil-centred blended learning milieus including, social constructivism, activity theory, and situated cognition, was made. Such a review of learning theories is critical to formulate a scaffold upon which this study can be grounded. The 21st century society makes great demands on its members because of rapidly developing and ever-changing political, cultural, social, economic and technological situations. Personal computers, cell phones, and social networks, all of which were once considered frivolous, have made such a huge impact on our culture that our day-to-day lives will not be easy devoid of them. Consequently, the society expects its members to keep pace with these fluctuating circumstances, and adjust their skills and proficiency in all facets of life. Many societies around the universe sturdily accept as true that it is the responsibility of education institutions to afford its youths with these skills and expertise. This elevates snowballing societal concern for the quality of learning and teaching at secondary education institutions. As a result of such unprecedented pressure on educational institutions to keep pace with the ever-changing societal needs and expectations, the emphasis in educational methodologies has shifted over time in order to mirror the evolution from less formal schooling in the agrarian society to remedial repetitive learning in the industrialization age to learning with an understanding rather than teaching in today's knowledge society. Educational approaches have also been influenced by the contemporary hasty developments and proliferation of new communications technology.

From the perspective of technology as a cognitive tool, learning is viewed as a mindful, constructive activity involving deliberate cognitive efforts, and the application of technologies as cognitive learning tools rather than as instructional media. This denotes a noteworthy leave-taking from traditional conceptions of technologies that were used for rote learning through activities such as mundane drill, and practice. Thus, the primary distinction between traditional learning applications of technologies and their use as cognitive tools is that traditional view assumes media as conveyors of information and pupils to be passive addressees rather than active constructors of knowledge. The literature on the use of computer as a cognitive tool has evolved in the last two decades. 'MindTools' is another term that represent more or less the same thing as 'cognitive tools'; these two terms are used interchangeably in this study. Cognitive tools are technologies that aid pupils to engage in and expedite cognitive processing leading to knowledge construction. The device of technology is not one of a physical nature but somewhat a cognitive nature being used as an engager, facilitator of thinking and knowledge creation (Jonassen, et al. 2000). They enhance the cognitive powers of human beings

during thinking, problem solving and learning (Jonassen, et al. 1996). According to Jonassen (2002), the role of a mind tool is to prolong the pupil's cognitive functioning in the course of the learning process, and to engage and facilitate critical thinking and higher-order learning. MindTools enable pupils to become critical thinkers. Cognitive tools are technologies that pupils interact and think with in knowledge construction, designed to bring their expertise to the performance as part of the joint learning system (Kim, et.al. 2007). According to Jonassen, et.al. (2000), pupils do not learn directly from technology, however, the role of technology in teaching is to engage the pupil more vigorously in the course of thinking and manipulating information which in turn facilitates the learning process. Thinking nurtures learning. Computers have the ability to mediate cognitive processes by providing pupils with the critical cognitive support to construct vigorous psychological models which in turn, engage pupils in still deeper processing and better learning (Jonassen, et al. 1996). When using technology as cognitive tools in learning contexts, pupils and technologies can become intellectual partners in learning; in the process, it helps pupils to surpass the limitations of their cognitive capabilities such as memory, thinking and problem solving capabilities, and to transfer some of the low level tasks such as calculations, storage and information retrieval to the computer. All these supports allow the pupil to think more productively, and engage in important processes of articulation and reflection, which are the foundations of higher order thinking skills and knowledge construction. According to Jonassen (1994), a pupil who uses any cognitive tool effectively must necessarily engage actively, think deeply, and articulate their knowledge. With such technology affordances, pupils engage in knowledge construction as opposed to knowledge reproduction. The 'cognitive tool' perspective embraces that learning takes place simply when pupils actively engage themselves in complex learning milieus that foster higher order thinking and problem solving skills. Activity theory and the socio-cultural work of Vygotsky (1978) offer a basis in this regard. According to Vygotsky, tools intercede and outspread our ability to intermingle with each other by making it probable to externalize our thinking into systems that we can segment with others and can act upon. He recommends that learning requires two mediational means— concrete tools (technical tools) and intangible tools or signs (semiotic tools). The part that technology can play in learning is of particular prominence when bearing in mind the idea of tools mediating human action. It has to be noted that, though pupils go into intellectual partnerships with the tools, the role of technology as a cognitive tool is not intended to do the thinking for pupils, but simply to expedite the thinking and learning processes. It is not that computers will directly impart content or thinking skills, but after working in partnership with computers, the pupil will internalise the way that computers think as a cognitive tool for their own use (Wegerif, 2007). Lajoie (1993, p. 5) argues that "the appropriate role for a computer system is not that of a teacher/expert, but somewhat, that of a mind-extension "cognitive tool". Kennedy, et.al. (2001) argue that, "carefully premeditated computer-based cognitive tools can scaffold learning by modelling complex environments or expert problem solving strategies". The underpinning learning theory of the 'cognitive tool' perspective is constructivism, as opposed to instructivist theories underlying the traditional communications perspective. Today, constructivist approach to instruction is the most recognised and preferred method of instruction within technology-rich environments. Learning is a social activity (Vygotsky, 1978). Social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition that results in active learning (Buchberger, 2000). Human interaction is debatably the most dominant tool for learning and skills development (Hall, et.al. 2000). As a result, it facilitates active user participation leading to new ways of constructing ideas. It is in social interaction that information can become knowledge. Social learning requires pupils to work in groups and it will enable them understand the way knowledge develops and changes today. Since knowledge is expanding exponentially in the information age, no one individual is an expert, rather individuals are part of a social network with others. Lave, et.al. (1999) model of situated learning anticipates that learning involves a process of engagement in a 'community of practice'. Community of practice is considered to be a type of milieu for acquiring knowledge (Wenger, et al., 2002). Social learning theorists suggest that learning communities provide a foundation for sharing knowledge. It is assumed that individuals can learn through constructing and sharing information and knowledge within the learning community as well as observing and modelling other people. In relation to learning and its social nature, Salomon (1993) argues that people appear to think in conjunction with others and with the assistance of culturally provided tools and implements. Driscoll (2000, p. 11) defines learning as "a persisting change in human performance or performance potential

which must come about as a result of the pupil's interaction with the world". Chickering, et al. (1987) propose that, the notion of collaboration is a basic component of the seven ideologies of good practice in education. They argue that, some of the dimensions of interaction are communication, collaboration, and active learning. According to Moore (1996), three different types of interactions are essential for learning to occur: pupil-content interactions, pupil-instructor interactions, and pupil-pupil interactions. For learning to take place, the pupil must actively interact and cognitively process the content of the course, not just inertly be exposed to it (Moore, 1996). However, Berge (1999) combines "pupil-instructor" and "pupil-pupil" interaction into one single category of "interpersonal interaction". According to him, for learning to occur, pupils must interact with each other and the instructor in order to arrive at shared meaning and to make sense of what they are learning. Interpersonal interaction affords the social context for the mutual production of understanding and has been demonstrated to play a major role in the learning process (Fulford, et al. 1993). This social context of learning is crucial for motivation, critical judgment and problem solving (Berge, 1999). Most people learn best when they are actively engaged in collaborative activities. Salomon, et al. (1998) report that pupils' construction of knowledge is enhanced when they engage in the co-construction of knowledge with peers and with their tutors. The more chances they have, and the more actively engaged they are, the richer their understanding (Wilson, 1997). Engaged pupils are innately inspired to carry out tasks and activities. In any learning environment, truly engaged pupils are behaviourally, intellectually, and emotionally in their learning tasks (Bangert-Drowns, et al., 2001). Evolving social networking technology tools outspread opportunities for collaboration with the tutor, peers and content enabling pupils to work in groups outside the classroom walls, thus expediting and progressing the learning process. Such group-oriented efforts by pupils result in new learning strategies that are consistent with the concept of social learning.

5. AFFORDANCES OF TECHNOLOGY IN PUPIL LEARNING

For the previous two decades, ICTs have transformed the ways teachers teach and pupils learn in different parts of the world. The role of computer in education has been essentially regarded as an instructional tool and for providing a wealthier and more exhilarating learning environment (Cunningham, et.al. 1996). Other most important affordances that qualify technology as a learning instrument are: authenticity, interactivity, flexibility, and lifelong learning. Online learning by its very nature needs active pupil engagement in learning activities and a great degree of pupil discipline, motivation, and control. Different categories of computer-related technologies are obtainable to be incorporated in teaching and learning strategies (McDonald, et al., 2008). Internet-based tools can facilitate communication, interaction, and collaborative learning in ways that were not possible before (The Node, 2001). Interactive landscapes of technology aid to generate perplexing activities that enable pupils to relate new information to old; obtain meaningful knowledge; and use their metacognitive abilities; hence, it is the instructional strategy, not the technology that impacts the eminence of learning (Bonk, et al., 1997). Interactivity through the use of communication tools, especially the asynchronous type such as electronic mail, and online discussion makes it probable for pupils to interact with peers and tutors, to provide responses of higher quality during interaction to share useful resources, and to provide for collaborative problem solving without space and time constraints. The asynchronous communication forum such as the Modern computer-mediated communication technologies have evolved to the extent that they can be effectively utilised in this re-engineering process for the reason that they have the potential to support interactive pedagogies. A shift is now possible from static content such as text, illustrations, graphs, charts, photos, or maps towards supporting knowledge production through interactive learning environments with animation, video, or interactive illustrations and thus, facilitating flexible and disseminated betrothed learning that offer wider educational opportunities. For discussing content, online discussion forums and web conferencing have worked well. Tileston (2000) argues that technology is a tool that can help teachers embody best practices to create an enriched and collaborative learning environment, meet a variety of learning style needs, support learning transfer, assist with the attainment of long term memory and deep understanding, address high-level thinking, make education equitable, and incorporate real world problems and authentic assessments. Technology possesses unique capabilities for delivering instruction and designing intellectually stimulating real-world assessments. Boyle (2008) asserts that technology can be used to support the following approaches and all pupils can benefit from these: (i) Active Learning: learn by doing (ii) Group Learning: discussion, collaboration (iii) Metacognition:

self-learning and reflection on learning. Similar observations were delineated by Gonzales et al. (1998) who assert that technology is a powerful tool to support inquiry-based learning- learning that is constructivist; values theoretical understanding over procedural adeptness, responsive to pupil's preceding knowledge and experience; constructs networks to the external world, and supports evolution of higher order thinking skills; prepares pupils for lifelong learning, and stimulates educational even-handedness. The aptitude of flexibility and fluidity of online learning encourages pupils to pace their own learning processes and to pave a way in knowledge construction which best suits them (based on individual learning styles and preferences), disregarding the "one size fits all" approach inherent in traditional education.

6. CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is a philosophy of learning based on the premise that knowledge is constructed by the individual through his or her interfaces with the environment, together with other pupils. In constructivist environment, the learning is pupil directed, and the learning consequences will differ extensively from pupil to pupil. Consequently, it is critical that assessment should replicate these differences which can be done only through alternative assessment strategies such as e-portfolios and qualitative approaches, such as interviews, observations, user logs, focus groups, expert critiques, and pupil feedback.

6.1. Constructivism and the New Technology

There is also a growing body of evidence that traditional classroom instruction can be heightened through the use of web-based multimedia and communication tools (Salinas, 2008). The fact that technology can play an important part in the constructivist learning environment is being increasingly acknowledged by all stakeholders in education. Grant et al. (2003) agree that technology plays a crucial role in facilitating constructivist approaches. The focus of both constructivism and technology are on the creation of engaging and collaborative learning environments. Lunenberg, (1998) argues that constructivism and the integration of computer technology in the curriculum offer genuine assurance for refining the accomplishment of all pupils in the core subject areas. According to them, there is a mutualistic relationship between computer technology and constructivism, each one benefiting from the other through developing constructivist course modules using technology as cognitive tools or mind tools and thus, providing enhanced opportunities for more authentic content, learning activities and assessments, and pupil interaction with content, classmates and teachers enriching potentials for knowledge construction. This relationship stimulates an amplified level of motivation, knowledge construction and the development of social and communication skills among pupils (Scheepers, 2000). Proponents of constructivism attempt to show connections between constructivist teaching/learning strategies and educational technology in instruction (Lee, 2006). The richness of the technology permits us to provide a richer and more exciting learning environment (Duffy, et al., 1996). The employment of this environment aims at introducing pupils to constructivist practice through collaborative problem solving techniques and processes. It is used to present thematic related to the curricula of particular educational levels in the form of simulation scripts / scenarios. In technology-supported collaborative learning environments, the multiple forms of synchronous and asynchronous communication tools help to facilitate dialogue, a key element in pedagogies based on socio-constructivist principles, where the emphasis is on co-construction of knowledge among a community of pupils.

6.2. Definition of Blended Learning

Although the theory of blended learning is not new, Graham (2006) notes that research around it is still in its infancy and therefore, it is not startling to note that there lacks a uniform definition that all researchers have adopted. As is the case in any novel and embryonic meadow of research, there are a number of thought-provoking opportunities for exploration, and it makes it even more challenging to agree on a distinct definition proclamation. Whitelock et al. (2003) introduce three definitions of the term 'blended learning'. Initially, they view blended learning as the integrated combination of traditional learning with web-based online approaches. According to Whitelock et al. (2003), blended learning refers to the combination of a number of pedagogical approaches, irrespective of use of learning technology. Finally, Whitelock et al. (2003) argue that blended learning is the combination of media and tools employed in an e-learning environment. The first two definitions closely match with

the focus of this study. According to Garrison, et al. (2008), the basic principle of blended learning is that face-to-face oral communication and online written communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose. In broad terms, the term ‘blended learning’ may be defined as an incorporation of a number of instructional modalities combined with synchronous and asynchronous web technologies to facilitate collaborative and reflective individual as well as cooperative learning.

7. LITERATURE REVIEW

7.1. Prerequisite of Blended Learning

Implementing blended teaching is not an easy task. It requires certain fundamental preparations in all the elements of teaching learning process- teacher, student, content designing, and infrastructure (Bonk, et al., 2006). The following are the basic requirements for implementing a successful blended learning.

a) Well trained teachers

Though pupil-centred, teachers are an important pole of blended learning. Teachers should be well acquainted with the concept of blended learning and fully trained and skilled to blend both types of approaches- tradition and technological. They should be trained to develop content in digital form so that it can be available to pupils online (Garcia, et al., 2020). They should be well versed with internet browsing and internet terminology, should be aware of all the websites that can be useful for the pupils while learning online. Teacher should know how to utilize blogs, you tube facility, software like Skype, goggle talk and others for video conferencing and social networking sites for educational purposes (The World Bank, 2020).

b) Teachers with scientific attitude

It is very important that teachers have scientific attitudes. They should have good observation skills, they should be optimistic and have problem solving skills (Jara, et al., 2007). Scientific attitude will help the teachers to deal positively with failures they will get while working on this innovative concept and will help to analyse the conditions objectively. This right type of scientific temper will automatically filter from teachers to pupils (Dangwal, 2013).

c) Teachers with wider outlook and positive approach towards change

As it is a must for the success of any innovative idea or method, blended learning process also needs teachers that have a wider outlook and should be flexible, they should be ready to accept the changes and very innovative and dynamic (Bonk et al., 2006).

d) Complete facilities like well-furnished computer lab, internet connection, provision for video chatting

It is the compulsory factor of blended learning to have complete facilities such as well-furnished computer lab, internet connection, and provision for video conferencing (The World Bank, 2020). Blended learning largely depends on infrastructure and as such, schools should not only have good classrooms but should also have well-furnished computer laboratories with sufficient number of computers to cater for all the pupils of one class, and the internet facility such as a Wi-Fi campus (Dangwal, 2013).

e) Pupils have access to internet at their private computers

In addition to school having fully ICT friendly campus, pupils should have basic hardware support to learn online and offline at their residence as well (Dangwal, 2013). This requires a positive attitude and good investment schemes from the government (The World Bank, 2020).

f) Flexibility in the system

The system should be flexible, including flexible time table, examinations system and all these are very crucial for implementing blended learning.

g) Fully aware and agreed parents

The parents should be made well aware of this innovative approach to teaching so that they are ready for it and support their wards for the blended learning and can accept that this deviation from traditional teaching is beneficial for their children (UNICEF, 2020).

h) Formative evaluation and continuous internal assessment

The school authorities and higher educational bodies should be ready to completely implement continuous internal assessment and other tools of formative evaluation as summative evaluation is not supported in the blended learning. The provision should be made for online examination for making the system more flexible. These are few essentials and basic requirements without which the blended learning cannot be executed successfully.

7.2. Advantages of Blended Learning

According to Jacob (2011), blended learning has the following advantages:

1. As part of learning is done through ICT, online or offline mode so teachers and pupils get more time in the classroom for creative and cooperative exercise.
2. Pupils gain advantage of online learning and CAI without losing social interaction element and human touch of traditional teaching'.
3. It provides more scope for communication. Communication cycle is completed in blended learning which is not possible if we follow only traditional approach.
4. Pupils become more techno savvy and they gain enhanced digital fluency.
5. Pupils have more strengthened professionalism as they develop qualities like self-motivation, self-responsibility, discipline.
6. It updates course content and so gives new life to established courses

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods mode of design was used in carrying out this research. Mixed-methods research is a research methodology that incorporates multiple methods to address research questions in an appropriate and principled manner (Creswell, 2015), which involves collecting, analysing, interpreting and reporting both qualitative and quantitative data. A mixed-methods approach is a research methodology in its own right. As stated by Creswell et al. (2011), a mixed-methods research design is an exploration strategy that has its own philosophical assumptions and methods of inquiry. As a methodology, it includes philosophical assumptions to provide directions for the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources in a single study. A mixed-methods design offers a number of benefits to approaching complex research issues as it integrates philosophical frameworks of both post-positivism and interpretivism (Fetters, 2016) interweaving qualitative and quantitative data in such a way that research issues are meaningfully explained. It also offers a logical ground, methodological flexibility and an in-depth understanding of smaller cases (Maxwell, 2016). In other words, the use of mixed-methods enables researchers to answer research questions with sufficient depth and breadth (Enosh, et al., 2014) and helps generalise findings and implications of the researched issues to the whole population. For example, the quantitative approach helps a researcher to collect the data from a large number of participants; thus, increasing the possibility to generalise the findings to a wider population. The qualitative approach, on the other hand, provides a deeper understanding of the issue being investigated, honouring the voices of its participants. In other words, whereas quantitative data brings breadth to the study and qualitative data provides depth to it. Moreover, quantitative results can be triangulated with qualitative findings and vice versa. Triangulation, as a qualitative research strategy, is the use of multiple methods or data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of a research problem or to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources (Carter et al., 2014). A mixed-methods design, therefore, offers the best chance of answering research questions by combining two sets of strengths while compensating at the same time for the weaknesses of each method (Johnson, et.al. 2004). Consequently, "mixed-method research designs are becoming increasingly relevant to addressing impact research questions" (Saville, 2012, p.7). The research, consequently, sought to answer the research interrogations, as upstretched by the investigators on the fears, challenges and opportunities in, as well as effects of implementing blended learning in Mudzi District schools.

9. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The study was carried out in 4 secondary schools in Mudzi District in Kondo cluster. As such, 10 teachers from the selected schools were purposively chosen together with 4 school heads and 5 pupils per school were selected as a sample. A sample is a selection of members from the particular

population (Sekeran, 1992). In statistical terms, Sekeran (1992) opines that a population is considered to be any group of people, events or things that are of interest to the researchers and that they wish to investigate.

10. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data collection was done using interview guides designed for school heads while questionnaires were designed for teachers. Document analysis was carried out on exercise books on hybrid work. Focus group with sampled pupils was conducted as the main research instrument. The instruments in question were administered, in person to heads, teachers and pupils. The researchers explained the purpose and guidelines to respondents on how to complete and/or respond to specific instrument. Proclamation of privacy of the given information was aptly given.

A deduction of the existence of four thematic areas: the effects, fears, challenges and opportunities in blended learning was used in arranging, reviewing and analysing the collected data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All said and done, the researchers got the chance to explore the sensitive and highly emotional issues relating to the research title.

11. RESEARCH FINDINGS

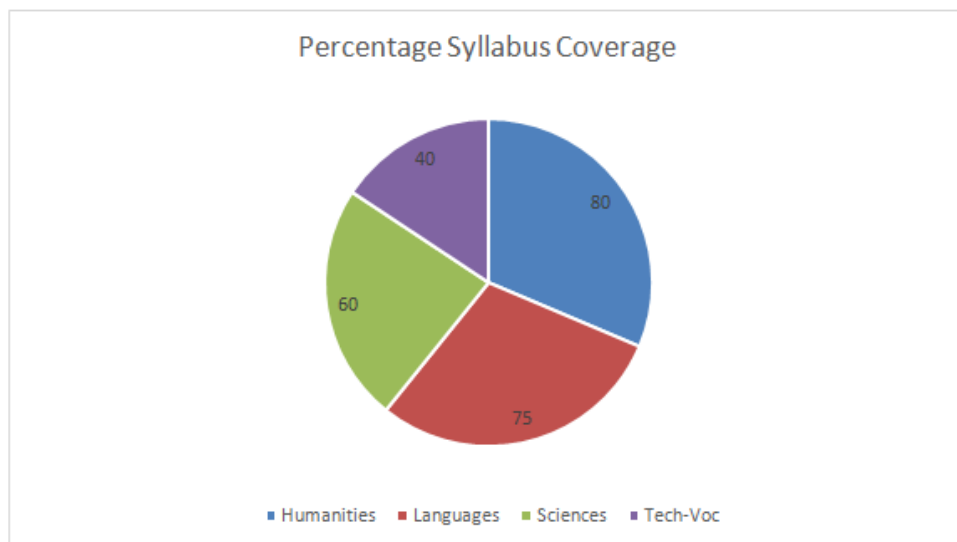
The interview questions were administered to four secondary school heads in Kondo cluster and they all responded. All the four secondary school heads in the cluster agreed that at their schools, there were other teaching and learning methods they had implemented since the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020 other than teacher-pupil classroom interaction. The table below indicates the teaching and learning methods used at four schools in the cluster.

Table1.

Teaching and learning method used	Number of schools used the method	Number of responses expected	Percentage of schools
Radio	4	4	100
WhatsApp	1	4	25
Zoom	1	4	25
Facebook	1	4	25
Home-based face to face study group	4	4	100

From table 1 above, all the schools in Kondo cluster in Mudzi District conducted radio lessons, and home-based face-to-face study groups. This clearly indicates that all the schools in Kondo cluster conducted radio and home-based face-to-face lessons as an alternative to traditional teacher-pupil classroom interaction. For zoom, WhatsApp and Facebook, only one school head in the cluster showed that his school managed to conduct these forms of online methods due to network connectivity at the school.

The findings from questionnaire guides administered to 16 teachers which were grouped into 4 learning departments showing syllabus coverage of sciences, humanities, languages and tech-voc were as follows; -



From the data presented on the pie-chart above, all the departments in Kondo cluster in Mudzi District did not manage to cover the syllabus during the Covid-19 era. The humanities department (Family and Religious Studies, History, Heritage Studies and Geography) covered the greatest portion of the syllabus of about 80 percent. Languages department (Shona and English) was second on syllabus coverage with 75 percent. Sciences (Combined Science and Mathematics) covered about 60 percent of the syllabus. Lastly, Tech-Voc (Agriculture, Building Technology and Design, Physical Education and Mass Displays, and Textiles Technology and Design) recorded the lowest syllabus coverage of 40 percent. The differences in syllabus coverage were attributed to different departmental requirements, unavailability of resources and network connectivity to facilitate the alternative teaching and learning methods during the Covid-19 period.

The findings from focus group questions administered to pupils in Kondo cluster schools of Mudzi District indicated that, there were other teaching and learning methods apart from face-to-face teacher-pupil interaction. The table 2 below shows the frequency of the alternative methods used in teaching and learning during the Covid-19 era.

Table2.

Teaching and learning methods used	Percentage of usage
Radio lessons	93
WhatsApp	87
Zoom	0
Facebook	0
Home based face-to-face study groups	72

Radio lessons were the most helpful teaching and learning method used by most the learners found in Kondo cluster schools in Mudzi District followed by WhatsApp platforms as teachers and pupils were sharing teaching and learning materials through this platform. Home based face to face study groups played a pivotal role as teachers were assisting pupils physically. Zoom and Facebook were not used because network connectivity was poor in Kondo cluster.

12. CONCLUSION

The research paper can conclude that Blended learning in the new normal, is not applicable in some rural areas where there are no network and signals like Kondo cluster in Mudzi district. This can be evidenced by the research findings obtained from the interviews, questionnaires and focus group interviews conducted by the researcher. Network connectivity, unavailability of resources to enhance blended learning, lack of financial resources of parents and guardians to purchase data bundles and mobile gadget like cell phones for the pupils and also lack of technical knowledge of teachers to grasp the modern way of imparting knowledge to the pupils.

13. RECOMMENDATIONS

The research recommends that; -

1. Government and business community to provide internet services in remote areas.
2. Government and partners should provide computers and laptops in schools.
3. Parents should be encouraged to purchase cell phones and laptops for the pupils.
4. Teachers should be capacitated on the emerging technologies as far as blended learning methods are concerned.
5. There should be continuous monitoring and evaluation of the blended learning in schools.
6. A well-defined awareness to be brought to the attention of all pupils to embrace blended learning.

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