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Distance E-Learning (DEL) and Communication Studies During Covid-19 Pandemic

Aprendizaje a Distancia en Línea (DEL) y estudios de comunicación durante la pandemia de Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the Distance E-Learning (DEL) experience of Communication students during the Coronavirus pandemic, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and measures the appropriateness of online remote technologies for media and communication courses. The data revealed several advantages that lie mainly in harnessing technologies, enhancing students' communication skills, and saving teaching and learning in times of crisis. The limits are mainly related to technical issues and computer proficiency. The findings from this study provide important input towards designing effective open online courses for communication students not only in the University of Sharjah but also in the world.

Keywords: Covid-19, distance learning, lockdown, students.

RESUMEN

Este estudio explora la experiencia de aprendizaje electrónico a distancia (DEL) de los estudiantes de comunicación durante la pandemia del coronavirus, en los Emiratos Árabes Unidos (EAU), y mide la idoneidad de las tecnologías remotas en línea para los cursos de medios y comunicación. Los datos revelaron varias ventajas que se encuentran principalmente en aprovechar las tecnologías, mejorar las habilidades de comunicación de los estudiantes y salvar la enseñanza y el aprendizaje en tiempos de crisis. Los límites están relacionados principalmente con problemas técnicos y competencia informática. Los hallazgos de este estudio proporcionan información importante para el diseño de cursos en línea, abiertos y efectivos para estudiantes de comunicación no solo en la Universidad de Sharjah sino también en el mundo.

Palabras clave: Covid-19, aprendizaje a distancia, confinamiento, estudiantes.

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INTRODUCTION

After traditional education was interrupted by quarantine measures in most countries of the world, the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic necessitated a fundamental transformation not only in terms of how people interact with each other but also in how students are taught around the world. UNESCO stated that the closure of educational institutions is affecting more than half of the world's students; Over 160 countries have implemented closings nationwide, affecting more than 87% of students worldwide (UNESCO: 2020). Out of the impasse, educational institutions around the world have resorted to Distance E-Learning (DEL) techniques.

This research focuses on the experience of DEL in higher education institutions in the UAE where the Ministry of Education decided to switch immediately to the Distance E-Learning environments in all educational institutions in the country since March 8 2020. Tertiary institutions such as University of Sharjah (UOS) have adopted a number of electronic bearings as pedagogical tools to secure the teaching process remotely. Training sessions took place both for students and faculties to learn how to interact via certain platforms. Particular systems currently widely adopted around the world, are used in the United Arab Emirates. The students of the University of Sharjah are now familiar with many of them, such as Zoom, which is a free application available for download on desktop, laptop or mobile devices; it can be used for one-on-one or group videoconferencing and employs two-way audio and video capacity (Kelly: 2020); UOS students also use for live streaming sessions Blackboard Collaborate Ultra as a real-time video conferencing tool that allows users to add files, share applications and use the interactive whiteboard, as well as Microsoft Teams, a unified communications and collaboration platform that associates continuous chatting, video meetings, file storage and application integration. The Respondus LockDown is also selected in times of examination as it is a dedicated browser that increases test delivery security in Blackboard; when using this browser during the test, students are locked into it until the examination paper is submitted for assessment, which prevents them from cheating; they cannot print, copy, go to another URL, or access other applications. Adjusted syllabi and classes schedules were then announced for students to meet with the new learning environment (Kumar & Nanda: 2019, pp.97-108).

Conceptual Framework

The steady development of communication technologies, especially the endless spread of Internet use, has created new ways of teaching. New terms such as Seamless Learning have arisen; unrestricted technology-based learning, regardless of location, time, or social environments. The term Distance Learning (DL) appeared in the same context in which the technology-based learning approach relies on the availability of learning resources anytime and anywhere; a phenomenon that has imposed major changes in learning habits and scenarios (Picciano: 2018). It is defined as a way of learning remotely without being in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom. Such learning has its roots in students learning through correspondence courses in many universities in the world (Midgley & Resalat: 2020). According to the Cambridge dictionary (2004), it is a way of studying in which you do not attend a school, college, or university, but study from where you live, usually being taught over the internet. Thus, DL relies on online courses and tutorials through various learning management systems such as Moodle and Blackboard. Courses exist in various forms and types, like video conferences, live-streaming sessions (BB. Collaborate), asynchronous audio or video lessons, assignments and projects, open schedule online courses, hybrid online courses...etc.

Online learning, also known as E-learning (electronic) is the type of learning that uses the Internet with accessibility, connectivity, flexibility and the ability to provoke different kind of learning interactions (Moore et al.: 2011, pp.129-135). For that, it is seen as an innovation that arisen in the teaching methods, not only in the learning material delivery but also in the abilities of various learners' competencies. The trend towards developing this kind of online education in various institutions over the world is usually increasing in line with developments in the field of communications and information technology.

Distance E-Learning (DEL) appeared as a solution to several obstacles that prevent a student from physically attending the classroom. It is suitable for those having work obligations, family constraints, and students who lack a convenient location to access the classes. Lately, DEL has emerged as a savior of the educational process in times of global crises like pandemics. It is often difficult to differentiate between the concept of 'Distance Learning' and 'Online Learning' by students or even some instructors. To distinguish between the two terms, it must be clarified that 'Online learning' means exposing the course tools on the internet via /Learning Management Systems (LMS); it can be used as a part of a blended learning environment, where students use online learning for a portion of a class time before transitioning to class discussion, skills practice, lecture, or projects (Schneider & Council: 2020).

Thus, the difference between Online and Distance Learning is the physical presence of students and instructors in the same place (classroom or Lab); while in online courses, a faculty member can meet his/ her students in the same place with the use of Online Learning facilities, Distance Learning requires the total physical separation. In other terms, students can still be in a classroom with an instructor and use Online Learning but they have to be separated from both instructors and peers in the Distance Learning process.

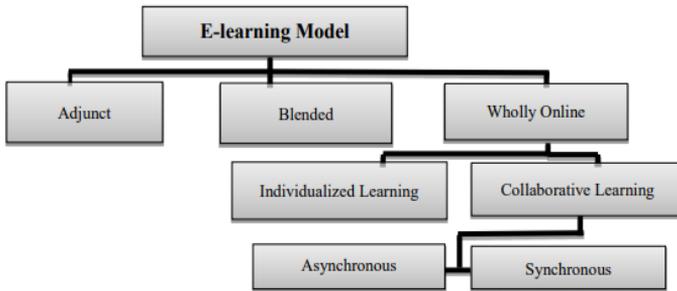


Figure.1 A. model for Using e-learning in education (Valentina & Nelly: 2015, pp.29-42)

Blended Learning (BL) is designated as a mixture of technology-enhanced learning operations combined with traditional methods (Bliuc et al.: 2007, pp.231-244); and also as 'a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online delivery of content and instruction with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace; and at least in part at a supervised brick-and-mortar location away from home'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature examination revealed richness in studies addressing topics related to the distance online learning styles and approaches. Various researches were focusing on the uses of ICTs in education many of them tended to plan mixed learning settings that focus on supplying learners with high-quality education and include the usage of TIC to promote active learning. Numerous researchers have pointed to the opportunities that new platforms provide for e-learners, encouraging instructors to adopt active learning methods as educational techniques that are able to seduce students and push them to engage in the learning process. It has pointed out that active learning encourages participation, interaction and student engagement but also requires effective teaching practice (Vaughan et al.: 2013). Cook and Dupras (2004) highlight the significance of a well-maintained intuitive and well-planned website design, in addition to incorporating self-assessment structures to guarantee learners assignment. Midgley and Resalat (2020) noted that online platforms enhance learners' interaction, giving students the ability to follow information very quickly and get involved in the course

via comments and comments. Marta-Lazo et al. (2018) focused on the use of social networking sites in MOOCs, as new ways of students' collaboration and demonstrated how the motivation and participation of students and the satisfaction with the use of the social network dialogue have a positive impact on the learning process. Canós Darós et al. (2019) explained the efficiency of social media as a virtual open space for communication, interaction and influence. In fact, social networks take many forms such as blogs, vlogs, instant messaging and virtual communities; and for learning and teaching purposes, they are used in a various contexts - language learning, writing development, after-class discussions, synchronous and asynchronous communication, community building and curricular tool.

In addition to focusing on the properties for distance learning tools and the opportunities they offer, some new approaches seemed to be more critical; Valentina and Nelly (2015) questioned the effectiveness of adopting online teaching not only in communication field but also in all offered courses in the tertiary level of studies; they pointed out many advantages and disadvantages of its implementation. Abulibdeh and Hassen (2014) tried to validate a model of student interactions, information technology self-efficacy, and student achievement through their applied study at the University Of Sharjah; their findings showed that student' interaction can be predictors of student achievement but self-efficacy can only promote student achievement via student interactions in an e-learning environment. Some studies were concerned with the academic integrity of DEL compared to face-to-face teaching methods as well as the impact student get during their distance online learning experience (Harrison et al.: 2017). Gewin (2020) described helpful tips in the transition to online learning; she noted the importance of creating more focused online learning lessons and stressed some key points, including the benefit of recordings of live-video conferencing to ensure students consultation outside of classes times, but states that live conferences should not be used for all educational activities due to poor networks. Yetik et al. (2020) exposed the influence of the open learning methods in the way communication courses are delivered; researchers demonstrated how Web-based course delivery technology has provided an ideal platform for teaching practical media and journalism courses such as LMS, Kahoot, Quizlet, Crowdsignal, etc.

Given the current situation, the latest studies have been involved in how to invest in the opportunities provided by new technologies to sustain the education process in such difficult times. In fact, a number of researchers have anticipated a significant growth in demand for online learning technologies years ago as millions of people in the world have access to the internet (Shuck: 2016), but the global health crisis accelerated the process. DEL becomes a refuge in the time of the Coronavirus. Many national and international academic institutions have collected resources to ensure continuing education during the epidemic. Many countries found themselves driven to innovate and transform their curricula in line with the requirements of distance education due to the fact that it was always considered as an alternative process capable of replacing traditional classrooms (Zhang et al.: 2004, p.75).

We conclude from the above that studies on distance learning technologies have witnessed development over the years, where the first researches focused on describing digital technologies and their advantages in the education, while others addressed the positives of adopting platforms and social networking sites as learning tools and examined their effects on the educational process, especially in enhancing interactivity. Specific critical studies posed the question about its role in developing the teaching and learning methods, and stated the obstacles faced by students. Finally, the lately published studies focused on the need to adopt distance learning to overcome the global environmental crisis and to ensure the continuity of education. Some research also conveyed experiences in this matter (Snoussi: 2019, pp.1-8).

In this study, researchers chose to highlight the Distance E-Learning experience for communication students in the University Of Sharjah to determine their impressions about the collaborative learning approaches chosen for them during DEL operations and measure the appropriateness of the online methods for mass communication and public relations courses. The research problem is formulated as follows: How communication students perceive and evaluate their Distance E-Learning experience at the University Of Sharjah? And the aims are related to:

- Evaluate the first DEL experience activated in the College of Communication at the University of Sharjah;
- Define the components of DEL as a collaborative space for building knowledge for communications studies;
- Explore the limits of DEL, if any, and suggest improvements to create a collaborative learning model for media students.

The present research is based on four (4) research questions RQ, formulated as follows:

- RQ1. What are the advantages of Distance E-Learning?
- RQ2. What are the limitations of Distance E-Learning?
- RQ3. What are the general improvements required to make the Distance E-Learning process more effective for communication students in the UOS?
- RQ4. How do the Distance E-Learning approaches fit the communication courses, and foster the knowledge construction on the field of Media studies?

This research is based on the Online Collaborative Learning (OCL) Theory, proposed by Linda Harasim which focuses on the facilities of the Internet to provide learning environments that foster collaboration and knowledge building; Internet is therefore used, as a means to reshape formal, non-formal, and informal education for the Knowledge Age (Harasim: 2012). The OCL Theory stipulates that there are three (3) phases of knowledge construction through DEL:

- Idea generating: the brainstorming phase;
- Idea organizing: the phase where ideas are compared, analyzed, and categorized through group online discussion and argument;
- Intellectual convergence: the phase of synthesis and consensus occurrence, through an assignment, essay...etc. (Harasim: 2012).

On this premise, the research will explore to what extent studying in a Collaborative Distance E-Learning environment, have really fostered the collaboration and knowledge construction for communication students at UOS, enabling them to generate and organize their ideas, as well as improve the convergence of their intelligence during the quarantine period of Coronavirus pandemic, by providing them Live streaming sessions and video recordings via Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, Online group discussions, and inverted online classrooms via Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

METHODS

Authors adopted for this research mixed methods; an online questionnaire was randomly addressed to (n=140) students enrolled in the College of Communication (UOS). The questions were developed in consultation with experts to ensure that the relevant content is correct. Reliability was verified by performing a pilot survey. The questionnaire was designed and distributed through Microsoft Forms, then Data was collected and copied into SPSS for deeper analysis; it included four (4) parts: Participant' profile (sex, level of computer literacy and the number of hours studied via DEL methods), positive sides perceived during the DEL experience, negative sides perceived during the DEL experience and participants' suggestions to improve their DEL experience and make it more constructive and suitable to communication studies. A five-point scale was adopted (ranging from (1) "I strongly agree" to (5) "I strongly disagree"). The data collection period was from 17 to 27 of March, 2020.

Parallel to that, three (3) online focus group discussions (OFGD) were conducted with total number of (30) students enrolled in the College of Communication at UOS. Discussions took place during the week 22 to 26 March 2020. The number of participants for each group was as follows:

- OFGD1: (10) participants enrolled in the main campus of Sharjah City (females).

- OFGD2: (10) participants enrolled in the Branch of Khorfakkan City (females).
- OFGD3: (10) participants enrolled on the main campus of Sharjah City (males).

No male student is enrolled in the College of Communication' Khorfakkan Branch. Authors chose the online focus group discussions (OFGD) to overcome the limitations of a traditional in-person model; Due to Coronavirus pandemic, students are no longer allowed to attend traditional face-to-face classes or meetings.

RESULTS

Survey Results

Table.1 shows the sample composition. Participants answered the survey questions are of female 'majority (68.6%) as the khorfakkan branch only contains female sections. (43.6%) of the participants claimed have completed 11 to 20 remote online sessions in time of the survey' distribution. Respondents' computer proficiency seems to be reasonable as 35.7% claimed it good; 32.9% very good and 23.6% excellent. Only 7.9% declared being weak in manipulating computers.

		n.	and %
Gender	Male	44	(31.4%)
	Female	96	(68.6%)
Number of online sessions	Less than 10 sessions	54	(38.6%)
	11 to 20 sessions	61	(43.6%)
	More than 20 sessions	25	(17.9%)
computer literacy	Weak	11	(7.9)
	Good	50	(35.7%)
	Very Good	46	(32.9)
	Excellent	33	(23.6%)

Table 1. Sample Composition

As an answer to the research question 1 about the advantages of DEL, data collected from students (table 2) showed "*e-learning makes teaching and learning more effective because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation*", as the major perceived positive side of remote online learning, with 84.3%, "strongly agree" and "agree" (Mean = 4.20). The statement "*E-learning is interesting and useful while face-to-face teaching is dangerous (Corona Virus crisis)*" was perceived as the second advantage with 79.2% of respondents, "strongly agree" and "agree" included; (Mean =4.13), while the statement "*E-learning is better for studying according to my own space*" was perceived the third advantage, with 67.2% "strongly agree" and "agree" included (Mean =3.85). The advantages from 4 to 7 are indicating that e-learning helps students in "*developing their knowledge of computer and internet*", "*using time effectively*", "*getting feedback from instructors*", and "*enhancing communications*".

Results referred that the students gave more attention to the advantages of using different new tools in education which gives them more flexibility and security. They also are interested in new tools to enhance their ability in communicating and building their knowledge.

n.	Positive sides	n.	strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	strongly disagree	M.	Std.D.
1	E-Learning makes teaching and learning	140	56 40%	62 44.3%	16 11.4%	6 4.3%	0 0%	4.20	.806

	more effective because it integrates all forms of media, print, audio, video, and animation..								
2	E-learning is interesting and useful while face-to-face teaching is dangerous (Corona Virus crisis)	140	59 42.1%	52 37.1%	19 13.6%	8 5.7%	0 0%	4.13	.951
3	E-learning is better for studying according to my own space.	140	40 28.6%	54 38.6%	34 24.3%	9 6.4%	3 2.1%	3.85	.981
4	E-learning helps me to develop knowledge of computer and internet.	140	43 30.7%	52 37.1%	19 13.6%	24 17.1%	2 1.4%	3.79	1.105
5	E-learning helps me to use time effectively.	140	33 23.6%	64 45.7%	22 15.7%	10 7.1%	11 7.9%	3.70	1.142
6	E-learning helps me to get the feedback by my instructor through Blackboard.	140	39 27.9%	67 47.9%	26 18.6%	2 1.4%	6 4.3%	3.94	.954
7	E-Learning improves communication between students and teachers.	140	29 20.7%	65 46.4%	26 18.6%	17 12.1%	3 2.1%	3.71	.998

Table 2. Perceived positive sides of Distance e-learning (DEL) experience.

Concerning the correlations between the perceived online learning advantages and both level of computer experience and the taken number of online sessions, tables (3) and (4) showed that there is no correlation between the level of computer experience and perceived online learning advantages and that there is also no correlation between the taken number of online sessions and the perceived online learning advantages. These results indicate that participants in all levels of computer experience and in all types of online sessions taken are aware of the benefits of e-learning. These results may also reflect the standard e-learning pattern used in the College of Communication (all departments and programs included).

	Advantages	level of computer literacy
Positive sides	Pearson Correlation	.203*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016
	N	140
level of computer experience	Pearson Correlation	.203*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.016
	N	140

Table 3. Correlations between perceived positive sides of DEL and the level of computer literacy

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

	Advantages	No. of online sessions
Positive sides	Pearson Correlation	.139
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.101
	N	140
No. of online sessions	Pearson Correlation	.139
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.101
	N	140

Table 4. Correlations between perceived positive sides of DEL and number of taken online sessions

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

T. test between male and female students in their perceptions of DEL positive sides, showed that there is a significant difference between male and female students concerning their perceived DEL positive sides (Table 5); female students were more positive (Mean= 28.3, n= 96) than males (Mean=25.15, n= 44). The results reflect the differences between the male and female lifestyles in Arab societies; men are likely to stay out of the house for a long time to work, buy household items and to meet friends in cafes...etc.; while women are required to stay at home more often, except if they work or study (Snoussi et al.: 2019, pp.28-36).

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Positive sides	Equal variances assumed	.469	.494	-3.841	138	.000
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.893	86.341	.000

Table 5. T. test between male and female students in their perceived of DEL positive sides

The research Question 2 was devoted to the main limitations of DEL. Data showed (table 6) that the first limitation is: "Learning in a real classroom and from the book is more understandable than the Distance online courses" with 62.15%, "strongly agree" and "agree" included; (mean = 3.71). The second limitation is: "Slow internet connectivity and technical issues are the major problems I face in using e-learning environment" with 35.5%, "strongly agree" and "agree" (the mean = 3.52). The third position for the limitation is shared between "I feel socially isolated when I use e-learning" (mean = 3.36), and "Both synchronous and asynchronous interaction through Blackboard, are less effective than face-to-face interaction in the classroom" (mean =3.36). Fourth to sixth limitations are: "The instructions provided on Blackboard are difficult to follow", "E-Learning is difficult to handle some times due to my lack of knowledge about blended learning techniques", and "E-Learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism".

The results indicated that a large number of communication students still prefer traditional teaching methods; They claim to be missing an opportunity to practice their skills in applied courses such as TV photography, TV directing, stories, program presentation and media writing, which are usually performed as laboratory training. Some participants claim facing technical problems such as computer proficiency while others prefer the face to face interaction with peers and instructors.

n.	Negative sides	n.	strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	strongly disagree	M.	Std.D.
1	Learning in a real classroom and from the book is more understandable than the online courses.	140	35 25.0%	52 37.1%	37 26.4%	9 6.4%	7 5.0%	3.71	1.070
2	Slow internet connectivity and technical issues are the major problems I face in using e-learning environment.	140	37 26.4%	38 27.1%	33 23.6%	25 17.9%	7 5.0%	3.52	1.202
3	I feel socially isolated when I use e-learning.	140	15 10.7%	54 38.6%	44 31.4	20 14.3%	7 5.0%	3.36	1.018
4	Both synchronous and asynchronous interaction through Blackboard, are less effective than face-to-face interaction in the classroom.	140	24 17.1%	43 30.7%	37 26.4%	31 22.1%	5 3.6	3.36	1.113
5	The instructions provided on Blackboard are difficult to follow.	140	11 7.9%	60 42.9%	36 25.7%	24 17.1%	9 6.4%	3.29	1.048
6	E-Learning is difficult to handle some times due to my lack of knowledge about blended learning techniques.	140	13 9.3%	52 37.1%	48 34.3%	15 10.7%	12 8.6%	3.28	1.060

7	E-Learning facilitates cheating and plagiarism	140	12 8.6%	51 36.4%	34 24.3%	32 22.9%	11 7.9%	3.15	1.112
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Table 6. Perceived limitations of DEL experience

Correlations between perceived online learning advantages and the level of computer experience and the online sessions taken Tables (7) and (8) showed that there is no correlation between perceived limitations of DEL experience, neither with the students' level of computer knowledge nor with the number of online sessions taken. The results indicate that participants at all levels of computer experience and types of online sessions are aware of some of the limitations of distance e-learning, especially related to the lack of training opportunities in practical courses.

	Advantages	level of computer literacy
Negative sides	Pearson Correlation 1	-.75
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.380
	N	140
level of computer literacy	Pearson Correlation .075	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.380
	N	140

Table 7. Correlations between negative sides of DEL and the level of computer Literacy

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

	Advantages	Number of online sessions
Negative sides	Pearson Correlation 1	-.128
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.131
	N	140
Number of online sessions.131	Pearson Correlation -.128	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.131
	N	140

Table 8. Correlations between negative sides of DEL and the number of taken online sessions

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

T. test between male and female students in their perceived DEL positive sides revealed that there is no significant difference between male and female students in their perceived DEL limitations (Table 9). Overall, both male and female students consider the distance e-learning experience to be positive. At the same time but they stress that traditional teaching methods remain indispensable in applied communication studies.

		F	Sig.	t	df.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Negative sides	Equal variances assumed	.621	.432	2.220	138	.028
	Equal variances not assumed			2.469	109.241	.015

Table 9. t.test between male and female students and their perception of the DEL negative sides' experience

The proposed improvements to DEL process that the research question 3 inquired were mainly on technical issues. The data showed that the first required improvement is: "All technical problems must be resolved quickly" with 76.4% "strongly agree" and "agree" included; (mean = 4.14); followed by "The number of internet labs trainings should be increased" with 69.3% "strongly agree" and "agree" included; (mean = 3.85). The third stipulated improvement is "Our college should increase the number of online distance courses" with 64.3% "strongly agree" and "agree" included; (mean = 3.83). The authors note that the proposed most vital improvement is related to technical aspects, in particular the claim to enhance participants' skills in manipulating programs and platforms used for distance education. The blended learning approach was finally recommended due to the great satisfaction of the DEL experience as a whole.

n.	Suggestions:	n.	strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	strongly disagree	M.	Std.D.
1	All technical problems should be solved quickly	140	55 39.3%	52 37.1%	31 22.1%	2 1.4%	0 0%	4.14	.810
2	Our college should increase the number of online distance courses.	140	32 22.9%	65 46.4%	33 23.6%	7 5.0%	3 2.1%	3.85	.913
3	The number of internet labs trainings should be increased	140	36 25.7%	54 38.6%	46 32.9%	1 .7%	3 2.1%	3.83	.889
4	E-learning training should be provided to all students even after the corona virus crisis	140	29 20.7%	70 50%	27 19.3%	11 7.9%	3 2.1%	3.79	.933
5	Rewarding the distinguished users of e-learning.	140	24 17.1%	68 48.6%	41 29.3%	5 3.6%	2 1.4%	3.76	.828
6	Our department should reduce the number of distance online courses after Corona virus crisis	140	16 11.4%	55 39.3%	42 30%	21 15%	6 4.3%	3.39	1.015

Table 10. Students' suggestions to improve their DEL experience

To sum up the survey's results, the most important positive aspects of DEL's experience for communication studies participants are the opportunity to use the multimedia environment to diversify their learning experience and make it more attractive and exciting, in addition to its capabilities to deal with difficult conditions, especially the pandemic of Corona Virus. Results showed that female students prefer distance e-learning approaches more than males. This can be understood by referring to the general context in which

the respondents live: The quarantine situation worries male participants more as mentioned previously in the research, because it limits their movement outside the home in which they are not used to staying much. Slow Internet connectivity and other technical issues, were the main obstacles that made participants criticize their DEL experience and claim that learning in a real classroom is more understandable than the Distance online environment. To this end, the proposals revolve around the technical conditions for DEL to improve via additional training courses for better computer and LMS proficiency as well as mixed methods that combine face-to-face teaching and learning processes to enhance the quality of communication studies.

OFGD Results

To get more accurate and deeper information that helps authors point the main advantages and limitations of DEL experience in the College of Communication during Coronavirus pandemic (RQ1 and 2), as well as pointing out the suitability level of DEL process with knowledge building for Communication studies and eventual improvements suggested (RQ3 and 4), three (3) Online Focus Group Discussions (OFGD) were conducted.

To resume the data collected in this regard, the authors decided to merge the results of the three OFGD's in a unified data. Words used by participants to describe their opinions were approximately similar in the three sessions.

FGD-UOS*-(MC and Khor. B.)*	
Advantages	Listen to the lecture records, Comfortable setting, the focus is better, Retrieve lecture records as needed, the place is more comfortable, overcome shyness and tension, Solve transportation problems, keep learning even in bad weather, create new opportunities for people with disabilities, smoother learning for those working, variety of teaching methods, providing more options for the students, self-discipline, integrate and concentrate more into the lectures, foster a sense of student responsibility, keep abreast of technological development, an opportunity for change, time-saving.
limits	The internet is down, sound problems, the device' hangs, not suitable for some applied communication courses, it reduces opportunities for creativity and innovation.

Table 11. OFGD results in the advantages and limits of Distance E-learning Experience

*FGD-UOS-MC: Focus Group Discussion- University Of Sharjah- Main Campus;

* Khor. B: Khorfakkan Branch.

According to the OFGD, the advantages of Distance e-learning experience (RQ1) could be summarized on three (3) main categories, as follows:

- *The technology assesses:* LMS can provide diversified multimedia space where instructors can submit any kind of material, such as Word text, slides, videos recordings...etc. The software also provides the ability to save all recorded lessons, assignments, announcements, and exams; the student can upload his answers without the necessity to hand it in hand like in the traditional type of education. This point was raised in the survey answers as the most positive side claimed by participants.
- *Student skills enhancement:* The distance e-learning experience enhances the students' technological skills, whether in terms of computer literacy and the use of software available for the purpose or in terms of developing the students' communication skills with the instructor and peers. Many female participants emphasized the fact that they cross the barriers of dread and shame to speak across the screen and participate in virtual discussions. Another skill related to time management and disposal was raised by participants.
- *Savior in times of difficulties and crises:* The third point is divided into two parts. Distance e-learning appears to be a rescue for students who face some personal difficulties such as physical disabilities, transportation problems, (especially for students who do not have a driver's license), and work restrictions

for students who are employees. It also emerges as a solution to the various crises that a student can live with, such as health crises (Coronavirus pandemic) and environmental (volcanoes, earthquakes, and floods).

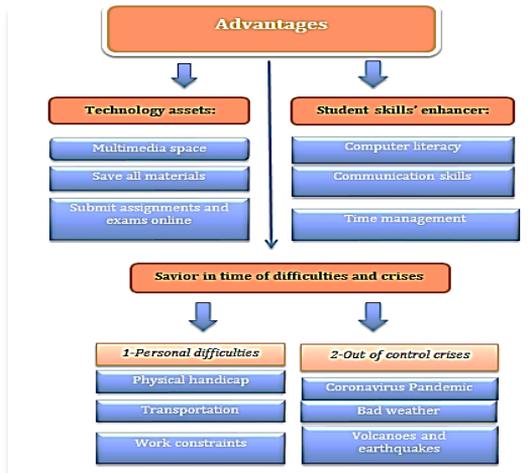


Figure 2. Advantages of DEL Experience from Media students' perspective

Meanwhile, limitations (RQ2) are summed up as follows: The major obstacle is related to the technical aspect, which is the most common element, mentioned by all respondents (in the survey and OFGD' responses), including internet interruptions, sound problems, and device hangs. Another limit stated by the participants, referring to their field of study (specialization). The Radio and Television Program students expressed their dissatisfaction with the inability to continue doing their training in the studio and the Mac-Laboratory (for the audiovisual production and editing sessions). Besides, some participants of the Public Relations Program complained about the inability to present their graduation project exhibition, knowing that PR. Graduation projects may include organizing and implementing conferences and exhibitions.

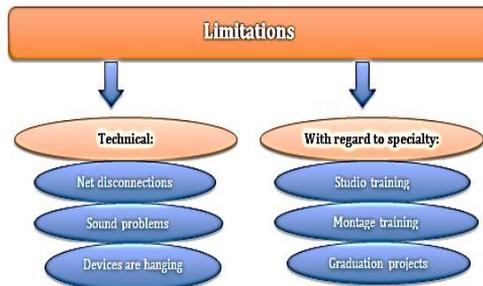


Figure3. Limitations of DEL Experience from Media students' perspective

Regarding the suggestions gathered from the participants during OFGD on how to improve the quality of the remote e-learning experience (RQ3), the data revealed more in-depth and detailed results compared to the survey data in this regard.

FGD -UOS- (MC and Khor. B*.)	
Suggestions to improve the quality of DEL.	Private lessons, the introduction of applications and web-based courses for Radio and TV training using new applications for the final exams, training students and instructors to use LMS more efficiently, promote students to interact through group discussions, distributing new devices to students, social media campaigns for Graduation projects,

Table 12. OFGD suggestions to improve the Distance E-learning Experience in Communication Studies

*FGD-UOS-MC: Focus Group Discussion- University Of Sharjah- Main Campus;

*Khor. B: Khorfakkan Branch.

Participants in the Online Focus Group Discussions made several improvement suggestions (RQ4), the most important of which are:

- Including private online lessons for students, just like in Smart Hamdan University (Dubai),
- Providing some software applications and platforms that include a virtual TV studio,
- Intensifying IT training to improve their computer proficiency,
- Intensifying online group discussions to enhance interaction in the online sessions,
- Distributing Laptops for Media students including applications and software they use, like final cut, Avid for editing...etc.

Besides, participants claimed that the theoretical courses are best suited for Distance Education as they are. They called for continuing the same experience of Distance E-learning with the theoretical courses included in their study plan like: Communication theories, Research methods, Introduction to Mass Communication, Information society, and Media laws and Ethics. Regarding the practical and project-based courses, participants asked for a:

- Web-based online courses for Journalism program (integrating software specialized in the writing, graphic design...etc.),
- New methods for Radio and TV program online courses that include virtual studios' tutorials.

Participants enrolled in the Public Relations program proposed new forms of graduation projects' accomplishment such as: Online awareness and marketing campaigns (executed via social media) and Video-conference' seminars.

DISCUSSION

While findings of this research cannot be generalized due to the limited number of the sample, the claimed advantages of DEL environment meet with what has been found by many previous international studies; Valentina and Nelly (2015) mentioned flexibility of time and place of online course delivery and receipt. They also addressed the same points raised by OFGD participants who emphasized on the role of DEL in fostering collaboration and knowledge building, especially how remote learning techniques helped them remove barriers that can hinder class-participation (like fear of talking to colleagues), motivating students to interact with others as well as exchanging and respecting different perspectives. The assumption made by participants specifying that it is when students actively construct knowledge, through their participation, that learning is most effective, is also defended by many educators who consider that it is when the students are asked to synthesize, evaluate, and create, that opportunities for higher-order thinking arise and deep learning and retention is most likely to occur (Biggs & Tang: 2007).

Meanwhile, the OFGD results endorsing DEL's potential as a skill enhancer and best support for generating and organizing ideas as well as intellectual convergence were consistent with what was stipulated in the Online Collaborative Learning theory (OCL); Harasin emphasized the same benefits of the transition to

teaching online and stressed the power of the Internet as a collaborative space. Jiang and Rafeeq (2018) also reached several common positive aspects while using LMS, and got similar suggestions and recommendations from relevant respondents on key improvements needed to make DEL more effective for Communication studies, such as the need to use DEL platforms most in line with Media courses and simultaneously implement smart learning pedagogies for mass communication and public relations classes. Among the main suggested improvements participants made, was to sustain a part of communication courses online, mostly theoretical, after the quarantine is ended. This statement meets with what was stressed by Jowseya et al. (2020) where it was emphasized that when introduced in a thoughtful manner, blended learning can positively affect student achievement, particularly when used to manage and support distance education.

CONCLUSION

Findings of the research revealed many perceived positive and negative sides related to DEL experience in the College of Communication (UOS); advantages lie in enhancing students' communication skills, saving teaching and learning in times of crisis and effective usage of multimedia as educational tools. The limits are mainly related to technical issues and computer proficiency as well as the absence of training in practical courses. The respondents validated that Internet is an effective tool to provide learning environment that enhances collaboration and knowledge building and made several recommendations to make Distance E-Learning more relevant to communication studies, such as using platforms that are more in line with applied media courses, field training, and graduation projects. The results of this study provide an important input towards designing effective open online courses for communication students. Finally, this research focused only on the experience of communication students at the University Of Sharjah (UAE); The pertinence of the results obtained which provide an important entry point for the design of effective blended collaborative learning approaches for communication studies, has prompted authors to decide to enlarge the sample and include similar contexts in the future studies.

Finally, it has to be emphasized that in these unprecedented times (the COVID-19 pandemic), there is a shared feeling of the need to continue a normal life despite everything and prepare for a time when life will return to normal. Since we all learn to work remotely, it is natural that the ability to use DEL methods will be strengthened and preserved, at least partially, after the end of the global health crisis. Indeed, virtual learning platforms have rewritten and reinvented the teaching fundamentals forever as many universities in the world, including the University of Sharjah, have officially announced new measures to implement permanent blended learning approaches. Certainly, the College of Communication (UOS) will take into consideration the recommendations made by participants in this study to provide a mixed model that is more appropriate to the specialization and meets the needs of Communication learners.

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