IMPACT OF DISTANCE LEARNING TECHNOLOGY ON ONLINE EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

Hevron Alshurideh ³, Muhammad Turki Alshurideh ¹, Barween Al Kurdi ², Shireen Hikmat Alkurdi ⁴

¹ Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan, Amman 11942, Jordan. Hevronalshurideh@gmail.com

² Department of Marketing, School of Business, The University of Jordan, Amman 11942, Jordan, Orcid [0000-0002-7336-381X], m.alshurideh@ju.edu.jo

³ Department of Marketing, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, The Hashemite University, P.O. Box 330127, Zarqa 13133, Jordan. Orcid [0000-0002-0825-4617], barween@hu.edu.jo

⁴ Humanities Department, Faculty of Engineering Technology. Al-Balqa Applied University, shireenkurdi@bau.edu.jo

ABSTRACT

Distance learning technologies have become mainstream due to the emergence of coronavirus (COVID-19) and its variants over the last few months. Both companies and institutions are now resorting to using technology for their operations, whether to train their workforce or educate their students. This research has devised full stack distance learning technology platform to enable a factious educational institutions or corporation to enable its usage and effectively demonstrate how technology could be utilized to fully transform learning online. As a result, the functioning of how a university or learning institution could take their learning online away from their physical medium, thereby insulting themselves from the risk of suffering contagion due to the coronavirus while continuing their operations and business as usual.

Keywords: Distance Learning Technology, Online Education Performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the years, businesses and commerce have adapted and adjusted to the changing circumstances [1], [2]. In 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic affected the world, the concept of 'social distancing' became mainstream [3]–[5]. Reasonably, activities that involved human interaction were now restricted, and as a result, many companies suffered significantly [6]. Many small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) suffered failures and had to shut down operations and exit the market due to their inability to operate via social-distancing friendly models [7], [8].

Restaurants and hotels too were affected, as were schools and colleges that did not have the infrastructure to continue their operations via online or digital modes [9], [10]. The advent of the pandemic signalled the lack of preparedness among businesses and commercial entities, many of which were not prepared to face a pandemic or situational disaster such as COVID-19 [11]–[13]. As a result, it was that their owners suffered losses since their fixed costs continued while their sales dropped almost fully due to the lack of customers in their premises [14]. Schools and offices were forced to let their students and employees stay in at their residences, which disrupted the former's learning and the latter's livelihoods [15]–[17].

As such, the 'work-from-home' or 'WFH' model became relevant and prominent in 2020 as many businesses eventually found that they could continue their employees' working through online collaboration technologies [18], [19]. Several firms worldwide invested in upgrading their infrastructure to ensure that they could continue to operate and remain in business [20]. This marks a critical step, because it wasn't certain about how long the pandemic would last or may continue to affect the world [21].

In 2021, the situation still largely remains the same; although global institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO) have been active in guiding nations towards getting their populations vaccinated, new variants of the virus such as the 'Alpha' variant, the 'Delta' variant, and now, the 'Omicron' variant continue to ravage the masses [22]–[24].

While the pandemic has caused damage worth trillions to the global economy [25], [26], it is an ongoing problem that calls for intervention at both the governmental as well as the individual levels [27], [28]. In schools and universities, distance learning technologies are becoming more relevant and necessary than ever before, as students' future continues to be at stake due to the

virus's contagion [29]–[32]. While it is not completely possible to eliminate the impacts of coronavirus for students, distance learning technologies could reduce it and improve the manageability [33].

Therefore, this research encapsulates the strategies to be implemented by educational institutions revolving around the business management of implementing an idea that may boost the ability of the firm (whether educational institution or commercial entity) to better handle itself and its operations amidst situations produced as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19). Hence, this research elaborates on the idea of various distance learning technologies on the basis of prior literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Distance learning technologies may become well-known now due to the compulsion of various institutions and firms to rely on them, but they have been present in the global marketplace since years ago [34], [35]. Research by suggests that distance learning technologies have not been utilized much for a significant part of their overall existence in the corporate and academic contexts until late 1960s; however, following then, distance learning technologies gradually began to be adopted by institutions [36], [37].

2.1. History of Distance Learning Technologies

Prior to the advent of distance learning technologies, the concept of 'distance education' was relevant. As per [38]–[40] the earliest instances of distance education can be traced back to 1800 when the University of Chicago initiated their first major correspondence program in the US wherein the instructor and students were located at different locations [41], [42]. The incidence or occurrence of distance learning took place because of the efforts of various parties to make education accessible to the non-elite sections of the society [43]. Prior to 1800, education was primarily considered a privilege and was expensive and hence couldn't be afforded by the non-nobility in society [44]–[46].

Initially, correspondence courses and distance learning programs were not openly accepted because the nobility considered it an insult to them [47], [48]. Research by [49] suggests that distance learning remained without technology for a significant period and correspondence was limited to books and personal visits by students at their respective educational institutions [50]–[52].

Following the events of World War, I (1914-1918), the increase in the usage of radios enabled a relatively new mode of communication that was later picked up in correspondence study [53]–[55]. The earliest instances of usage of technology in distance learning (thereby creating the distance learning technologies that are primarily used today) could be traced back to the Open University in Britain in 1970 and the innovative applications of media by Charles WEDEMEYER in 1986 at the University of Wisconsin [56], [57]. Following those events, educational institutions gradually picked up on distancing learning technologies [58], [59].

2.2. Key Elements of Distance Learning

Research by [60] explains that there are six dimensions of distance learning including:

- Distance between the instructor and student (as being separated geographically)
- Presence or influence of an educational institution (to oversee the transaction between the instructor and student)
- Application of media to connect student and teacher (this was limited in the pre-2000 era)
- Two-way transaction of communication (receiving and sending information between the individuals)
- Individually receiving education as opposed to being grouped (in the early days, distance education wasn't as developed to handle large numbers of students at once)
- Educators in industrialized capacity (rather than individuals, those educators were affiliated with some institution and hence used the resources of the latter to impart education to the students)

In the modern distance learning, many of those continue to hold true except point five [61], [62], because distance learning now enables entire courses to be delivered to students over digital means [63].

2.3. Modern Trends in Distance Learning Technologies

In the current era, distance learning technologies have become the commonplace for both educational institutions as well as for-profit firms considering to upgrade their workforces' knowledge [64], [65]. The rise of coronavirus (COVID-19) and its subsequent transition into a full-scale pandemic may have accelerated the shift towards digital-based modes of learning, but it

hasn't been, by far, the only factor to have caused the same [66]–[68]. Some major factors to be considered with regards to trends in modern distance learning technologies include the following:

- Several universities and educational institutions now have distance learning programs for their students, and this enables both parties to gain. Students have a relatively low-cost way of acquiring further education that may enable them to find better jobs and/or progress in their career, while educational institutions can earn more from their workforce and operations without having to invest in capital expenditure such as renting or leasing more physical space to house a larger student body [69], [70].
- Subjects that are fundamental such as Calculus I, English for Business, etc. aren't too specific and hence can be delivered over online modes. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, those courses are being delivered online, although the universities may have collected the full payment for them [71]–[73].
- Various reasons exist for why it is advisable for students to not step out of their homes during the coronavirus pandemic era. New variants continue to afflict masses, and vaccinations taken previously may not be as effective for or against new variants [74]. Hence, health-wise, it is considerably important that students continue their lessons and/or education through distance learning technologies to avoid coming into contact with any potentially infected individuals and hence minimizing their risk of contracting the virus themselves [75], [76].

2.4.Management Idea Influenced by COVID-19

For the purpose of this research, it is assumed that the report is a reference document delivered to the shareholders of an educational institution by the management or board of directors [77]–[79]. The chosen topic that the fictitious educational institution aims to adopt is distance learning technologies[80]; therefore, it consists of about five distance learning technologies that may be adopted by the management and the firm or institution [81], [82]. Following the explanation of those five distance learning technologies, a brief discussion is provided to help the readers understand how they may aid the resilience of the firm and their operations against the onslaught of COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 [83]–[85].

2.5. Proposed Model of Modern Learning

As far as education and learning are concerned, the author suggests that they can be classified into two main segments or aspects, including in-class learning, and out-of-class learning [86]. It may be argued that learning itself is a continuous process, and students continue to gain knowledge within the classroom [87], [88], but also outside it through various media or channels as well as environmental stimuli. The illustration below demonstrates how the same may be structured [89].

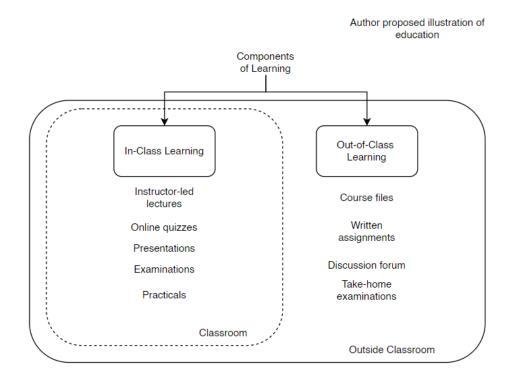


Figure 1: Modern Learning [90].

Hence, the author proposes that learning has to continue happening whether learners are in the classroom or not; with the advent of distance learning technologies, the primary objective of the institution is to ensure that they can find technological platforms responsible for ensuring that the in-class learning technologies are handled effectively [91], [92].

2.6. Proposed Distance Learning Technologies

In the model proposed above to illustrate the components of learning, the various parts shall be complimented by various platforms and distance learning technologies as the author suggests [93]–[95]. Hence, this subsection shall have parts that would necessarily include the potential products

that when combined together may form a distance learning stack responsible for fully digitalizing learning for the institution or firm [96].

2.6.1. Learning Management Systems (LMS)

The learning management system or LMS is the foundation or bedrock of the 'universe' of online learning [97]. It is impossible to determine or define a distance learning technology suite. For the firm chosen in this report, the LMS shall include two components, including the in-class component as well as the out-of-class component [98], [99]. However, more so than being a dedicated tool, it shall be more of a platform which may serve as the foundation for other integrations of various tools and technologies [100].

At the basic level, LMS includes the following features that may help support online education or distance learning [101]:

- 1. Unified platform that is accessible by students, instructors, and other authorized parties through the means of a login ID (usually their registered e-mail ID or username) and password [102].
- 2. Dashboard interface that presents all the necessary information related to the course on one screen, including due dates of assignments, courses enrolled for, instructors' names and details, grades, lecture timings, course files, etc [103].
- 3. Integration with third-party collaboration and productivity tools to enable students to benefit from the same without having to exit the platform.
- 4. Discussion forum and e-mail inbox integrated into the portal to enable students, instructors, and other authorized parties to communicate with each other seamlessly.

Two of the proposed or valid learning management systems (LMS) are Blackboard (BB) and Moodle. Either LMS may be deployed by the firm to enable distance learning technologies to be used by our students [104], [105].

2.6.2. Collaboration Tools

Although the learning management system (LMS) would provide the foundation for the distance learning technology stack, the two components (in-class learning component and out-of-the-class learning component) need to be considered for replacement of their physical forms with online

replacements [106], [107]. The author suggests that collaboration tools may be used to handle the in-class learning component of the distance learning technology.

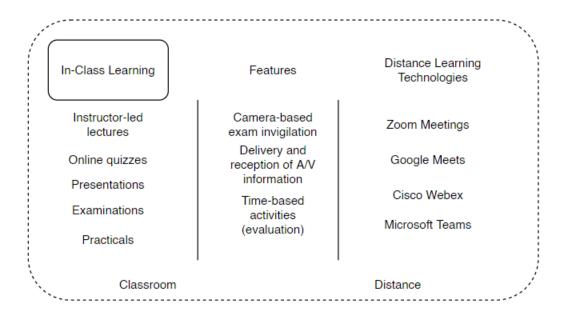


Figure 2: Collaboration tools [108].

Collaboration tools are technologies that enable students to communicate and work together in some form to achieve some meaningful benefit collectively [109]–[111]. Therefore, collaboration tools enable more than one student to work together and hence, because learning now happens to be collaborative, the usage of collaboration tools cannot be ignored or undermined [112], [113]. The features that the collaboration tools must have include the ability to invigilate students via camera (webcam), delivery and reception of audio-visual information [114], and time-based activities such as quizzes, exams, and tests that may be conducted by the instructor [115], [116]. Some of the features here are enabled through or via distance learning technologies such as Zoom Meeting, Google Meets, Cisco WEBEX, and Microsoft Teams such as the instructor-led lectures and classroom discussions [117]. However, as for the examinations, practical tests, and quizzes, they may be built into the portal (LMS) itself and hence function with the collaboration tools [118].

In short, the collaboration tools handle the in-classroom learning component. As for the out-ofclass learning component, the same shall be explained and handled by the next set of tools, the productivity tools as shall be explained below [119], [120].

2.6.3. Productivity Tools

As for the second component of distance learning, the out-of-class learning component, the same would be taken care of by productivity tools [121]. As the name suggests, productivity tools are tools that are employed or utilized by individuals to produce results or outcomes [122]. In this context or that of distance learning technologies, productivity tools would include the likes of Google Suite, Microsoft Office 365, ZOHO Suite, etc [123].

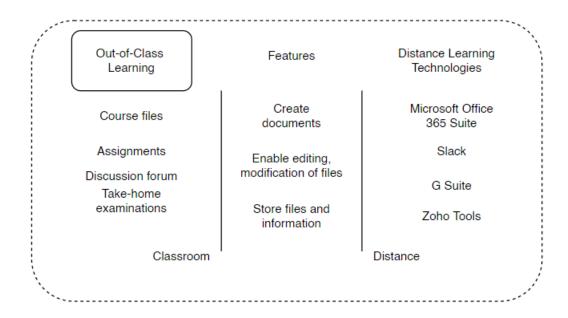


Figure 3: Productivity tools [124].

The diagram above demonstrates how the same may be incorporated into out-of-class learning endeavours [125], [126]. The main features necessary for out-of-class learning components are to create documents of various types, enable the editing and their modification by either the creator of the document or by other authorized parties, and to store information and/or files in secure space digitally [127].

As the figure 3 above illustrates, some of the distance learning technologies among productivity tools would include the likes of well-known productivity suites such as Microsoft Office 365 Suite and Google Suite [128], [129]. It must be noted that in this context, it is expected that they would have some of the abovementioned characteristics if not all [130], [131]. However, the main idea is that they should enable the gathering of knowledge even beyond the classroom, and then allow its documentation.

2.6.4. Combined Model

The final model here is a combination of both the productivity tools and collaboration tools which are both integrated into the foundation which is the learning management system (LMS) that the firm shall use [132], [133]. In the real world, both the productivity tools and collaboration tools would be likely used simultaneously by the students and professors as part of their distance learning technologies [134], [135]. In this sense, the collaboration tools would be interconnected with the productivity tools, so students can both use their own devices as well as that of the cloud-based platforms like Microsoft Office 365 Suite, G Suite, Slack, etc. Through a combination of both aspects, the distance learning technologies model can be completed [136], [137].

The process of the combined model is as such given below (in steps, though not exactly):

- The university deploys a full stack distance learning technology platform that is replete with a foundation (LMS or learning management system) along with a productivity suite of tools that supports out-of-the-classroom learning coupled with a collaboration suite that enables in-classroom learning [138].
- Students login to the portal and use the collaboration tools to effectively communicate with each other and collaborate to achieve the learning outcomes of their courses.
- Students use the productivity tools when outside their classroom to ensure that they continue to learn and grow.
- Cloud storage would be used for the students to store and retrieve the data as per their requirements.

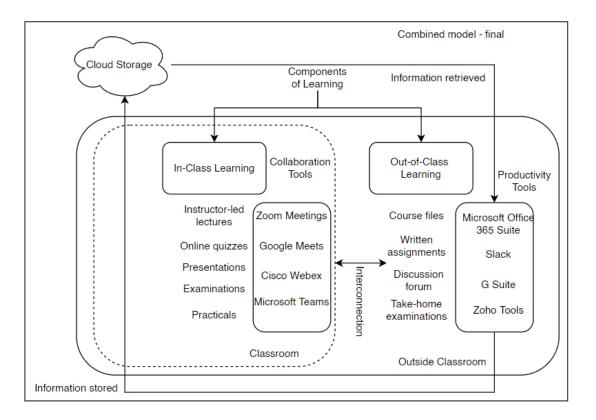


Figure 4: Combined model [139].

Thus, the overall distance learning technology stack would be ready and usable for our firm that we have considered for the purpose of this study.

2.7. General Research Model



Figure 5: Conceptual Research Model

3. DISCUSSION

In addition to the system proposed in this research, the recommendations that may be applied in this situation for the firm would include the following.

- The incorporation of both productivity and collaboration tools would ensure that the inclass learning and out-of-class learning parts are handled properly. However, because technology may be difficult to master, adequate training must be provided to both students as well as instructors to ensure that they make the most of the system provided to them for distance learning. Research by suggests that there may be challenges associated with the learning systems via technology, but they can be handled through proper training.
- Proactive approaches are essential for educational institution as well as other institutions
 considering to deploy systems for online learning. In this context, the method suggested
 for distance learning technologies must be frequently tested and updated, so that it
 continues to improve in both usability as well as features for the students and other
 associated stakeholders.
- Research and development (R&D) with regards to the distance learning technology system would have to be continuous, otherwise security issues like bugs could potentially hamper the functionality of the same and hence the same would be ill-advised.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it can be seen that although distance learning technologies were optional for companies and institutions at some point in the past, they are a necessity now. It has become ever more important for companies and universities to deploy infrastructure and digital equipment to ensure that they are capable of delivering knowledge upgrades to their respective stakeholders, including students and employees. As this research report demonstrates theoretically, the concept of a distance learning technology suite must have components that involve both the in-classroom learning and out-of-classroom learning. The foundation for any distance learning technology stack would be a competent learning management system (LMS) such as Moodle or Blackboard, a portal that would be accessible through a login username or e-mail ID and a password.

On top of this foundation system, third-party applications from various developers such as Microsoft Office 365 Suite from Microsoft, Google Suite from Google, Microsoft Teams from

Microsoft (again), Zoom Meetings from Zoom, Cisco WEBEX from Cisco, etc. could be integrated. As a result, students would have the functionality of both collaboration tools and productivity tools at once on one platform. Thus, they would experience a seamless learning experience with regards to the same wherever they shall be physically. Some challenges to note in this case would be the lack of familiarity that many or most students would have in case they do not have a tech-savvy background, but at the same time, they too would likely ensure that they could pick up quickly if adequate training is provided to them by the university or educational institution. As a result, the overall system would function seamlessly and pandemics such as coronavirus or any other would have much lower or lesser impacts on the business.

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