



# Disconnectedness and Quality: Understanding the Ineffectiveness of Online Learning Emergency during Covid-19

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims** The increasing development of information communication technology is increasingly positively impacting individuals in various fields, including education. This research aimed to understand the causes of ineffective online learning from the point of view of activists.

**Participants & Methods** This qualitative research was conducted in 2019 in the context of Instructors in the Department of Accounting, Padang State Polytechnic. This study used a phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews that focuses on activists' experiences (egos) who are central to the entire environment. Based on these assumptions, phenomenology seeks to find the intentionality behind the activist's behavior for his understanding.

**Findings** In the view point of participants, the causes of ineffective online learning were cultural and emotional. The cultural aspects are categorized under awkwardness with technology and content and characteristics of online learning and the emotional aspects are categorized under instructors' pressures and workload and students' dishonesty.

**Conclusion** The effectiveness of online learning systems is about connectedness and quality. Meaning is a subjective truth that arises from the consciousness of a person who experiences and performs an action.

**Keywords** COVID-19; Learning Quality; Learning Management; Online Learning

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## Introduction

Indonesia first confirmed the case of COVID-19 on Monday, March 2, 2020. In the same month, the government officially closed schools to reduce the spread of COVID-19 [1]. Online learning methods were the only option at the time [2]. Online learning is the best alternative learning method when offline learning methods cannot be done [3]. However, the closure of colleges and schools has some unfortunate consequences for the Education system, despite efforts to change the learning system with an online approach [4, 5].

The application of online learning methods that are done suddenly puts pressure on instructors, especially those who do not have expertise in utilizing technology in the learning process [6]. The pressure experienced by instructors creates inertia that can be an obstacle to successful online learning methods [7]. In addition to the obstacles in technological change, obstacles in the change of interaction between instructors and students are also obstacles to the online learning process. Online learning as an alternative pedagogy in education during a pandemic [8].

The increasing development of information communication technology is increasingly positively impacting individuals in various fields, including education [9]. The use of technology in the field of education can provide opportunities for students to get a high-quality education at a very affordable price. Students can experience unlimited learning by connecting with learning communities around the world online without leaving home [10]. This physical learning process is believed to help learners improve the learning experience in terms of interaction, communication skills, confidence, and so on, through the process of digital discussion and collaboration that can be done both with instructors and with their friends [11].

But the discussion in the above studies only focuses on well-planned online learning programs. Naji *et al.* [12] critically questioned the readiness and acceptance of users in the application of online learning conducted abruptly, without planning, and should be applied at full scale. Understanding the readiness of users in the application of internet net-based learning, which is done abruptly, can help all interested parties develop a more comprehensive online learning strategy. Media is one way of providing educational learning to children [13]. Online learning will become a new model in education in the future [14].

E-learning is a system that utilizes internet network technology to organize all learning activities, ranging from lesson plans, syllabus, enrolment processes, assignments, course content, discussion, to exams, and so on [4]. An E-learning system provides relevant information about learning process activities [15]. The curriculum is better structured, and the learning

content makes it possible to be supported by online discussion forums and online library access. Because it uses internet network technology, the e-learning system relies heavily on the ease of instructors and learners in accessing it [16].

Previous research has found the ineffectiveness of online learning systems applied abruptly during the COVID-19 pandemic [3, 5, 17]. But the studies have not explored the instructor's understanding of the application of online learning conducted abruptly. Extracting the subjective meaning of the instructor is very necessary because it can provide understanding to leaders and decision-makers about the reasons for actions chosen by individuals in the face of obstacles that occur during the process of sudden changes in the learning system during the pandemic. Besides, this research can also provide an understanding of the causes of ineffective online learning from instructors' point of view.

During the pandemic, social restrictions were put in place to reduce the spread of the covid-19 virus. People are asked to stay at home and reduce their activities outside. The university also conducted a face-to-face suspension of learning. But as a consequence, the university implemented an online learning system that could facilitate the process of distance learning. Universities adopted the e-learning system in online learning as a tool to achieve learning goals in the early days of pandemics. Research on the sudden application of online learning tends to be ineffective. Flores & Gago [17] explained that the implementation of online learning at the beginning of the pandemic had reduced student learning opportunities. Not all students have a decent home environment for online learning. For example, related to technical problems, problems that arise include the unavailable laptop owned by every student in their home, bad internet network access in some areas in the suburbs, e-learning platforms that they have not mastered well [3].

The application of online learning systems requires the support of expensive learning information system technology. But the success of the online learning system is not enough just with the availability of advanced e-learning technology. Students' desire to use and adopt an e-learning system is also very determining the success of an online learning system [4, 9]. The low adoption rate of e-learning shows the university's unpreparedness to implement an online learning system. While not all universities can afford and design advanced and expensive e-learning technologies, universities can still adopt e-learning systems such as moodle-LMS at a lower price [18]. The adoption of the e-learning system is done abruptly. This rapid change brings many problems because the user does not understand the requirements and characteristics of online learning [5].

In addition to technology and infrastructure issues, the availability of appropriate learning content for online learning approaches is also a significant obstacle. Educators who do not have skills in the utilization of online learning resources generally use offline learning content in the online learning system without first adapting and adjusting [19]. The evaluation of the content used in online learning systems during the social distancing covid-19 period is very lacking. The first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic educators had to learn technology and prepare teaching equipment independently without systematic support from institutions. They didn't even have time to experiment with the quality of the technology-based learning content that had been designed [1]. As a result, there is an obscurity of the object of learning evaluation, the vagueness of assessment indicators, and the distribution of irrational task loads [19].

Research on online learning in the early days of social distancing also pays less attention to psychological issues than students. Many students felt discounted and lost hope in the early days of the transition of offline learning to online learning [12]. Naji *et al.* [12] argue that more priority should be given to the support aspect of learning activities in each course rather than focusing on the information technology aspect in this transition period. At this time, students are so vulnerable and frightened that it is difficult to expect them to be able to arrange their study schedule. Students experiencing psychological distress tend to refuse to adopt an online learning system [20]. Meanwhile, expecting educators to provide psychology support is also very difficult because in these transitional times, educators are also busy adapting to the settings of the online environment without adequate skills and experience [21]. The lockdown policy applied to educational institutions poses psychological pressures on students, such as stress, depression, loss of control over oneself, low self-confidence, and loss of aspiration [22].

Based on previous research discussions, it can be seen that the implementation of online learning abruptly in the early days of social distancing pandemic covid-19 is generally ineffective. This is due to the lack of preparation and training; almost all instructors solve problems in the online learning system in their way. So the problem hinders the smoothness of the online learning process. A smooth learning process always requires positive sentiment and try to avoid problems [23]. But the studies have not explored the instructor's understanding of the application of online learning conducted abruptly. Exploring the experience of instructors as an individual to discover the meaning of sudden changes in the offline to online learning system is indispensable. This means that it can provide understanding to leaders and decision-makers about the reasons for actions chosen by individuals in the

face of obstacles that occur during the process of sudden changes in the learning system during the pandemic. Besides, this research aimed to understand the causes of ineffective online learning from the point of view of activists.

## Participants and Methods

This qualitative research was conducted in 2019 in the context of Instructors in the Department of Accounting, Padang State Polytechnic. The content of practicum learning materials in Polytechnics is more than theoretical material. So, online learning methods for practicum material become a challenge for instructors. The participants in this study are activists who directly experience a sudden change in offline learning methods to online learning methods. The Participants were in a transition period of changing the learning method which was in the early days of closing the university due to the determination of the COVID-19 pandemic status. All Participants were teachers in the accounting department at the polytechnic of PNP, but of the three Participants, only two joined the online learning training. All Participants involved have taught both theoretical and practical subjects using the offline learning method. This is very important so that Participants can provide clear information about everything they feel and their meaning when there is a sudden change in offline learning methods to online.

This study used a phenomenological design with semi-structured interviews that focuses on activists' experiences (egos) who are central to the entire environment [8]. "Ego" in phenomenological research is an activist who experiences, senses, and interprets a certain thing that happens in his surroundings [14]. In other words, researchers using phenomenological methods will focus on an individual who understands a particular context of his environment as an "I" who has an ego. Based on these assumptions, phenomenology seeks to find the intentionality behind the activist's behavior for his understanding.

## Findings

Participant 1 was a teacher who was involved in online learning method training organized by the government in June 2019. She had been teaching accounting for five years, in both the theory class and accounting laboratory class. Her field of expertise was accounting management. At the time of the sudden change in offline to online learning methods, she was teaching the theory class courses. Theory class courses do not require special devices and equipment such as practicum courses. The theory class courses focus on studying the materials and content of lectures by lecture and discussion methods. Participant 2, was a woman teacher who does not participate in the training of online

learning methods organized by the government in June 2019. She had been teaching accounting for 20 years and her area of expertise was finance. Before the COVID-19 pandemics, she had experience teaching both theory classes and accounting laboratory classes. At the time of the change of offline learning method to online learning method, she was teaching in the theory course class. Participant 3 was the head of the diploma program of the accounting department. A man who had taught for 15 years in both theory class and accounting laboratory class. The field of study of expertise was accounting information systems. At the time of the sudden change in offline to online learning methods, he was teaching an accounting laboratory class course. Accounting laboratory courses were courses conducted in a laboratory where each student must be physically present to work on an accounting practicum. He was involved as one of the instructors who participated in online learning training organized by the government in June 2019. As a trainee, he understood how the online learning system should be implemented.

#### **Cultural Aspects**

**Awkwardness with technology:** At the beginning of the implementation of the online learning system, newly trained instructors have not been able to fully master the practice of the online learning system and its application. According to the head of the diploma program, instructors who have just received training cannot be expected to spread the implementation of online learning based on the system to other instructors.

At the time of the training program, instructors who participated in the training were asked to practice in their respective courses. So it is only applied to a few courses only. It was done because of our commitment to training and government programs. But the training is not real, only in the form of an introduction, and participants also do not really practice it (Participant 3).

According to him, the newly trained instructors only gained knowledge about online learning for 15 days, while it takes a long time, continuously practices and habits in utilizing the online learning system. Thus, with various efforts in such uncertain circumstances, instructors are only able to take advantage of some of the simple features available in the LMS, such as file uploads and file downloads.

The government's training program is only for a small percentage of teachers. Teachers who do not join the program have not understood [online learning system]. However, at least they are familiar with some features such as insert file, insert page, insert an image, and so on (Participant 2).

Efforts to understand the e-learning system take a considerable amount of time and effort so that teachers seem to be racing against time in preparing learning content and putting it into the e-learning system. The process of setting up content and

understanding how e-learning works are two things teachers should do at once. The involvement of teachers and students, students, and other students will influence online learning styles.

#### **Content and Characteristics of Online learning:**

At the beginning of the application of online learning, the Participant does not have the preparation of material content to be given to students. As a result, Participant only uses materials and materials that have previously been used in offline learning systems. Although institutions' socialization has been done by institutions, the process of understanding the system cannot be done in a short time. The Participant admitted that he had to get used to using the online learning system to understand the tool well.

The online learning training program at that time was the only introduction. But because at the beginning of the pandemic COVID-19 has been applied [online learning system], inevitably, all instructors must follow that. When new technology is adopted it is natural that there will be obstacles (Participant 3).

Socialization and the early introduction of the online learning system conducted briefly pose many obstacles at the time of its application. The obstacles encountered by Participants make them want to learn more about the system to overcome their obstacles in online learning. But this is not easy to do because Participants also have to prepare online learning content at the same time.

We have to learn many things, starting from using moodle. We are still groping, and at the same time, we have to prepare the material [learning content]. That's what causes the use of moodle to be stressful. Because we learn to use moodle while preparing material at the same time, including preparing videos, and so on. So there is no clear systematics (Participant 1).

Time controlled, skills, and energy, make Participants learn online with materials and communication force as appropriate. While Participant admits, he uses materials and technical offline learning on online learning platforms in the absence of shock and revision. Participants are not fully dynamic learning as well as the online learning system provided.

#### **Emotional aspects**

**Instructors' pressures and workload:** At the time of initial socialization about the online learning system's mechanism, Participants understood that the implementation of an online learning system can help the administrative aspects of the learning process. Participants are taught how to use the discussion, chat, and forum features contained in the online learning system. However, socialization cannot be practiced by Participants. Even not long after the socialization process, Participants must directly implement the application of online learning methods using a system that they have never tried.

This situation resulted in Participants being overwhelmed and nervous about technology. But to maintain the implementation of the learning process, Participants make use of rough applications such as email, zoom, and WhatsApp as a medium of communication in delivering learning materials to students.

The basic idea of an online learning platform with moodle is documenting tasks. When compared to other platforms such as WhatsApp and email, the documenting process is quite troublesome. Moodle platform is more practical and clear, even for grading process has also been equipped in excel format. We just download it (Participant 1).

**Online Learning and Student Honesty:** The pressure felt by Participants is caused by their nervousness about the technology of online learning management systems. Things related to learning content also frustrate Participants. Techniques and methods of discussion, lectures, and quizzes, often done on offline learning, cannot be done on online learning methods.

The Participant explained that they always use the zoom app to provide lesson materials with lecture techniques. At the same time, quizzes conducted under the supervision of instructors to minimize the element of cheating cannot be done through the zoom application. Another problem also occurs in the implementation of online lectures; it turns out that not all students can attend online on the Zoom application. The reasons for the student's absence vary, such as not being connected to the internet or not having a laptop.

These online learning process results are not as good as if the learning process is done in class, face-to-face. For example, if we want to explain something on the computer [using zoom application], sometimes our signal is unstable, or the student signal is unstable. At the time of explaining mathematical equations, explaining the pictures or graphs are also difficult. Finally, the pictures of graphs are sent via WhatsApp, as well as the process of discussion and question and answer that is all done through the WhatsApp application (Participant 2).

The honesty of students in doing tasks is also a problem for Participants. The limitations of Participants in supervising students in completing assignments and exams online are a major problem. In the offline learning system, Participants can directly monitor the behavior of students while working on assignments. But when the task is carried out online, there is a concern of the Participant that the answer to the task has moved from one hand to the other. This makes Participants doubt the quality of learning achievements implemented with the online learning system.

## Discussion

This article aims to explore and understand the subjective meaning of instructors in implementing online learning that is applied abruptly. The sudden implementation of the online learning system occurred at the beginning of the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic cases. This application is due to the closure of the university to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. An online learning system quickly replaced the offline, face-to-face learning system. This sudden transition caused many obstacles at the time of its implementation. As one user of the online learning platform, instructors have a significant role in ensuring the quality of learning outcomes. Instructors are tasked with delivering the knowledge and conducting evaluations, and giving assessments to ensure that learning objectives have been met.

The meaning that Participant has to online learning in the early days of its application that is done suddenly can be grouped into cultural aspects and emotional aspects. Cultural aspects include changes in habits and routines in carrying out the learning process. Institutional culture can shape the image within each member of the institution. This is also the case with applying online learning systems that are not traditional learning cultures used so far [24, 25]. Participants have an awareness that offline, face-to-face learning is more qualified when compared to online learning. Face-to-face learning is guided by instructors in a classroom that is important in shaping student behavior. The classroom environment forms the principles of student learning ethics [26]. Planting ethical principles is an aspect that is difficult to deliver through the online learning system. The application of online learning, especially in the process of assessment of learning achievement, takes time in preparing the exam format in the form of a problem bank, the habits and skills of students in using technology to access exams, and exam content that matches the characteristics of online assessment [27]. Therefore, at the beginning of the application of the online learning system conducted abruptly, Participants are faced with conditions that require them to try to keep the learning process running even though they experience many obstacles and problems.

The first obstacle faced by Participants is the limitation of skills to technology. The idea that technology can make all work easier is debated at this time. However, the improvement of skills to technology is useful in the development of science and professionalism of instructors [17, 28]. Besides, there is the fact that a learning management system is very helpful in documenting the learning process [29]. However, a sudden change in the learning system made the Participant refuse to use the online

learning technology. Changes come as an external force and are not predicted, then affect the individual's reaction to the situation [12]. There is a lack of confidence that such changes can benefit them, resulting in a rejection. Rejection occurs in the early days of the application of the online learning system, forcing instructors to try creatively to use alternative applications other than LMS to carry out knowledge delivery [3, 12].

The next obstacle is the use of content that does not match the characteristics of the online learning system. The interactive character of the online learning method allows that students to learn flexibly, anywhere, and anytime [4]. Such characteristics are required to the content for online learning that instructors must prepare. In the online learning system, instructors are required to have knowledge of content, pedagogical knowledge, and be able to integrate content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge in a technological context [30]. The problem at the beginning of the application of the online learning system, instructors unable to prepare learning content in accordance with the characteristics of the online learning model in a very short time. Besides, the lack of confidence of instructors that students have skills in managing their own learning time is very flexible [31, 32]. This is also a consideration for instructors in preparing online learning content.

The solution for the problem is the teacher's decision to copy the offline learning materials and content used so far. Such a decision is understood as a consequence of unprepared material that available in accordance with the online learning model characteristics. This strategy is effective to maintain the sustainability of the learning process but has not succeeded in improving the quality of teaching [33]. One measure of the quality and effectiveness of online learning is supported by the design or the sequences of the context and content, which are difficult to meet in a short period of time [34]. The impact is also evident in the unclear learning objective. The role of instructors is not focused on meeting learning objectives because they have to deal with many problems, such as less interactive content and low online participation of students [12]. The transition from face-to-face teaching to e-learning has probably not per se contributed to an increase in teaching quality, but we hope that instructors will gain experience from the measures now forced by the situation, which will ensure better and possibly also new technology-supported teaching offerings in the future.

Participant behavior that refuses to use the eLearning system and copying material content does not match the characteristics of online learning, shaped by the Participant's meanings [35]. The meaning is that the offline learning system is unable to be replaced by an online learning system. In other words, the quality of the offline learning system is

better than the online learning system, especially the emergency online learning system implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. A face-to-face offline learning system can detect the level of understanding of each student so that the vagueness and uncertainty in the evaluation process and unclear in setting the achievement of learning objectives can be avoided. Teachers have an integrated task load in educating their students [36]. The connectedness between teachers and students in offline learning systems becomes the reason behind the quality of the learning system.

The results of previous studies have found that online learning systems that are implemented abruptly tend to be ineffective. The obstacles that arise include technological problems, financial problems, cultural problems, and social problems. The problem is generally explored from a student's point of view. While instructors are also part of this sudden change in the learning system, and which has a role as the spearhead of learning effectiveness. Instructors play a significant role as instructors, evaluators, and assessors to ensure learning objectives. However, the sudden transition of the learning system has put pressure and a burden on the instructor. Therefore it is important to explore and understand the meaning of online learning from the perspective of instructors.

Lack of mastery of technology makes instructors unable to provide interactive content and learning materials. So it is not able to maintain the motivation of students' learning. The pressures and burdens of teaching are growing. Instructors must master the online learning system and prepare the content of the learning materials at the same time. Finally, the practiced online learning system is copying the existing offline learning system without much adjustment. Discrepancies in material content and approaches to the learning process give rise to many potential frauds in the evaluation and assessment stage.

## Conclusion

The effectiveness of online learning systems is about connectedness and quality. Meaning is a subjective truth that arises from the consciousness of a person who experiences and performs an action. Therefore, understanding the causes of ineffective online learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemics can be done through phenomenological approaches. These results can provide understanding to policymakers in universities in evaluating online learning systems. Especially the online learning system that was implemented at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemics is still ongoing today.

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