Student Reflections on the Shift to Emergency Remote Teaching in Academic Writing Classes during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study investigated how the shift to emergency remote teaching affected students' academic reading and writing development in an American university in the UAE right after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were forty-eight students enrolled in the three academic writing classes I taught in Spring 2020. The primary data source was the students' reflective writing assignments. The analysis of the data revealed a variety of expected and unexpected problems faced by the students such as technical difficulties and internet access, lock down measures, difficulty in concentration, personal and family circumstances, as well as increased emotional distress. The students narrated how they navigated these challenges and adjusted to their new reality through a number of creative coping strategies, new study habits and personal strengths they discovered about themselves. These findings suggest that several strategies and practices can contribute to creating a more humanistic environment conducive to learning during times of crisis and highlight the significance of a pedagogy of care, affection and empathy.

Key words: Emergency remote teaching, Covid-19, pandemic, academic literacy, pedagogy of care, compassionate teaching, equity, reflective writing

Introduction

Spring 2020 has been an unforgettable semester for all stakeholders in education for many reasons. Most notably, it has deepened a number of long-standing controversies and challenges, particularly those regarding equity issues and the role of technology in teaching. The various responses of educational institutions to the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from cancelation or postponement of all campus events and activities to the enforced shift to online education and remote work, have been widely documented both in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other parts of the world.

Before the pandemic-enforced changes transformed our lives overnight, Spring 2020 had started out as usual, with no issues out of the norm. Eight weeks into the semester, I had gotten to know my students better in the three classes I was assigned to teach: two sections of WRI 101: Academic Writing I and one section of WRI 102: Academic Writing II. However, as the semester progressed, the threat of a mysterious viral infection taking the world by storm began to take over the campus, spreading worries among faculty, staff, and students. Eventually, the emergency shift to online education was announced in the first week of March, a week before the Spring Break, as a precautionary measure (Ministry of Education, 2020). While online teaching was not a completely new mode of delivery in my teaching context, online learning platforms were used to complement face-to-face teaching, not as the only delivery mode. Hence, the faculty and students were provided with a number of quick training sessions to prepare them for the provision of online delivery of education, which was initially viewed as a temporary arrangement. Before long, however, it dawned on the students and the entire campus community that this temporary arrangement would take much longer than anticipated.

To provide a brief background about the specific context of this study, an overview of the courses I teach, the academic program, and student profile would be helpful. I have been

teaching academic writing courses at an English-medium American university in the UAE for 14 years. The university is an independent, not-for-profit co-educational institution, serving students from the region and around the world, with approximately ninety nationalities represented in the student population, about 3% living on campus ("Fast Facts", 2020). Depending on their English proficiency and completing the academic bridge program if required, the students are required to take one of the three academic writing courses offered by the Department of English: WRI 001, WRI 101: Academic Writing I, and WRI 102: Academic Writing II. All undergraduates are required to take these writing courses either as a pre-requisite or a co-requisite for a large number of discipline-specific courses.

As a researcher who is interested in academic literacy development of undergraduates and the ways they cope with the challenges they face along the way, having observed the immense impact of this first flush of change on my students, I felt almost obligated to conduct a formal study to understand and document my students' initial experiences. Given the uncertainty of how long the Covid-19 Pandemic and the enforced changes it brought about will last, listening to our students' voices on this unique experience is imperative. Examining the ways students responded and adapted to this crisis can help us, academicians, not only adjust our teaching resources and strategies, but also re-evaluate our approach to teaching.

Hence, based on this rationale, I carried out an investigation to answer the following research question:

- How did the COVID-19 Pandemic-enforced shift to remote learning affect students' academic reading and writing development when viewed from their perspectives?

Literature Review

The theoretical background of this study originates from three fields: the shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) in higher education (HE), the ever-growing research investigating the impact of COVID-19 on HE, and the role of reflective practice in learning.

The Shift to Emergency Remote Teaching in HE

While the pandemic has not been the single driving force behind the shift to online education, it has certainly accelerated it at an unprecedented rate globally. In a paper discussing the reasons behind this shift a decade before the pandemic, Dykman and Davis (2008) cite several factors beginning with improvements in access to educational services using online technologies and changing paradigms for teaching and learning that integrate well with these technologies. Other factors such as heightened educational competition and globalization, improvements in online systems capabilities, and the underlying economics of providing online education versus conventional means also play a key role in this shift. As they state, the idea that universities can reach anyone, anywhere, anytime makes it possible to compete for students, faculty, and resources globally. This openness makes online education a profitable enterprise for universities who can potentially increase student enrollments without significantly expanding campus facilities. However, Dykman and Davis (2008) end their discussion with a word of caution regarding the underestimated differences between online and conventional teaching, stressing that managing online coursework and student-teacher relationships are much more complex and demanding tasks.

About a decade later, in a critical overview of the concepts of openness and innovation in online HE, Lee (2020) challenges the reputation of online HE as being "open", that is, being accessible to "anyone, anytime, anywhere". He argues that the openness claims are more rhetorical than actual and questions to what extent online HE has effectively served the diverse

groups of disadvantaged and underserved learners, beyond simply allowing them entry to university. Ironically, written right before the outbreak of the pandemic, Lee's work (2020) foreshadows the equity issues, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 enforced shift to online education globally.

Admittedly, education offered online in response to a crisis or disaster is not the same as well-designed online education. Hence, it is important to use the right terminology. The abrupt transition to online instruction is commonly called emergency remote teaching (ERT). As Hodges et al. (2020) explain:

> In contrast to experiences that are planned from the beginning and designed to be online, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. The primary objective in these circumstances is not to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis. (para. 13)

While the impact of Covid-19 on education has been unprecedented in magnitude, it is not the first crisis- prompted academic disruption we experienced. Past research on HE responses to natural disasters, war and other types of conflicts reported temporary and sometimes long-term transition to online or remote learning. The insights gained from these studies highlighted the importance of not only timely, clear, transparent, but also compassionate and empathetic communication between students and teachers; as well as equity and ethics (Di Carlo et al., 2007; Gomez, 2013; Mackey et al., 2021; Swartz, Gachago, & Belford, 2018; Tull, Dabner, & Ayebi-Arthur, 2017).

The Impact of Covid-19 on Higher Education

A recent Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report (Giannini, Jenkins & Saavedra, 2021) describes the impact of the pandemic as "the worst shock to education systems in a century, with the longest school closures combined with the worst recessions in decades" (para. 1). Given that the education sector also provides health, nutrition, and psychosocial services, the overall welbeing of students has consequently declined substantially. Emphasizing the gravity of the issue, a global survey conducted by UNESCO indicates that more than 220 million tertiary-level students around the world have been affected by the pandemic (UNESCO, 2021). This survey was addressed to the decision makers in 193 UNESCO member states and 11 associate members and aimed at providing an evidence-based overview of the current situation of the higher education system at national and global levels and evaluated the varying impact the pandemic had on higher education systems in terms of access, equity and quality of teaching and learning, university operation, national challenges, emerging issues, and strategic responses. The key findings confirmed the popularity of the hybrid model of teaching and the increase in online education as the most significant impact. It was revealed that access to education was highly influenced by regional income levels, with high income and Europe and North American countries better able to cope with the disruption due to government funding support and increase in domestic enrollment. The survey results also shed light on the exacerbation of inequality in higher education with the mixed impact of the pandemic on university finance. It was emphasized that financial support from the government and external sources were crucial to the survival of HEIs.

Similar findings have been reported in studies examining the students' and professors' perspectives in various countries around world. In an exploratory study investigating the university students' perceptions of online teaching and learning in India during the pandemic,

Rizvi and Nabi (2021) reported inadequate bandwidth and poor network connectivity, unsuitable home environment for attending online classes, feeling of isolation and demotivation due to lack of face-to-face interaction and excessive screen-time causing fatigue. In a quantitative study conducted in Al Ain University in the UAE, the reported challenges faced by students as well as faculty members included concerns about the digital divide, the shift in focus from learning the course content to ICT skills, lack of effective student-teacher communication, plagiarism cases and increase in educational expenses (El Refae, Kaba, & Eletter, 2021).

A growing number of studies have been drawing attention to the psychological impact of the pandemic. For instance, in a review article published soon after the outbreak, the potential impact of the pandemic on the education and mental health of students and academic staff was described as follows: "The COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted the lives of many people across the world. The worldwide rapid increase of infected cases has created a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what is going to happen (Sahu, 2020, p. 3)." It was pointed out that this stress could lead to unfavorable effects on the learning and psychological health of local and international students, who were concerned about their health, safety, and education as well as the wellbeing of their families.

Confirming the anticipated problems above and drawing attention to the potential long-term effects of the pandemic on the life chances of emerging adults, a study conducted in the Central Asian Republic of Kazakhstan (Simpson & Mikkonen, 2020) reported the results of a survey of undergraduate students related to their mental health after six months of online learning and relative social isolation. The findings suggested significant mental health concerns, with around one third of all responses suggesting moderate to severe indications of a negative response to their situation. It was noted that, these findings, although drawn from one group of students at one university at a particular point in time, "point to a potential

'hidden pandemic' of mental health problems in the wider population which if not understood and mitigated could act to limit the future life chances of a significant proportion of the emerging adult population" (p. 7).

On a global level, a comprehensive research study (Aristovnik et al., 2020) with a sample of 30,383 students from 62 countries explored the nature of problems faced after the first wave of COVID-19 crisis in early 2020. The findings showed that the lack of computer skills and the perception of a relatively higher workload interfered with students' adaptation to online learning. Furthermore, it was reported that students' socio-demographic characteristics played a role in their response to the transition from campus to online learning. Female, full-time, first-level students and students with financial problems were generally affected more by the pandemic in terms of their emotional life and personal circumstances. Accordingly, the authors concluded that concerned authorities should prioritize the needs of vulnerable student groups while seeking to resolve the consequences of the prolonged COVID-19 measures around the world.

Likewise, in a comparative, longitudinal study, college students' mental health over the course of the 2019- 2020 academic year, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic were examined (Zimmermann, Bledsoe, & Papa, 2020). The findings showed a striking increase in depression and anxiety among the participants, which was in accordance with prior research suggesting that the multifaceted stressors accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly likely to negatively impact mental health at a large scale due to the high degree of uncertainty, disruption to daily life, and economic impact. The vulnerability of certain groups was also confirmed in this study; individuals with pre-existing psychological distress, women, and Latinx-identifying students were found to be at elevated risk for mental health concerns.

All of these studies demonstrate the unprecedented impact the pandemic had on HEIs, emphasizing the exacerbated equity issues, putting vulnerable groups of students at greater risk. While these studies offer important insights, they mostly present data gained through surveys and questionnaires, which lack the depth of information that qualitative data sources can provide. While the present study is conducted at one HEI with a limited number of participants, it provides a unique contribution to the literature with the amount of detail provided by the participants about their experiences. The data were collected throughout online learning at several intervals and provided access to students' experiences as directly told by them in their reflective essays, ***not*** in response to researcher-developed survey or interview questions. The use of reflective essays as a data source provided access to details and depth of data that would have been difficult to gain otherwise.

The Role of Reflective Practice in Learning

Since reflection plays a very important role in critical thinking and improving academic literacy, it's been an integral part of my teaching through formal and informal strategies since the beginning of my teaching career. The various reflective writing tasks my students completed in Spring 2020 did not only encourage them to build a deeper connection with their learning experiences during an exceptionally challenging semester, but also served as a useful research tool for this study, providing insights that would have been difficult to gain otherwise. Since learning and assessment through reflection is not the primary focus of this research project, an in-depth analysis of models of reflection and scaffolding strategies to facilitate it is beyond the scope of this literature review. However, a brief review on the role of reflection in learning would be useful due to its significance and unique role as a data collection tool in the present study.

The roots of reflection can be traced back to the works of philosophers such as Dewey (1933) with his focus on reflective thinking for personal and intellectual development. From

the perspective of critical social theory, reflection has been seen in more of a transformative light and a critical lens problematizing unquestioned assumptions about social structures in the interest of emancipation (Freire, 1972; Habermas, 1974). The interrelation between reflection and identity formation has been addressed by researchers who maintain that reflection can serve as a tool for students to inspect their own view of self with respect to what they believe and who they believe themselves to be (Ryan & Ryan, 2013; Wilson, 2002). When viewed from the perspective of critical social theory, reflection allows one to examine their own individual positionality within the wider context of a social system (Smith, 2011). Along the same lines, Ryan (2013, p. 145) offers a two-step definition: 1) making sense of experience in relation to self, others, and contextual conditions; and 2) reimaging and/or planning future experience for personal and social benefit.

The concept of reflective practice, mostly credited to Schön, refers to a systematic reviewing process which involves individuals evaluating critical points in their learning or life experiences. Schön (1987) states that "reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline" (p. 38). An important aspect of Schön's model of reflective practice (1987) is his differentiation between reflection-in-action, which refers to reflection while an activity or event is still in progress and we can take action to change it, and reflection-on-action, in reference to reflection after the incident, reconsidering the situation and what can be done for future change. On the interrelations between the two concepts, he notably points out, "But our reflection on our past reflection-in-action may indirectly shape our future action" (Schön, 1987, p. 31). Not necessarily related to the field of education, the term *reflective practitioners* is used to refer to adults in any profession who reflect on their strengths, limitations, and opportunities for growth. When applied to the field teacher

education, reflective practitioners usually refer to educators who continuously review, question, and evaluate their own teaching methods.

Engaging in reflective practice offers many benefits for students as it does for educators. A study conducted by Lerch, Bilics, and Colley (2006) shows that through reflective thinking students are able to develop higher-order thinking skills, the ability to analyze their own learning, and the metacognitive thinking skills necessary for them to be effective learners. Research suggests that metacognition accelerates learning process by letting learners regulate their learning (Gourgey, 2001; Posner &; Rothbart, 2007; Schraw, 2001) and that lack of metacognitive awareness stands in the way of independent learning (Fisher, 2007). If students focus their reflection on analyzing situations where problems arose, what went wrong or right with an assignment, or what they could have done differently, their problem-solving ability improves. Along the same line of thought, Nunn and Brandt (2016) point out that, "Reflective writing is justified as a pedagogical activity or as a professional training activity if it helps 'us' make sense of our own experience, with a view to making the next experience more satisfying or successful" (p.130).

While, the significance of reflective learning is acknowledged in in higher education as an effective way of improving students' lifelong learning and professional practice, it is far from a straightforward process to that can be mastered by students easily (Rogers, 2001). There are various hierarchical levels of reflection along a depth continuum, ranging from descriptive accounts to transformative, intensive reflection (Grossman, 2008; Bain 2002). Through scaffolding at each stage, students can learn to produce deeper-level, more critical reflections. Among many strategies recommended to facilitate reflection are journal writing (Carrington & Selva, 2010; Moon 2004), formal reflection papers (Mc Guire, Lay, & Peters, 2009), and less commonly discussed, interviewing. Particularly related to this study is McGuire, Lay and Peters' (2009) work, investigating the reflection process through the use of

formal reflective papers in their Social Work course. Their findings suggested that structured reflective essays, when accompanied by guided prompts and assessment rubrics, acted as a particularly useful strategy to enable critical thinking about the relationship between theory and professional practice.

My approach to reflection draws on Schön's (1987) and Ryan's (2013) models of reflection. With regards to this research project, I encouraged my students to engage in *reflection-in-action* throughout the semester while their actions could still change their overall learning outcomes when I asked them to write a reflective self-evaluation after each writing task. At the end of the semester, I engaged them in *reflection-on-action*, when I asked them to write a final reflective essay discussing critical incidents in their learning journey (drawing on the previously written self-evaluations) and their impact on their overall learning experience, as well as their plans for future experience for personal or social benefit.

Methodology

The present study is informed by the underlying principles of the interpretive paradigm. Interpretivists' choice of methodology is guided by their endeavour to understand the subjective world of human experience while retaining the integrity of phenomena being investigated. In this approach, events and individuals are regarded as unique and largely non-generalizable. The main objective is to understand the subjective world of human experience through the eyes of participants, not the researcher (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). Accordingly, the focus of this study is the students' accounts of their lived experiences as directly told by them.

Participants

The students enrolled in two academic writing courses that I taught in Spring 2020: two sections of WRI 101 and one section of WRI 102 were the participants of this study. They were aged between 18-20 at the time of data collection and in their first year of

undergraduate studies at the University. Out of the fifty-three students enrolled, forty-eight of them provided their emailed voluntary consent to participate in the study. The table below shows the distribution of male and female participants in each course.

Table 1: The number of male and female participants in each course

Course	Male	Female	Total
WRI 101	17	15	32
WRI 102	9	7	16
Total	26	22	48

Data Collection

The primary data source was an assignment, called *Reflective Essay*, which the students were asked to complete as part of the common course requirements, as well as the reflective writing tasks, called *Self-Evaluations*, which I ask my students to write after each major assignment throughout the semester. None of these assignments were created for the purposes of this research project.

The *Reflective Essay* is a common assignment across all sections of WRI 101 and WRI 102, required to be given as a final assessment as part of the common syllabi. As stated in the common syllabi for both courses, the final assessment, *Reflective Essay*, involves reflecting on and synthesizing "major concepts and skills developed over the entire course." With this general assignment objective in mind, I create a more specific assignment prompt suitable for the students taking my classes each semester, mainly asking them to discuss their progress as a reader and writer throughout the semester drawing on specific classroom practices and activities. I also ask them to draw on two previously completed writing tasks to produce their final reflective essay. These tasks are:

- The literacy autobiography: In their literacy autobiography, the students are asked to share their learning objectives along with the challenges they anticipate for the semester. The literacy autobiographies were *not* directly

included in the data analysis for this study; however, while composing their final *reflective essay*, the students were encouraged to refer back to this assignment given at the beginning of the semester and take it as a point of reference while assessing their overall progress retrospectively.

- Reflective self-evaluations: As part of this task, the students are asked to reflect on their performance in the scaffolding process-assignments, assess their paper's strengths and weaknesses, reflect on the challenges they faced, and discuss what they could do differently next time to overcome these challenges. Two self-evaluations written after the transition to online learning were included in the data analysis of this project. These self-evaluations were written after the following major writing assignments: Cause and Effect Analysis Essay and Argumentative Essay in WRI 101; Argumentative Essay and Research Paper in WRI 102.

The final reflective essay prompt I designed in Spring 2020 asked the students to discuss not only their progress as a writer/reader, but also the impact of the sudden shift to online education on their life and learning experiences in general, and more specifically, in my course.

The students were asked to write this essay in the final week of Spring 2020. The essay was written by each student in their own accommodation due to remote learning arrangements. The assignment, explained the distribution of male and female participants in each course on May 4 during class time, was completed and uploaded on i-learn on May 10.

The table below shows the data sources and data collection dates in both courses.

Table 2: Data sources and data collection dates

Data Source	Date of data collection in WRI 101	Date of data collection in WRI 102
Reflective self-evaluation #1	April 6, 2020	April 6, 2020
Reflective self-evaluation # 2	May 6, 2020	May 7, 2020
Final reflective essay	May 10, 2020	May 10, 2020

Ethical Considerations

All possible measures and precautions had been taken to maintain high ethical standards in this study. These standards concern the ethical issues of informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality. Following the strict ethical standards of the university it was conducted in, I received the approval from the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection. The voluntary consent was obtained by email. The students were informed of the research objectives and how their essays could be used. To avoid the possibility of coercion, I did not seek voluntary consent until after the course was over. Hence, they would not worry that their decision could affect their grade. Students were assured that they did not need to agree to this and could withdraw their consent at any time in the future by getting in touch with me. After informing the students, I waited until they responded positively before I included their essays in my research study. Except for five students, all responded to my email and gave consent to participate in the study. I used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. The views of participants were of paramount importance to this study; hence, I paid utmost attention to respect and represent these views as objectively as possible.

Data Analysis

The main source of data in this study, as explained above, was the students' written reflections throughout the semester (i.e., reflective self-evaluations and the final reflective essay); hence, the raw data was ready to be analysed by the end of the course delivery in Spring 2020.

There are various data analysis strategies used in qualitative research; however, the overall data analysis process can be conceptualized in three steps: preparing and organizing the data for analysis, reducing the data into themes through coding and condensing the codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or discussion (Creswell, 2007).

I prepared the data for analysis first by reading all the reflective assignments several times and noting down the topics that emerged from the data. Radnor (2002) calls this stage topic ordering. While preparing the data for analysis, I organized the reflections written by each student as collected by date, which I thought, would be useful in identifying any changes in each of them. I made a list of the topics, assigning a name and a code to each. I then read the reflections very carefully one more time to lay out the categories within each topic. I listed these categories under each topic as sub-headings, as displayed in the table below.

Table 3: Topics, codes and categories

Topics	Codes	Categories
Challenges	CH	1. Internet access and technical difficulties 2. Increased workload 3. Lockdown measures 4. Difficulty in concentration 5. Personal and family circumstances 6. Decreased motivation 7. Procrastination 8. Shift from on-campus to home learning
Psychological impact	PI	1. Sense of shock 2. Fear of the unknown 3. Denial 4. Frustration 5. Stress
Adjustment	ADJ	1. Sense of solidarity 2. Sync meetings 3. Encouraging feedback 4. Positive T-S relationships and class atmosphere 5. Goals 6. Sense of achievement
Perceived benefits	PB	1. Personal strengths discovered 2. Character development and morals

3. Improved study habits

The next step was reading the reflections for content. I did so by going through them one more time to highlight and code the main excerpts/extracts from the reflective essays that went under each category. While this systematic approach did not immediately reveal the participants' perspectives on the issues explored, it gave me an opportunity to get the most out of the data through a thorough exploration of the material. This made the raw data more manageable and formed the basis of my interpretation process. I also used member validation to consolidate and adjust my interpretations where necessary.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the data with regards to the the impact of the abrupt shift to online education on the participants' learning experiences revealed four salient themes: challenges, declining mental health, adjustment, and perceived benefits. The four sections below explain each theme followed by a discussion.

Challenges

The students reported various challenges they encountered while working towards their academic objectives in their reflective writing assignments. The challenges most commonly brought up included Internet access and technical difficulties, increased workload, lockdown measures, difficulty in concentration, personal and family circumstances, decreased motivation, procrastination, and shift from on-campus to home learning.

The table below illustrates each challenge with an excerpt from the students' reflective essays to convey their voices more clearly. The table also includes the number of mentions for each theme to give an idea about the frequency they appeared in the data.

Table 4: Challenges

Theme	Example	Number of mentions*
Internet access and technical difficulties	"Sometimes I could not hear the professor giving an online lecture and sometimes my microphone would not work. Therefore, it prevented me from actively participating and sometimes miss out on certain information." (Rana, WRI 101)	35
Increased workload	"One of the most difficult challenges faced by us students was time management. Since everything was online, we were bombarded with midterms and assignments by all the professors." (Abdelrahman, WRI 102)	26
Lockdown measures	"Many of my friends had become depressed and sad because of the quarantine situation in the UAE and their families are far from them, so they can't visit them." (Omar, WRI 101)	39
Difficulty in concentration	"Attending a lecture in the comfort of my bed although sounds nice however is very distracting and doesn't allow for optimum focus." (Younus, WRI 102)	35
Personal and family circumstances	"From the stress of living through a pandemic to the stress of trying to solve an exam while your parents are fighting in the next room, Covid-19 has challenged me in ways that I still don't know how to deal with." (Hana, WRI 101)	29
Decreased motivation	"The main challenge was remaining motivated and focused in these times, along with adapting to the huge shift in my routine. Staying motivated when I have lost so much hope in life is very difficult. Knowing that the economy is crashing and that this epidemic will affect the economy and job market for the next few years makes me think about what is even the point of getting this degree now." (Hala, WRI 102)	30
Procrastination	"The lack of social interaction also lowered my morale by a significant amount, and since we weren't required to physically attend lectures, this gave birth to procrastination and laziness in myself. While we always did our process assignments during class prior to the pandemic, now we had to do them individually while spending all of class time being attentive to our instructor. "(Abdullah, WRI 102)	34
Shift from on-campus to home learning	"The change of place was uncomforting and I did not have access to a quiet place as I would usually work in the library or my dorm room. I had to adapt to the reality I was in and manage to work in the noise." (Jana, WRI 101)	35

Many of these challenges identified above were brought up in studies conducted to investigate the impact of the pandemic on HEIs in the Gulf region and other parts of the world as discussed above. What is unique about the findings of the current study though is the amount of detail provided directly by the students and the fact that their accounts of the challenges were not provided in response to researcher-developed survey or interview questions. As a result, the students had a chance to address the most important obstacles they faced without being prompted and being restricted with space and time constraints. This strategy provided access to details and depth of data that would have been difficult to gain otherwise.

Particularly regarding personal and family circumstances as well as the shift from campus to home learning, other data collection methods such as interviews or surveys may not have been as helpful in uncovering the gravity of the issues the students were dealing with. In their reflective writing, however, many students opened up and revealed the difficulty of concentrating on their studies in the midst of heightened family tensions, interparental conflicts, and financial troubles, which are usually considered sensitive topics.

For instance, one student in WRI 102 noted the following in her reflections after completing one of the major writing assignments:
"I didn't write this essay properly at all, I couldn't function healthily. Being at home all the time, everyday in a toxic household does things to you. For me, coming to university everyday meant that I am spending time away from my toxic parents and family that ruin my mental stability. I am finding it so hard to breathe and function and I can't leave this place because of the lockdown. I found it so hard to synthesize material and write down points, I am even finding it hard to write this. I don't know why this is happening to me, it is all getting worse." (Huda, WRI 102)

Many students revealed the financial strains their families suffered due to the pandemic as in the following example:

"The salary deductions had introduced a financial chokehold that quickly became overbearing as my brother needed to purchase the tools to carry out his online learning as well." (Momen, WRI 102)

Another common challenge reported was the difficulty of participating in online classes with limited space and technical resources, especially for students from extended families with older family members or bigger families where students had multiple siblings:

 "For me, my younger brothers finished his classes just before I would start the writing session, which meant that the time that the class started was at the time when distractions were at their highest. This meant that I couldn't get the most out of our class discussions and that I could not work off my peers' feedback." (Ahmed, WRI 101)

Similar comments came from a student in WRI 102:

"Being on lockdown with my family has not been the easiest. Having five different people working and using the WIFI meant that there will be a lot of interruption in the connection. The way I coped in this situation was by setting up a desk in my room and using my phone's personal hotspot to avoid connection issues." (Alya, WRI 102)

Psychological Impact

Another salient theme that emerged from the data was the intense psychological impact the abrupt shift had on the students, which was expressed through a sense of shock, fear of the unknown, denial, frustration, and significantly increased stress levels.

The analysis of the data showed that many students were startled when the initial announcements regarding the shift to online education was made; however, they mostly took it as a temporary arrangement, which comforted them to some extent. When they realized that this new mode of learning would take longer than expected, they experienced a deeper sense of shock, disbelief, fear of the unknown, frustration, and increased level of stress. The

Table 5: Psychological impact

Theme	Example	Number of mentions*
Sense of shock	"In the beginning, I was on the right track in completing the assignments like writing a summary and a critical analysis essay. Later on, we were informed by the University to shift to remote learning till an unspecified time. This news was shocking to me since I have not experienced remote learning in the past." (Ali, WRI 102)	33
Fear of the unknown	"When I knew classes are going to be online, a slight fear has struck me. Because it is a new experience that I have never experienced before." Saud, WRI 101	30
Denial	"The abruptness of this decision had left both students and professors alike in a state of disbelief in which they were forced to adapt to an unprecedented and unforeseen situation." (Mahmoud, WRI 102)	28
Frustration	I have personally faced many challenges responding to the course requirements changing throughout the semester whether academically or psychologically. Ghazal 102	37
Stress	"With everything happening in the world from the Covid-19 pandemic, the Australian wildfires, the USA-Iran conflict that impacted Iraq, this year, my main focus hasn't been on becoming a better reader or writer. With my family living in all parts of the world and how each part of the world being impacted so considerably, this has put a great deal of worry and anxiety in me." (Hadeel, WRI 101)	40

comment below illustrates how the uncertainty intensified their anxiety and fear of the unknown:

"Now for the unexpected pandemic turn, it took me surprisingly by shock, not knowing how long online learning would be implemented for." (Laila, WRI 101)

The findings of the present study regarding the impact of the pandemic on students' mental health were in line with other studies (e.g., Bozkurt et al., 2020; Simpson & Mikkonen, 2020; Sahu, 2020), some of which underline the vulnerability of certain groups and factors increasing risk factors, including pre-existing psychological factors, financial problems, and being an international student with limited mobility due to Covid-19 restrictions (Zimmermann, Bledsoe, & Papa, 2020). To illustrate, the excerpt below, which is from a WRI 102 student's reflections, demonstrates the triggering effect of the pandemic on pre-existing mental health issues:

"The isolation and lack of activities caused my mental health to drop and I suffered a few breakdowns. I ended up seeing my psychiatrist and changed my medication." (Amani, WRI 102)

Adjustment

A common theme in the data was the students' detailed accounts of their adjustment process and what helped them deal with the challenges and sense of shock they endured as a result of the abrupt shift to online learning. The students mostly reflected on the following factors that helped the adjust: sense of solidarity, synchronous meetings, encouraging feedback, positive classroom atmosphere, adhering to their goals, and the sense of achievement they felt after completing a given task.

Table 6: Adjustment strategies

Theme	Example	Number of mentions*
Sense of solidarity	"Seeing my professor put in the same effort that you always showed us in class made me want to push myself as much as possible to show the same energy that I was receiving. Although the enforced online classes felt nothing like our pre-Covid19 lectures, I had to accustom myself to them to feel like an active part of the responsible society." (Ali, WRI 101)	31
Sync meetings	"The live online lectures were effective enough for us to properly understand the concept, and in case of any issues or	27

blocks in our essay writing, we were given feedback from the professor. (Reyan, WRI 102)

Encouraging feedback	"Receiving satisfying feedback and grades after working on a certain assignment for days gave me a boost to work even harder on my following essays." (Rewa, WRI 101)	30
Positive T-S relationships and class atmosphere	"With the help of an extremely helpful professor and friendly class environment, I developed the ability to look at writing tasks not as a burden, but as a challenge to help improve myself in all aspects I am weak in." (Aaryn, WRI 102)	36
Goals	"What got me back on my feet is getting on the Dean's List. I realized that if I worked hard enough, I can actually do it. This sentence has been constantly playing in my head since I started this course. WRI 101 was my motivational class of the semester. Other than patience and commitment, it taught me the power of hope and working hard to achieve your desires." (Amna, WRI 101)	23
Sense of achievement	"I am most proud of pushing myself to write and get my work done despite everything that I am going through. That is how I truly improved as a writer this semester. I believe my most significant accomplishment was pushing myself to write despite not being in the mood for it. Completing a task made me feel more productive and motivated me to do other tasks." (Hawra, WRI 102)	25

The students' reflections on what helped them adapt, particularly their comments on the helpful role of the sense of solidarity, positive teacher-student interactions and classroom atmosphere, receiving effective feedback whether through written comments or synchronous class sessions, showed the importance of the social aspect of learning, more specifically, academic literacy instruction in the context of this study. Emphasizing the significance of social context influences in academic literacy development, Leki (2007) confirms that language and literacy development, academic growth, and even the ability to complete course assignments go hand in hand with the extent, stability, and success of socio-academic relations students build and, in some cases, cannot progress until such relationships are formed.

Feeling a sense of achievement and sticking to their goals also emerged as important factors that helped the students adapt to their new reality, which shows the significance of constructing a positive identity in academic literacy development and instruction. The interconnectedness of the concepts of literacy and identity has been acknowledged and widely documented in literacy studies, which construe literacy as a social construct (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 1989; Moje, Luke, Davies & Street, 2009).

The findings showed that flexibility in course requirements and deadlines played an important role in meeting the students' need for sense of achievement, along with encouraging teacher feedback. The following excepts from the students' reflective writing illustrate how appreciative they were of the flexibility and sympathy provided:

"The professor was kind enough to give us extensions when required to ease the tension." (Albert, WRI 101)

"The things that helped me cope with assignments during the pandemic was the attitude of my professor. I find my professor to be very reasonable and understanding, which made me feel like it is okay to made mistakes. I think it is important for a student to have this confidentiality with their professor. The reason why is because I think it is a great motivation and guidance to have your professor know you and your work, it helps build a safe space to share issues and concerns." (Husna, WRI 102)

Indeed, previous research which examined the ways undergraduate students adapted to the enforced shift to ERT around the world, also reported on the significance of faculty support in student success. To illustrate, the findings of a qualitative case study conducted at a university in the western USA (Gelles et al., 2020) revealed the ways second-year engineering students used self-discipline strategies to overcome a number of challenges they faced during ERT in Spring 2020, and how the faculty supported students in the classroom

through a compassionate and flexible pedagogy, by adjusting the curriculum and assessment as well as effectively communicating with students

Similar findings were reported in an exploratory study which examined how the Department of Strategic Communication at Morgan State University adapted aspects of its existing departmental culture in order to transition into an emergency remote teaching environment during the coronavirus crisis (Smith et al., 2020). The findings, collected through open ended survey questions and based on the lived-experience narratives of students, faculty, and staff, emphasized the value of compassionate teaching, community-building, co-creative learning, and course structuration.

At a global level, the findings of a collaborative, synthesis study (Bozkurt et al., 2020) that narrated the overall view from a total of 31 countries across the world stressed that all parties involved in emergency remote education (ERE) experienced trauma, psychological pressure and anxiety to various degrees, which necessitated a pedagogy of care, affection and empathy.

Perceived benefits

In spite of all the hardships faced, a common theme in the data was lessons learned and perceived benefits after a remarkably challenging semester. The students' reflections on their experiences included personal strengths they discovered about themselves, the morals they learnt, and improved study habits.

Table 7: Perceived benefits

Theme	Example	Number of mentions*
Personal strengths discovered	"Getting in contact with peers and getting help when needed is much more difficult. In order to combat this issue, I decided to take initiative and start a WhatsApp group with select students in order to discuss the course and ask any questions that we might have outside class time. I feel that this skill of initiative was something that I learned throughout	35

	this pandemic. I would not have learned how to be more initiative without this situation." (Mohammad, WRI 102)	
Character development and morals	"I have gained two valuable life lessons, which are dedication and acceptance. Other than patience and commitment, it taught me the power of hope and working hard to achieve your desires." (Leia, WRI 101)	37
Improved study habits	"I had to adapt to the reality I was in and manage to work in the noise. I tried a new way of working to increase my efficiency by writing for 45 minutes and taking a 15 minutes break and setting a timer because it's easy to get distracted while taking a break. I saw this on a video on YouTube and tried it for my research paper and it worked." (Sarah, WRI 102)	38

These findings are similar to those reported in Gelles et al.'s study (2020) which highlighted the role of self-discipline strategies employed by second-year engineering students to overcome a number of challenges they faced during ERT in Spring 2020. Gelles et al. (2020) pointed out that the students in their study appreciated and thrived when faculty showed compassion and flexibility, but they also took responsibility for their learning and being self-disciplined. They explained this positive student response with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; as cited in Gelles et al., 2020), which posits that if students have their needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness met, they would be highly motivated to perform well. This interpretation applies for the students in this study as well. The findings summarized above indicate that the students exercised their autonomy through the personal strengths they discovered about themselves such as time-management, taking initiative, and other improved study habits. As discussed above, the students in this study were mostly appreciative of the feedback they received on their progress and the resulting sense of achievement they felt, which indicates that their need of competence was met, too. An important theme discussed above as part of the helpful adjustment strategies used by the students was the positive social relationships, which shows that the students' need of relatedness was also responded to.

Findings viewed through Kübler-Ross' theoretical lens

Going through the findings a number of times while simultaneously reading the literature on response to unexpected life circumstances and events, I noticed that Kübler-Ross' five-stage grief model (1969) offers a useful framework to make sense of the findings.

Swiss psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) originally devised her five-stage grief model, consisting of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, to make sense of the ways people process the grief resulting from terminal illness and death. However, the model has been adapted for other life-changing experiences and loss, e.g., end of a close relationship, job loss, organizational change, or any perceived or real change in one's life. Kübler-Ross (1969) clarified that the stages in her model were not linear; but could take place in any order and even concurrently, with some people never experiencing certain stages.

Kessler, who co-authored several books with Kübler-Ross, added a sixth stage to the model, "meaning", which can transform grief into a more peaceful and hopeful experience. This stage does not refer to finding the silver lining or meaning in the painful incident or hurtful situation that caused grief, rather focusing on one's life after the hurt in an effort to make it more purposeful after the loss, through productivity, creativity, and altruism.

As discussed above, facing the challenges brought about by the abrupt shift to online learning had a profound impact on the psychological wellbeing of the participants who reported experiencing a sense of shock, fear of the unknown, denial, frustration and increased levels of stress. These findings resemble Kübler-Ross' denial, anger, and depression stages. The denial is the first of the five stages of grief in the Kübler-Ross model, where one is in a state of shock, feels the world is meaningless, and doubts the reality of the loss. This stage helps one buffer the immediate shock of the hurtful situation. Once the reality sets in, the pain is often redirected and expressed as anger, which is the second stage. Since anger is a rejected

feeling in many cultures, one might resort to avoidance strategies, which gets in the way of healing. Along with anger, one might cope with pain through the emotions of impatience, bitterness, and anxiety. The third stage is bargaining, where one remains in the past and believes that they can avoid the pain through a type of negotiation. They would be willing to sacrifice anything to go back to normality of their lives before the hurtful event. The bargaining stage of grief did not emerge from the data directly, except for some statements in reflective self-evaluations and reflective essays where they compared their pre-pandemic academic life to the current one, expressing how they missed being in a physical classroom, communicating face-to-face with their classmates, and hoping to return to normality soon after the lockdown, in a sense, temporarily sacrificing their freedom. The fourth stage, depression, is the intense sadness and despair, which occurs when one acknowledges the situation cannot be fixed or reversed. During this stage, one may feel empty, fatigued, confused, distracted, drained, and numb.

The fifth stage, acceptance, takes place when one comes to terms with reality. This is a time of re-adjustment, growing, and evolving into the new reality, although not necessarily feeling content or okay with it. The last two salient themes identified in the data (i.e., *adjustment,* where students reflected on how they adapted to online education after the outbreak, and *perceived benefits*, where they reflected on lessons learned and the positives that came out of this experience) correspond to Kübler-Ross' acceptance and meaning stages.

Challenges and Limitations

The overwhelming amount of work as a result of the shift to ERT, balancing work and personal life in the midst of a pandemic, and uncertainties experienced throughout the semester were the biggest challenges I faced while conducting this study. Another challenge I faced had to do with my dual role as a researcher and a teacher. Addressing this issue, Radnor (2002) notes that "The researcher cannot remove her way of seeing from the process, but she

can engage in reflexively in the process and be aware of her interpretive framework" (p.31). Following this insight, I made a conscious effort to become aware of my own assumptions and biases that may impact the research in any possible way. This constant endeavor to become aware of all these reality filters helped me to keep a critical distance from the data, analyze what the students wrote in their reflective essays with a more objective stance. In fact, I came to realize that my dual role benefitted the research process as it allowed me to have close knowledge of the students' experiences and to build the needed rapport with them. Had I not built a trustful bond with the students throughout the semester, they would not have revealed the challenges they faced, nor shared their genuine thoughts with me in their reflective essays.

Using additional data sources for triangulation purposes, such as interviews and a survey, would have been helpful in increasing the rigor of the study. However, given the special circumstances related to COVID-19 restrictions and the increased workload influencing both the students and faculty, I was unable to use any additional data sources. These limitations can be taken as suggestions for future research.

Conclusion

The findings of this study regarding the challenges faced, the adaptation process, and the perceived benefits at the end of the semester highlights the necessity of a pedagogy of care, affection and empathy during times of crisis. As aptly put by Bozkurt et al. (2020):

> With the uncertainty that characterizes this period of human existence and the resulting anxiety and trauma that learners, teachers and parents are experiencing, the theme of a pedagogy of care has surfaced within educational institutions [. . .] A care approach to education pushes educators to recognize and address the diversity of students' experiences and vulnerabilities, allowing them to be more receptive not only to the assumed needs of students but also their expressed and individual needs. This requires

structures and practices that go beyond academia and prioritizes the emotional and psychological development and needs of students, especially during times of crisis. (p. 4)

Transparent and genuine communication with students, particularly those who are already disadvantaged due to their socio-economic status, is one of the pillars of pedagogy of care, which calls for a stronger support system (Concerned Academics, 2020). In this view, for effective and meaningful learning to take place, educators and other concerned authorities should see students as individuals first, each surrounded by their unique personal, socio-economic and political circumstances, beyond their decontextualized "learner" roles in the classroom.

Research on ERT during the pandemic as well as shifts to remote education during previous times of crisis suggest that several strategies and practices can contribute to creating a more humanistic environment conducive to learning. Flexibility with coursework demands; multiple points of contact; prompt, clear, transparent, compassionate and empathetic communication between students and teachers; reciprocity of caring; student centered design and teaching practices are the most important teaching and learning strategies and practices (Di Carlo et al., 2007; Gomez, 2013; Mackey et al., 2021; Tull, Dabner, & Ayebi-Arthur, 2017; Swartz, Gachago, & Belford, 2018; Robinson et al., 2020; Sitzman, & Leners, 2006; Velasquez et al., 2013). These suggested strategies are in line with the findings of the present study as a common theme in the data was the students' detailed accounts of their adjustment process and what helped them deal with the challenges as well as the sense of shock they endured as a result of the abrupt shift to online learning. The students mostly reflected on factors such as sense of solidarity, synchronous meetings, encouraging feedback, positive

classroom atmosphere, adhering to their goals, and the sense of achievement they felt after completing a given task

On a final note, this study has contributed to the body of research on using students' reflective writing as a data collection tool in qualitative research. The data were collected throughout online learning at several intervals and provided access to students' experiences as directly told by them in their reflective essays. The use of reflective essays as a data source provided access to details and depth of data that would have been difficult to gain otherwise. However, I would like to emphasize that it is not my intention to judge whether the participants' subjective first-person accounts reveal the "truth" about their lived experiences, or that have a completely transparent access to those. From an interpretative research standpoint, my primary objective in this study has been to portray the participants' experiences as viewed from their own subjective perspectives. A perspective, as Charon (2009) explains "is an angle on reality, a place where the individual stands as he or she looks at it and tries to understand reality…. and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted. There is no possible way that the individual can encounter reality 'in the raw', directly, as it really is, for whatever is seen can only be part of the real situation" (p. 3). While this definition explains the significance of the notion of perspectives as a tool for people to make sense of the world, it also reveals the restrictive side of it in that one can only see what their perspective allows them to see. This does not mean that there is no truth at all; "there is something actually happening out there in the world – but we cannot know it completely or in any perfectly accurate way because we always see it through filters we are here calling perspectives" (Charon, 2009, p. 6). Likewise, in their discussion on the authenticity of reflection from a phenomenological approach, Nunn and Brandt (2016) note that reflective writing should not necessarily "be seen as, or even need to be, 'accurate' or 'true' in any objective sense" (p.148). They further clarify that "Even so-called 'real'

experience, once narrated, is reconstructed or reinvented. Once written down it becomes an object in its own right" and has its own deep-seated sense of reality, as is always claimed for literature (p.148).

Hence, informed by an interpretive approach to research, this study does not have any claims of generalizability. However, I hope the findings can be inspiring for academicians in their adjustment to ERT. With the insights it provides, the study may serve a useful purpose with curriculum development and instructional practices and contribute to the development of strategies that facilitate students' learning in the case of a required shift to ERT in the future.

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