

Challenges Faced by Lecturers in Teaching Interpersonal Communication Skills Online to Medical Students at University Malaysia Sarawak

VIMALA GOVINDARAJU*
MALIA TAIBI
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about changes in the teaching and learning process at overall educational institutions and higher educational institution such as universities also affected. The pandemic period had an impact on the implementation of online teaching and learning with medical students at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Malaysia Sarawak. It is important to develop medical students' interpersonal communication skills by shifting theoretical and practical courses to virtual courses, which encourage the students to adapt early in their medical student careers. Interpersonal communication is needed in the context of building an educational civilization in shaping the medical student personality. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have been required to conduct teaching and learning activities from face-to-face classes to fully online classes. The challenge today is the loss of interpersonal communication caused by online teaching and learning. This study examines the challenges faced by the lecturers at the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Malaysia Sarawak. This study adapted the qualitative method through a phenomenological approach. Semi-structured In-depth interviews were conducted with lecturers who were experienced in teaching medical students. The data transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematically to encode the main themes and subthemes. There are several challenges identified in online learning such as limited non-verbal cues, reduced student engagement and emotional disconnect, technological barriers and assessment difficulties for lecturers in teaching using interpersonal communication skills to medical students at University Malaysia Sarawak.

Keywords: *Interpersonal, communication, lecturers, challenges, skills.*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is transactional, a symbolic process that requires people to build relationships between people and adjust their environments through the exchange of information in order to try to reinforce and change the attitudes and behaviors of others (Cangara, 2007). According to Laidlaw and Hart (2011), communication is one of the most crucial clinical skills. However, it can be complicated because it involves communications between individuals in different positions. It can also be emotionally charged at times and is crucial when it comes to matters that can be used to address intimate and personal problems. A positive relationship between patients and doctors is the outcome of sympathetic conduct and patient-centered treatment, which are based on effective communication (Taveira-Gomes et al., 2016).

The core of any healthcare encounter is interpersonal and communication skills (ICS). The literature has observed that the phrase "health communication," which describes the downward and outward flow of knowledge, is frequently used interchangeably with health education (Macnamara, 2021). Health education is essential to community and individual health and forms the cornerstone of preventative health care systems. Global higher

*Corresponding author: gvimala@unimas.my

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education is being impacted by the Coronavirus disease outbreak and dissemination (COVID-19). The WHO proclaimed the new Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) a worldwide pandemic on March 11, 2020. In these cases, online media are used for learning activities, and internet-based virtual learning takes the place of in-person instruction (Putra et al., 2020; Surani & Hamidah, 2020).

According to Schwartzman (2020), new online educators face a number of difficulties, most notably the loss of independent time and space as well as synchronous and asynchronous content. Literature pointed COVID-19 has compelled educators and students to embrace digital communication technologies in teaching and learning (Sharipudin et al., 2024). The researchers explained that the role of educators in communicative learning is important in the context of online learning, so it also sheds light on balances such as the relative benefits of rigor and adaptability. The interpersonal communication that takes place largely determines the learning goals and makes it easier to understand the content. The literature suggests that interpersonal communication has a positive impact on teacher performance, which means that good interpersonal communication improves teacher performance (Tuerah et al., 2019).

Online learning has become a benchmark for academic institutions focused on moving their educational content to the digital world and delivering classes online. It is therefore the responsibility of educational institutions to ensure the availability of appropriate internal access and the use of technology to facilitate it. Another study pointed In the context of communication between teacher and students, the communication that occurs is by the characteristics of interpersonal communication, which encourages the effectiveness of communication between the teacher and students (Triwardhani, Trigartanti & Putra, 2020). The essence of interpersonal communication in learning is exchange behavior, which is expressed in emotional and material exchanges between teachers and students and between classmates (Shan et al., 2018). In the process of teaching and learning, interpersonal communications are crucial for human health and well-being in addition to learning (Bragg, 2007). According to Toufaily, Zalan, and Lee (2018), medical students who choose online learning lose their feeling of community and social engagement since they are unable to interact with teachers and peers in real time or with a human touch. Although there are fewer support alternatives available, online learning gives greater flexibility.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative phenomenological research design using semi-structured interviews with experienced online teachers was used (Richardson & Ice, 2010). According to the literature, phenomenology emerged in the 20th century as a method of philosophy based on the study of phenomena by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Patton, 2002). Researchers may be able to comprehend and explain the structure of the events they are studying by looking at fundamental aspects of the human experience, the scientists said. A list of possible participants with a wealth of online learning experience was compiled using a purposive sampling technique. The idea of purposive sampling, in which researchers choose individuals who particularly advance our knowledge of the research issue or phenomenon under study, is also emphasized in the literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2003). A study pointed to a phenomenological approach which is a kind of description that covers both what the individuals have experienced and how they have experienced the particular phenomenon (Tang & Omar, 2023).

In this study, a qualitative method using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen as the aim is to understand the significance of the phenomenon in the online teaching of interpersonal communication skills as experienced by the researcher (Dyche, 2007). In general, this study used in-depth interviews to convey detailed life experiences, especially the challenges faced by instructors in teaching online interpersonal communication skills to medical students at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on semi-structured interviews with lecturers to share their life experiences and perspectives on the research phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews elicit faculty's own professional experiences, views, and explanations about how interpersonal communication skills, particularly the use of verbal and nonverbal communication, can help students progress online.

A sample group of people selected by the researcher for the related research objective and research problem. In the literature scholar refers to samples of 5 to 25 participants depending on the purpose of the study (Morse, 1994). In this research, the researchers surveyed 20 instructors who teach medical students. In-depth interviews were typically conducted face-to-face between the interviewer and participant. Considering the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers conducted the data collection process online. During the interview, the researcher interacted with the informant by asking questions in a neutral manner, listening carefully to the informant's answers, and proceeding with the investigation by asking further questions based on the answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews, it was found that eight informants agreed and participated in this study. Of the eight informants, five were women and three were men. The informants ranged in age from their 30 to 50. These informants have between 10 and 25 years of professional experience as physicians, medical professionals, and academics. The following discussion addresses the challenges that informants face when using interpersonal communication skills with medical students during online teaching and learning. Based on thematic analysis, several barriers were identified in the interviews.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication skills are one of the student competencies that need attention. Two-way communication helps improve psycho emotional states because both people can openly engage (Aziz, Sukor, & Razak, 2020). This ensures that a sense of positive recognition is created through the interactive communication between the two parties. A study highlighted on building relationships in interpersonal communication requires the role of a communicator. The teacher who becomes the important medium in communication with students will be the main reference for students (Triwardhani, Trigartanti, & Putra, 2020). In e-learning situations, two-way communication between students and teachers, including instructors, is limited. As physical classrooms disappear, group activities will need to be modified to accommodate the inevitable disruptions. For example, on Zoom, activities to improve students' interpersonal skills are primarily conducted through breakout rooms (Chen, 2021). The researchers contrasted this scenario with in-person group discussions and online learning environments, where students mostly engage in unsupervised learning. These circumstances, together with psychological stressors like fear and worry brought on by the pandemic, are causing more disruptions in education than ever before.

Interpersonal communication emerged as one of the most important modes of communication during the pandemic. Student growth is impacted by the interpersonal communication skill of empathy. (Lecturer 1)

Interpersonal communication between students and teachers mostly occurred in the classroom or during the lectures processes. (Lecturer 3)

Interpersonal communication is one of the important elements to increase student learning motivation. I understand that conducting interpersonal communication skills in teaching and learning can help to achieve the desired goals. (Lecturer 4)

In the online lectures, these elements of interpersonal communication are interesting because there will be differences where there is a loss of interpersonal communication dimension when this involves technology and digital devices. (Lecturer 9)

Limited Non-Verbal Cues

All instructors experienced and noted that in private teaching and learning environments, nonverbal communication such as body language and eye contact supports verbal communication between students and teachers. However, research shows that students in virtual learning environments refuse to turn on their cameras in online environments, and for good reason (Alruwais et al., 2018; Slimi, 2020). Castelli and Sarvary (2021) argued that refusing to turn on the camera is an international challenge.

As lecturers, we can interact with students to control the lesson in a physical classroom. Additionally, some aspects of interpersonal communication using both verbal and nonverbal signs are absent from the online course. For instance, Zoom's poor social cue communication necessitates more intentional actions. Several times in the last weeks of my IPC course, I felt like a bad teacher when I had to cut off some students' interesting discussions about unrelated topics. (Lecturer 2)

There are issues with online instruction where instructors and students don't communicate face-to-face. For instance, lecturers can't see students' body language while they're watching a video. (Lecturer 3)

Lecturers can't see students' faces, their genuine reactions when they are lecturing online. It is very difficult to evaluate actual pupils' comprehension of the lessons conveyed by this response, which is not representative of real life. Naturally, the students will participate in the online classes, listen, and join, but evaluating their responses and communications proved somewhat challenging. (Lecturer 4)

I always encourage students to talk and respond. Unfortunately, I could not get these in online activity as their microphones are all muted, and some did not even turn on their videos. (Lecturer 7)

In online learning, both students and lecturers lose out on nonverbal clues like body language and facial expressions, which are vital in medical education because it's critical to comprehend patient emotions and behaviors. In the majority of online courses, professors appear on the screen while students quiet themselves. I want to talk about our own here. (Lecturer 6)

Reduced Student Engagement

The reduced sense of human touch minimises the ability to motivate and engage students through meaningful communication, which would otherwise ensue from the relationship between instructor and student. In order to attempts humanize in the online teaching and learning process as far as is feasible by encompassing two-way communication can possibly develop the lack of engagement (Dhawan, 2020). A research at Telkom University and UIN Bandung (Watnaya et al., 2020) displays the same thing where students and lecturers miss the feeling of togetherness, empathy for physical appearance, respect, and face-to-face meetings in lectures.

In some other way, students and lecturers are facing difficulty in building relationships. For example, lecturers always establish a strong student-educators relationship among students and the online learning situation creates more challenges as well as it somehow affects mentorship and peer support. (Lecturers 8)

Technological Barriers

Interruptions in the online learning process are caused by instability of the Internet network, number of tasks, power outages, and noisy atmosphere during learning. Haswani et al. (2020) found that internet connectivity was the most important factor influencing e-learning effectiveness. The scientist also emphasized that the availability of the Internet and the cost of the Internet his package will determine the continuity of online learning. In reality, however, the study found that students' internet access is limited by their geographic location and limited funds to purchase internet packages. The interviews revealed that most instructors faced unstable internet connectivity among students. The official added that students' literacy levels and ability to access online learning are also critical to the effectiveness of online learning, especially for students living in rural areas. For example:

Basically medical students came from different parts of Malaysia especially students from Sabah and Sarawak facing internet instability as they stayed in rural areas. For this continuity of online learning, students experienced limited internet access because of their geographical location. (Lecturer 1)

As lecturers were teaching from home, their internet providers differed from one another. Thus, slow internet can also disrupt their e-learning classrooms. Some features, such as interactive chat forums, or interactive online

presentation technology are needed to maintain students' engagement and motivation in learning via online technology. (Lecturer 5)

Without direct communication, teachers were unable to check students' understanding, students' reactions, students' engagement with the course being taught. (Lecturer 8)

Challenges through increased network traffic to support the centralised infrastructure and limited capacity and capability to handle student academic communication. (Lecturer 9)

Online learning is personalized, student-paced, student-teacher communication, unobtrusive presentation of course materials, and a technical interface free of technical glitches (Alonso et al., 2005). Online learning requires a balance between learner characteristics and technical skills (Dabbagh, 2007; Vladova et al., 2021; Scheel et al., 2022). Furthermore, teachers' skills in handling and using technology in education also influence students' trust and acceptance of digital learning (Vladova et al., 2022).

Lack of technical skills has become a major challenge for educators in developing and implementing online education, and medical educators are currently required to devote sufficient time to teaching management, research, and balance between personal and professional life. (Lecturer 3)

The lecturers still find mastering new technology is mandatory in their e-learning practice. Teaching technology is needed to keep up with the current trends in e-learning practice, and teaching pedagogy is also needed to make their online learning interesting, engaging and can achieve their teaching objectives. Yet, the most important is to make online classes ideal by maintaining the teacher-student connection. (Lecturer 5)

Another barrier to the development and implementation of online learning is reported to be the reluctance of educators to use new technologies (Ayoub et al., 2020). Technical issues are problems caused by the platform's hardware and software resources. Most users of e-learning platforms do not have the basic technical requirements needed for the courses they enroll in (Alkharang & Ghinea, 2013). Technological challenges are hindering meaningful academic experiences during the pandemic and ERT (Eberle & Hobrecht, 2021). One of the lecturer pointed on the online challenges as below:

Platform portability, which is the ability for the platform to be accessible from any device, weak internet bandwidth, unstable power supply, and hardware challenges such as weak monitor display can be a threat for the users in deriving the full benefits of the platform. (Lecturer 5)

Many of the interruptions that occur in the online learning process are caused by the instability of the Internet network, the number of assignments, power outages, and the noisy atmosphere during learning. (Lecturer 6)

Assessment Difficulties

Educational challenges include the instructor's skills in using technology to increase student concentration and motivation through interactive learning activities during synchronous learning, high-quality presentation slides, video recording, asynchronous forums, and more. Includes creative and engaging materials such as written communication in chat. Similar to online learning, online assessment can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous online assessments are similar to automated assessments and feedback quizzes, simulations, and presentations. Online assessments can be viewed through asynchronous forms of e-portfolios, reflections, projects, or assignments (Khan & Jawaid, 2020). In traditional teaching methods, the teaching process takes place between teachers and students at the same place and at the same time. Distance learning, on the other hand, allows teaching and learning to occur in different locations and at different times, which we often refer to as asynchronous learning (Kusuma, 2022). Teaching and learning through online design as student-centered learning. It is a way to orient learners to be independent in their learning and take responsibility for their understanding (Cucus & Aprilinda, 2016).

The lecturers in the online teaching and learning act as a mediator and also facilitator for the students if he or she finds problems in the learning process. The openness of the lecturer to open communication channels with students that may exceed traditional class learning hours is critical to the achievement of the learning process, which in turn builds student confidence. (Lecturer 2)

Pedagogy should be the cornerstone to any e-learning technology. Pedagogy requires the educator to understand how students learn, then design and deliver course materials, and mentor students appropriately, so that knowledge and skills are passed on. (Lecturer 3)

Teaching hands-on, such as clinical skill, is difficult to be conducted online. During the face to face teaching and learning process, medical lecturers get feedback on the content which teaches both theoretically and practically. (Lecturer 4)

E-learning requires a different approach to pedagogy especially in areas such as individual and group communication and online assessment. As e-learning is currently widespread, academics who are not equipped technically to handle developments of materials and delivering online modules are hampering progress, and they require extensive skills development. (Lecturer 6)

In some clinical teaching it is impossible to be run online. While the subject can be taught in a theoretical manner, practical such as palpation for hepatomegaly would be remotely impossible to be trained online. (Lecturer 5)

THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

From a theoretical perspective, this study introduces the structure of instructors' interpersonal communication, the elements of verbal and nonverbal communication, the obstacles of doctors' interpersonal communication skills, and the ways to overcome the obstacles of doctors' interpersonal communication skills. Lecturer at UNIMAS Faculty of Medicine. A theoretical perspective is developed and the behavior of UNIMAS Faculty of Medicine instructors using interpersonal communication skills with students during online teaching and learning due to COVID-19 is empirically validated. This theory was used in this study as a perspective to recognize and identify the emergence of interpersonal communication skills used by teachers in relation to the challenges faced in the online education process. Although building theory is not the purpose of this study, this study suggests that theory and models provide a way to comprehensively understand her IPC functioning practices.

Social Cognitive Theory

Figure 1 depicts a triangle in which cognitive, behavioral, and other individual factors and environmental processes all act as interacting elements. Albert Bandura, the founder of social cognitive theory, described human behavior as a communication between personal factors, environmental factors, and the behavior itself (Bandura, 1977). Bandura identified self-efficacy (confidence in performing the behavior), outcome expectancy (expectations about the consequences associated with performing the behavior), and personal goals related to the behavior to be most relevant. According to Rahmat (2021), using appropriate learning strategies, the learning process is also facilitated by the surrounding learning environment. Effective learning requires the communication of environment, behavior, and cognition. According to Figure 1 Bandura (1977), social cognitive theory is a learning theory that emphasizes the environment in which learners find themselves and contributes to their behavior. This behavior is important in building a person's perception.

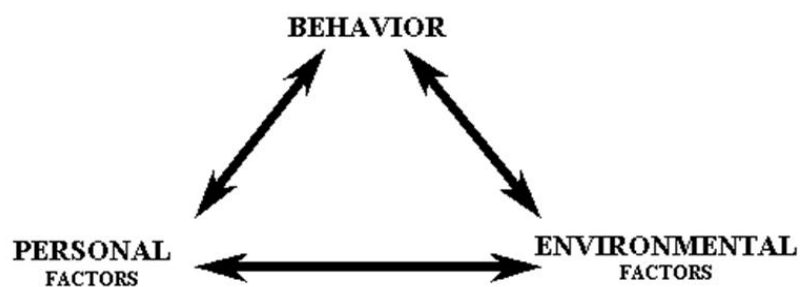


Figure 1: Social Cognitive Theory (Source: Bandura ,1977)

i. Online Environment

One of the important aspects of online teaching and learning is communication. Martin and Bolliger (2018) described communication as the communication between the teacher, the learner, and the learner that revolves around the content. The communication between the learner and the instructor is a two-way communication. Similar two-way communication to exchange ideas and information involves a learner and another learner within the course content. On the other hand, communications between learners and content are considered personal communications and may or may not be supported by the instructor. Because online

learners appear to have minimal opportunities to interact with the instructor's domain, it is difficult to understand the factors that contribute or otherwise contribute to high-quality communication in online learning environments. It is important.

ii. Environment (Learner-Instructor Communication)

Communication between instructors and students refers to actions taken by professionals to stimulate students' attention and motivate them to study. Communication is far from standard as instructors, conversations function to convey knowledge, exhibit and demonstrate skills and particular attitudes and values (Attardi et al., 2018). Facilitation or communication with learners between educators and students are important elements of the quality of online learning (Alqurashi, 2019; Ladyshevsky, 2013).

iii. Behavior (Learner-Learner Communication)

Another important but often overlooked communication is between learners, which can be a valuable resource for learning (Attardi et al., 2018). Gray and DiLoreto (2016) stated that there is a weak relationship between student-learner communication and satisfaction in an online learning environment. However, some researchers suggest that this is not the case and that communications between learners play a role in student satisfaction in online learning environments (Moore, 2014; Attardi et al., 2018).

iv. Cognition (Learner-Content Communication)

Considering that online learning occurred in an infinite amount of time and place, it is crucial to take the students' independent learning into consideration. Moore (1990) describes learner-content communication as the process of engaging intellectually with the topic or the content, which alters the learners' comprehension of the subject. It is important that the content is designed and structured properly to make it easier for the student to engage with the material even though this is considered as the weakest link communication (Xiao, 2017).

ONLINE LEARNING ENGAGEMENT MODEL DIMENSIONS

Three important dimensions—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement—that provide difficulties for lecturers instructing medical students at University Malaysia Sarawak in interpersonal communication skills are highlighted by the Online Learning Engagement Model. Reduced participation in communication activities, such as role-plays, which are essential for developing communication skills, impedes behavioral engagement. The absence of in-person communication affects emotional engagement, making it challenging to establish rapport and create a positive learning atmosphere. Since online platforms frequently lack the immediacy and complexity of in-person talks, students' inability to fully understand complex communication topics in a virtual setting poses a hurdle to cognitive engagement. Using cutting-edge digital tools, developing emotionally supportive virtual environments, and using tactics that encourage critical thinking and active learning are all necessary to meet these challenges. The focus of this study was to equate learning states with learning behaviors and cognitive states with affective learning experiences. Scholars have focused on social communications in online learning and proposed aspects of social engagement (Liang, 2018; Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). Therefore, the components of the online learning engagement model identified by researchers are divided into four dimensions in this study:

cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, affective engagement, and social engagement.

i. Cognitive Engagement Dimension

For teachers at University Malaysia Sarawak who teach medical students interpersonal communication skills online, the cognitive involvement factor presents serious difficulties. The mental work and commitment students do to comprehending and mastering course information is referred to as cognitive engagement. Distractions, little communication, and a dearth of immersive learning opportunities can make it difficult for students to concentrate and fully engage with difficult communication ideas in an online environment. Students' cognitive engagement is further reduced by the lack of practical exercises and real-world simulations, which are essential for fostering interpersonal skills. Lecturers must use cutting-edge techniques like interactive case studies, virtual simulations, and problem-based learning exercises that promote critical thinking and the application of knowledge in authentic settings in order to overcome these obstacles. A distance learning platform has been introduced to facilitate learning during this COVID-19 crisis. The literature points out the unique environment of online learning compared to offline learning environments. Online learners need to pay more attention to cognitive engagement to cope with complex learning situations (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). Learners with high cognitive engagement tend to revisit ideas and have a strong thirst for knowledge. Conversely, less qualified learners show only superficial efforts, such as memorizing knowledge. The researchers of this study focused on the cognitive processes of learners, from concrete to abstract, but adapting Bloom's revised taxonomy of educational goals in the dimension of engagement in order to memorize, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and achieve.

ii. Behavioral Engagement Dimension

One of the biggest obstacles professors at University Malaysia Sarawak confront when instructing medical students in interpersonal communication skills online is the behavioral engagement factor. When students actively participate in learning activities, such as participating in online sessions, adding to conversations, and doing assignments, this is referred to as behavioral engagement. Distractions, a lack of physical presence, and a diminished sense of accountability make it challenging to maintain regular behavioral engagement in an online environment. Interactive exercises like role-playing and group projects are frequently necessary for interpersonal communication skills, and they are more difficult to carry out successfully in a virtual setting. Passive attendance during online sessions can easily go unnoticed, making it difficult for lecturers to keep an eye on engagement and make sure students are actively engaged. The problem may be made worse by the lack of instant feedback or in-person connection, which may also make students less inclined to participate. Adopting cutting-edge teaching techniques, such as gamified learning, interactive platforms, and frequent check-ins, is necessary to address this dimension and encourage active student participation and maintain interest throughout the learning process. Learning platforms can record detailed learning behaviors of learners at different times, such as viewing and posting resources (Khe, 2010; Feng et al., 2016). For this study, researchers included the division of behavioral engagement dimensions which focused on the four different learning behaviors commonly used in online learning platforms in the behavioral engagement dimensions (Nandi et al., 2012; Hew, Cheung, & Ng, 2010).

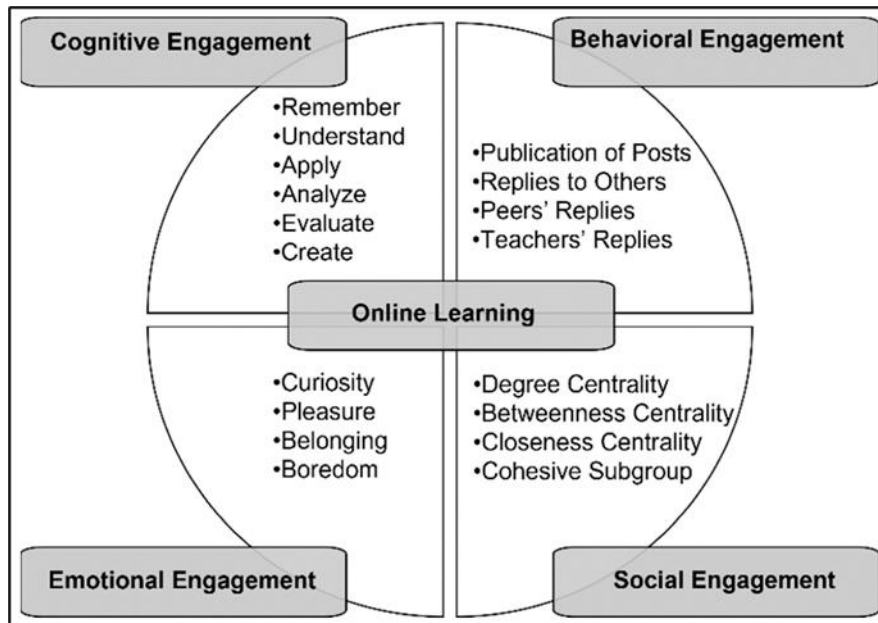


Figure 2: Online Learning Engagement Analysis Model

iii. Emotional Engagement Dimension

Emotional engagement can affect cognition, behavior, and communication with peers. Students will show a positive state when involved with highly positive emotions. The classic emotional engagement scale, in which emotional responses include interest, happiness, boredom, and sadness (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). It is also noted that emotional engagement should include students' identification with the school, which involves a sense of belonging and value. Scholars conducted empirical research and analysis and discovered that "a sense of belonging" is more significant than "sadness" as a common emotion in distance learning (Yu et al., 2020). This study divides the dimension of emotional engagement into four dimensions, which is curiosity, which means that students are curious about the course content, teaching and learning materials, and teaching methods that apply to teach medical students. At the same time this emotional engagement dimension pointing that students who are actively communicating with lecturers and have a sense of belonging to the with the course content, However this emotional engagement dimension also inline with the process of communication in online learning will lead to boredom somehow lead to students' negative emotions such as boredom of course content, resources, and teaching methods.

iv. Social Engagement Dimension

Online learning offers a range of interactive techniques due to technological advancements and modifications. Scholars added communication engagement to the online learning engagement measurement scale and found that communication enhanced their sense of social presence (Handelsman et al., 2005). Based on previous studies, this study divides the dimension of social engagement into four dimensions as follows: (1) Degree centrality, which refers to the total number of people the learner contacts in the course communication network; (2) Closeness centrality, which means that the sum of the distance between the learner and all other people connected with him in the course communication network; (3) Betweenness centrality, referring to the number of shortest paths that pass through a learner

in the course communication network; and (4) Cohesive subgroup, meaning that the number of groups formed by learners in the course communication network. According to the existing engagement analysis model of online learning, this research divided the online learning engagement model into these four dimensions: cognition, behavior, emotional, and social engagement, in combination with different analysis methods. As shown in Figure 2, we comprehensively analyze the process of online learning engagement to create an online learning engagement analysis model.

FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research should thus incorporate effective professional communication to be able to construct and sustain therapeutic relationships between doctors and patients. Doctors with good interpersonal communication skills are competent to identify problems earlier and can avoid health care issues and provide moral support and encouragement to their patients. Communication between the doctor and patient is one of the major elements in the health care process. Educate and train these skills to medical students as setting philosophies by regulating organizations must include communication skills in place to measure these skills for health care professionals. Canary and Lakey (2006) quoted communication competence skills can be educated and improved through experience. Regular education and training courses are important in the process of improving and developing the communication skills for all the medical profession. Future research pointing to health care professionals, who should consider making an effort to increase communication competence skills through teaching and training that may have facilitated belongings on these results. The greatest proficiency in continuing education and training for medical doctors in matters connected to the proper technique of communication will enable them to respond effectively and kindly to the expectations of patients. Sharpening the basic communication skills formerly recommended can strengthen the relationship between the doctors and patients which they believe is lacking among many doctors and patients.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The interpersonal communication that occurs greatly relates to the lecturer's performance in preparing and managing online classes. Literature pointed that "Interpersonal communication has a positive effect on teacher performance, meaning that excellent interpersonal communication will improve teacher performance (Tuerah, 2019). The results of this study indicate that lecturers faced challenges in teaching Interpersonal Communication Skills to Medical Students during the online learning environment. Online learning has become a benchmark in academic institutions that focus on transferring educational content to the digital world so that teaching methods are delivered online. This transformation focused on providing a quality online teaching and learning environment by modifying and improving online learning environments, which are rapidly becoming a major factor in the educational landscape.

CONCLUSION

The Covid 19 pandemic had an impact with the implementation of online teaching and learning at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). Online learning, which is one of the emerging ways, has a number of challenges, especially from the perspective of interpersonal communication because lecturers and

students concentrate more on using online media as a learning tool. It has been extremely difficult to teach medical students at University Malaysia Sarawak interpersonal communication skills online, highlighting the difficulties of simulating face-to-face communication in virtual environments. The incapacity to perceive and communicate nonverbal cues, which are essential for comprehending the subtleties of communication, is a significant obstacle. Furthermore, it can be challenging to keep students interested in an online setting, particularly when teaching interpersonal skills like empathy, active listening, and dispute resolution. The learning process is further hampered by technological obstacles such as erratic internet connectivity and a lack of experience with digital technologies. These problems are made worse by the challenges of evaluating interpersonal skills online, since meaningful assessment frequently necessitates in-person communication and real-time feedback. The relationship between instructors and students, which is crucial for building trust and promoting successful learning, is also weakened by the absence of emotional connection in online environments. To overcome these obstacles, a multifaceted strategy is needed. The gap between theory and practice can be closed by using blended learning strategies, enhancing digital infrastructure, and incorporating cutting-edge virtual tools like role-playing and simulation software. Even though online learning provides flexibility, innovative approaches are still required to guarantee successful communication skill acquisition, which is essential for the creation of capable, compassionate medical professionals.

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BIODATA

Vimala Govindaraju is a university lecturer under the Strategic Communication Program at the Faculty of Language and Communication, University Malaysia Sarawak. She obtained her Ph.D. in Human Communication from University Putra Malaysia in the year 2017. She also obtained her first degree in Communication and Master's Degree in Corporate Communication from University Putra Malaysia. Her areas of specialization are in Human Communication, Interpersonal Communication, Health Communication and Corporate Communication. Email: gvimala@unimas.my

Malia Taibi is a senior lecturer with the Strategic Communication Programme at the Faculty of Education, Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). She graduated from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Shah Alam with a Bachelor of Mass Communication (Journalism) and earned MA in Communication and Media Studies from Coventry University, United Kingdom. Her research interests are on media studies, youth and culture. Email: tmalia@unimas.my

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