

Monograph writing and “distant” supervision in the pandemic

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Abstract

Due to the spread of Corona Virus, The Moroccan government decided to close all universities, a decision that impacted the lives of professors and students in a negative way since the latter were not capable to attend conventional classes in their institutions. As an alternative, to reach the goal of allowing students and their supervisors to interact, distant learning started to be developed in the form of some online platforms set by universities in addition to personal initiatives from teachers via the use of online resources like zoom. This shift in education from traditional classroom learning to computer-based online learning, which might be one of the largest educational experiments to date, has also changed the way monograph supervision is accomplished. In this article we will display the different problems university professors faced in monograph supervision at the level of methodology and interaction.

Keywords: distant learning; Covid; supervision; monographs; methodology; interaction

Introduction:

The impact of the pandemic has been remarkable and its disruptions have affected all Moroccan universities. Since students form vulnerable groups in terms of income, gender, geography, and special needs, they have been hit hard, suffering economic hardship, encountering connection difficulties, and living in emotional distress. The bright side of the pandemic, however, has to do with the fact that it has tremendously accelerated the adoption of flexible pathways and innovative curricular, pedagogical and assessment approaches that are student-centered and take advantage, whenever appropriate, of advanced technologies that can make learning more stimulating, engaging, and effective. Nonetheless, students still face many difficulties in terms of learning, assessment, and communication. This very fact is challenging to supervisors, whose mission is to accompany students along the bumpy road of researching and writing, taking into consideration both quality issues and the university timeline. In the present piece of communication, it will be shown that monograph writing at the BA level, one of the tasks students are entitled to perform, is an area of difficulty in distant supervision at the level of methodology and interaction.

Method

The huge impact of the pandemic on the Moroccan university has led the latter to rely heavily on the resources of modern information and communication technology (ICT) in its attempt to be synchronous. This synchronicity is mainly apparent in supervision where the task of learning becomes more difficult and the students more irritable when they reach the crucial phases in the research project. Since research papers necessitate frequent interaction between supervisors and their supervisees, DL may hinder the production of quality research within the proper time deadline. Dealing with different topics in different fields increases the responsibility of professors exponentially as every student

constitutes a special case that needs customized mentoring. In DL, the supervisor is required to build a culture of productive interaction with his/her supervisee (Easton, 2003).

To understand this situation, we interviewed 20 professors who supervised research papers in the pandemic period by opting for a purposive sampling, which is used to select the subjects for data collection. Many pieces of research have tackled issues related to the students in DL, while issues of supervisors also need more investigation. To do so, primary data were collected from the faculty of letters (Saiss) and the faculty of letters (Dhar Lmehraz) at Sidi Mohammed Benabdellah university (Fez), and the faculty of letters at Moulay Ismail university (Meknes) from teachers who supervised research papers at the B.A level in DL. We used semi-structured interviews with informed consent. Using interviews as a data collection instrument makes our investigation a qualitative study adopting an inductive approach and assuming interpretivism as a philosophy.

Some questions we asked the professors were:

1. How was your supervision experience in DL?
2. Have you experienced any difference between supervision in the conventional system and in DL? If yes, can you describe the experience?
3. What were the main problems you encountered in supervision?
4. Could you enumerate the major challenges of monograph supervision in DL?
5. What are the things needed to improve the online teaching operation at the level of research?

Analysis

Problems in methodology

In addition to the problems in interactivity that have to be solved in supervision and which will be dealt with in the next section, it remains that monograph documentation, methodology, and writing are of paramount importance.

First, as far as documentation is concerned, in the time of the pandemic all university libraries were closed. As we all know, research papers writing is a structured process that has to follow some specific steps, the first of which is documentation. This step requires access to the library and its central card catalog or online catalog. After that, students consult different references, mainly books, journals and reference works, which enable them to devise their note cards and bibliographic cards (the step prior to outlining). In the absence of libraries, all these technical procedures were overlooked and the result was a totally heavy reliance on online resources. While these resources are necessary, students lack the tools of evaluating them for credibility. Another fatal consequence was the replacement of note taking by copying and pasting, a technique that frequently leads to plagiarism. The unprecedented shift to online documentation needs knowledge in online research skills; unfortunately, this course is absent in the majority of university curricula.

Second, at the level of methodology, data collection was a real problem for students because of a lack of face to face interaction. It should be noted that remote qualitative methods include online or phone-based interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), audio-diary methods (Mupambireyi and Bernays, 2019), photovoice (use of photography to capture lived experiences) (Copes *et al.*, 2018), video documenting, documentary analysis of social media (e.g. Facebook and WhatsApp groups, YouTube comments or podcasts) and auto-ethnography (ethnographic study on self) (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Lupton, 2020). Remote quantitative methods, on the other hand, include mobile phone surveys implemented using: interactive voice response (IVR), short messaging service (SMS) or computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) and self-completed online questionnaires, shared via email or social media platforms.

In both qualitative and quantitative research many problems emerged:

- Challenge to cultivate a relationship of trust with the subjects.
- Absence of visual cues which leads to misunderstanding.
- Technological difficulties with devices and gadgets and with the disturbance by other noises and activities.
- Data security of online platforms need to be cared for like end-to-end encryption as some platforms (e.g. Zoom) are less secure.
- Difficulties in communicating self-collected data to supervisors.
- Lack of depth as compared to face to face interviews.
- Questions need to be highly specific because the subjects do not have a chance to ask to clarify questions.

- Questions need to be highly specific, as there is no opportunity for participants to clarify questions and limits in character numbers etc.....

Finally, at the level of writing it was hard for supervisors to track individually tens of students and know that they implemented the instructions directed to them since correcting monographs on screen is a tedious activity for professors. Additionally, there is the detrimental problem of plagiarism which affects negatively the whole process. In the absence of the software Turn-it-in, which is hard for faculties to buy due to its high price, professors do their best to advise students to respect research ethics or alternatively look for free software to track plagiarism knowing that these types of freeware are not one hundred percent efficient.

Problems of interaction

Supervision, which is an “intensive, interpersonally focused one-to-one relationship between the supervisor and the student” (Wood and Louw, 2018), is strongly linked to the relationship between the supervisor and the student. This relationship determines the successful completion of research (Da Costa, 2016).

According to the professors interviewed, limited interaction, so characteristic of DL, is the main challenge. At the level of interaction, the abrupt transition to remote learning raised technical issues and put pressure on students from low-income and other marginalized groups, which in turn led to serious accessibility and equality issues. Quick access to technology and a stable and functional internet connection, as well as a calm environment, are necessary conditions. Yet, not all Moroccan students have this privilege. Pre-existing disparities among students in terms of socio-economic status and territorial origin have increased. As a matter of fact, for students living in remote or rural areas, digital education in general and online supervision have been a curse. The inability to digest supervisors’ instruction is mainly due to insufficient or unstable internet connection and inadequate resources. For example, frequent problems emerge when laptops bug all the time, or when students are unable to find a calm environment to study. These communication barriers, which are attributed to purely technical issues, de-track the communication especially when it comes to the slow internet connection that students of far flung areas, who are not well versed with technology, suffer from. Therefore, all the professors agreed that the above mentioned technical issues that constitute communication barriers make a main difference between conventional and DL supervision as limited interaction is a key factor. However, many pieces of anterior research focused on the positive side of using ICT in DL. According to a study conducted by Iwasaki *et al.* (2019), no significant difference was found between face-to-face challenges in research supervision, face tutoring and online tutoring using ICT. For Hansen and Hansson (2015), ICT can be of great assistance in providing frequent feedbacks and high level of interaction between supervisors and supervisees. For others, virtual meetings with supervisees can save the traveling time of supervisors and allow them to arrange meetings in flexible timings that ultimately increase the student-

teacher interaction (Aghaee et al., 2013). Others, on the other hand, confirm our findings and back up the idea that the migration to a new learning space has faced several major concerns relating to policy, pedagogy, logistics, socioeconomic factors, technology, and psychosocial factors (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020; Varea & González-Calvo, 2020). The above challenges have been stressed by all our interviewees who hold a negative attitude towards DL due to the technical challenges and the low socioeconomic status of the Moroccan public university student.

Furthermore, among the problems that occurred at the level of monograph writing as far as distant supervision is concerned, we found that professors faced the problem of tracking as it was hard to know whether the original version was kept the same since supervisors used to receive different sections and chapters which kept changing on a daily basis and this constituted a source of confusion for educators. This also caused feelings of distrust as supervisors were not sure about the originality of the work submitted. This is also confirmed in the literature. According to MacKeogh (2006), the distance teaching mode poses many challenges for the instructor including students' access to the resources as it is impossible to identify whether the work submitted by the student is his; hence, for the author, the authenticity of students' work cannot be ensured easily as compared to the conventional mode.

From a student's perspective, DL is a crippling factor in monograph completion as it makes the task of finishing research worse (Costa, 2018). From a teacher perspective, Askew et al. (2016) believe that Supervisors' motivation to supervise the students is very important. For them, four factors are key: workload agreements, time pressures, quality of students and recognition of the supervisors' contribution.

Moreover, what makes the progress check harder is the absence of proximal supervision because with a total lack nonverbal communication, distance supervision becomes more challenging for the supervisors at different levels and they need to exert extra efforts to compensate it (Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998).

At the personal level, in terms of the affective component, teachers cannot guess when the student is bored, confused or frustrated. Butcher and Sieminski (2006) stated that face-to-face interaction between the student and the teacher is vital for the motivation, confidence building and knowledge enhancement of the supervisees; distance supervision sometimes becomes passive due to lack of face-to-face interaction, causing dissatisfaction among the students and this becomes the biggest challenge for supervisors too (MacKeogh, 2006). This was also confirmed in the interviews we conducted.

From the data collected, we can confirm the fact that compared to face-to-face education, online teaching and supervision are lower in quality as the physical presence of the teacher plays a primordial role in maximizing learning, answering diverse methodological questions on the spot, and saving time in supervision. What made

the online experience worse in the Moroccan university was the lack of management structure put in place by institutions to help teachers develop their numerical skills. Besides, using student groups as a means of instantaneous interaction and feedback was hard to implement online and did not have the same effect as in a real pedagogical context.

Another problem that emerged to the surface in this newly adopted operation was related to the limit between what is private and what is public. While normal supervision used to take place according to a fixed and prescheduled time, online supervision was a nightmare for teachers who found themselves obliged to answer questions and solve problems all the day and night! This raised privacy issues that had to be handled with care as many students come from different backgrounds and have different views about the code of conduct and what is socially acceptable.

On another level, within the broad category of students, we have three categories, namely devoted students, working students who have less time for research and who ask for mentoring after office hours, and housewives who are constantly busy in their family. These different groups of learners vary in terms of the time available, and the degree of motivation, physical freshness, etc... and thus pose an extra problem in supervision. The communication barriers linked with working students and housewives led to irregular contact; hence, these students became dormant. According to Lessing and Schulze (2002), a supervisor has to establish a balance among multiple factors like supporting students, having expertise in research, providing positive criticism and bringing creativity. He needs to work on various fronts to bring quality research work by providing guidance to the students in a way that leads to innovative ideas while keeping in mind the timelines and rules established by the organization. Dealing with these three categories was a hard test for supervisors to take all the above factors into account and meet all these conditions.

Conclusion

Despite all these drawbacks and despite the general dissatisfaction of supervisors due to the problems they enumerated and which show the huge difference between proximal supervision and DL supervision, all the professors interviewed expressed their engagement and will to continue working with these new tools in total complementarity with the traditional mode of learning. This engagement of university professors demonstrates to the public the value placed on their perspectives and lived experiences and can be used to inform and strengthen activities already being implemented in the time of trouble like pandemics and shows to Moroccans that university professors are reliable and believe in constant personal and professional development.

For professors, although there is a difference between the two modes of supervision, the fact remains that we have to get used to DL and adopt it in parallel with proximal teaching. To achieve this, we have to eradicate from our mind that all what is virtual is difficult. Perceived gap of time and distance can be dealt with properly once our mindset is made more positive and this is the key

to success. All the professors want to profit from ICT, but they emphasized the fact that they need constant formation in this domain, urge the ministry to provide students with ICT material, and add online research skills in the university programs.

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