

Thinking Beyond the Present: Advocating Continuity of Practice of Emergency Remote Teaching in Higher Education Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the disruption of education systems and the closure of schools all over the world. To ensure that teaching and learning continued during the pandemic, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Nigeria adopted Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) and moved classes to online and distance education platforms. The expectation is that ERT will be an alternative to face-to-face teaching methods, which were the norm before the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we argue in favour of HEIs continuing to utilize ERT rather than leaving remote teaching by both lecturers and students untapped. We will also provide justifications to support this ongoing use of ERT. We suggest that institutions should embrace a blended learning approach. This involves implementing an ERT contingency plan for potential future crises, integrating ERT as a mandatory component of academic staff professional development, enhancing the skills and readiness of academic and support staff for ERT, and formulating a strategy to address the challenges associated with ERT. We conclude that ERT presents a promising pedagogical approach that has the potential to bring about positive transformations in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Keywords: Emergency Remote teaching, Teaching in the new normal, Higher education institutions, Nigeria

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In the pre COVID-19 period, teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) primarily took place through face-to-face, in-person interactions. This meant that students and their lecturers would gather in a traditional classroom setting, sharing the same physical space. More recently, educational practices have shifted in response to a world that is becoming more digital (Bearman et al., 2020). Many educators have found themselves turning to Google or YouTube to search for information and learn new skills (Bhatt & MacKenzie, 2019). With the emergence of COVID-19, however, HEIs ushered in additional alternative teaching and learning processes and patterns globally termed emergency remote teaching (ERT) where students were taught online through the deployment of various information and communication technologies.

Before the emergence of ERT, online or e-learning for on-campus education was largely underutilized in Nigeria. As a result, higher education lecturers encountered notable challenges implementing ERT into their practice. Some challenges included unstable internet connectivity, inadequate computer laboratories, insufficient access to computers/laptops, technical problems, inexperience and low or insufficient technological skills of some lecturers to conduct ERT, among others. As the world recovers from the disruptions experienced during COVID-19, educational institutions must continue to address ongoing challenges and technological needs. In this paper, we discuss the measures that HEIs in Nigeria can adopt to sustain ERT in the “new normal” era within the Nigerian context. These measures include providing consistent power supply, retraining staff in information and communication technology (ICT), offering new educational tools and facilities, ensuring high level internet connectivity, and furnishing students with smartphones and staff with computers. However, despite discussing these measures, it seems unlikely that HEIs in Nigeria will continue the practice of ERT after the pandemic.

COVID-19 and the Disruption of the Educational System

The aftermath of the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic led to global lockdowns, the closure of schools and other educational institutions, and the suspension of face-to-face teaching activities. During the peak period of COVID-19 in Nigeria, teachers and instructors in HEIs across the country were forced to move their content online and begin teaching remotely. Before the pandemic, there was no known policy regarding online and remote teaching or talk of adoption of any practice for teachers and students. This attitude has made many HEIs in Nigeria fail to collaborate on a memorandum of understanding with universities in the UK, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere. This is primarily due to the national ICT policy, even though most institutions in Nigeria were in the process of developing such a policy before the onset of the pandemic. All HEIs adopted an unplanned transition to teaching called emergency remote teaching (ERT), which was considered a branch of distance education (Bozkurt, 2020). ERT was an alternative

arrangement to facilitate continued teaching by teachers and continued learning by students. Emergency Remote Teaching should be distinguished from online teaching, as emphasized by Bates (2020). ERT is characterized by its temporary nature, stemming from the abrupt disruption of the regular education system during the pandemic. It involves the compulsory adoption of remote teaching methods as a response to an emergency situation, which is why it is termed “Emergency Remote Teaching” (ERT). ERT ensures that teachers/instructors are separated from their learners in time and distance in the teaching and learning activities but provides opportunity for teachers and students to remain connected and engaged with the content while working from their homes (Bozkurt, 2020). Crawford et al. (2020) suggest that educational access should not be hindered by school closures, emphasizing the need for continuous learning. To achieve this, they suggest it is necessary to redefine the right to education by incorporating connectivity and eliminating obstacles that impede access to such connectivity. They point out that educational delivery can no longer be solely facilitated by the physical presence of the teacher in a brick-and-mortar building and that learners do not necessarily need to be physically present as a group in a brick-and-mortar building. They also propose the widespread use of technology to ensure continuity of learning; expansion of flexible learning modalities across levels and types of education and training; alternative modality for students’ evaluation such as online testing for final examinations; and innovative continuous assessment methods such as monitoring students’ progress with mobile phone surveys, tracking usage and performance statistics from learning platforms and apps. We suggest that this approach to educational access offers further rationales for adopting ERT in HEIs suitable to the Nigerian context as a result of the provision of regular power supply, staff retraining on ICT, provision of new educational tools and facilities, high level internet connectivity, and provision of smartphones to students and computers to the staff. The key distinctions between remote teaching, emergency remote teaching, and online teaching are discussed below.

Remote Teaching, Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Teaching

Remote Teaching is a planned and structured strategy to teaching conducted using online or a combination of online and face-to-face approaches. It is an alternative choice made by educational institutions to deliver instruction remotely, by using virtual learning tools and platforms. RT calls for proper administrative planning, in the form of preparation and integration of various instructional methods, and involvement of students through interactive and teamwork tasks. It is a well-planned and organized practice designed to provide a high-inclusive learning experience.

ERT, denotes an unplanned shift to remote teaching in quick response to unforeseen events or emergency situations, including disasters, pandemics, or expected school closures. It is not a permanent measure, typically involves swiftly digitizing existing study materials using basic technologies, and does not usually demand the same level of interaction, tasks, engagement, and pedagogical rigor as more comprehensive teaching methods.

The word “remote” is derived from the Latin word *remove*, which evolved into the word *remotus*, meaning “move away or move back” or simply “removed”. In its basic form, “remote” therefore implies far-flung, or far afield, isolated, and distant from the actual source or epicentre (Harms et al., 2014). Emergency remote teaching (ERT), therefore, entails delivering curricular content, instructional materials, or educational resources to the target learning audience physically away from the centre or institution of learning (Nokukhanya et al., 2021). ERT is, therefore, a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). It provides solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face which is not possible because of a crisis.

The special feature of ERT is that it is an unplanned practice, with no option than to use any kind of offline and/or online resources that may be at hand (Bond et al., 2021). The whole essence of ERT 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 reliably available, contextually more feasible, and quick to set up during an emergency, crisis, or conflict (UNICEF, 2020). ERT was the readily available option for instructional dissemination during the pandemic when educational institutions were temporarily closing.

On the contrary, online learning is both a social and a cognitive process, not merely a matter of information transmission through remote information technologies (Conole, 2021). It requires careful planning not only in identifying the content to be covered, but also consideration of how different types of interactions will be supported and prioritized. Consequently, development of online courses may take months (Erlam et al., 2021). In essence, online teaching and learning is purposefully designed to be remote or distant in nature leveraging on the deployment of technology to enhance teaching. The major differences between ERT and online teaching are summed up in Table 1.

Table 1

Differences Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Teaching

Emergency Remote Teaching	Online Teaching
Activated in response to a crisis or something beyond human control	Activated in response to permanent instructional delivery
Designed temporarily to be remote and distant	Designed purposely and planned to be remote and distant
Regarded as an exception to the main in-person mode of education (not the main mode)	Regarded as a main mode of education (not an exception)
Meant to be a short-term/temporary solution	Meant to be a long-term solution

Very urgent	Not urgent
Most teaching resources are inaccessible	All teaching resources are accessible
Faculty support is minimal	Has full faculty support
Student enrollment is compulsory (Students do not have a choice)	Student enrollment is voluntary (Students do have a choice)

Source: Adapted from UoPeople (2022) Emergency Remote Teaching Vs. Online Learning: A Comparison <https://www.uopeople.edu/blog/emergency-remote-teaching-vs-online-learning/>

In summary, ERT is a temporary, short-term instructional delivery model implemented to respond to a crisis. In contrast, online teaching is from the outset planned and designated to be delivered virtually.

Benefits of Emergency Remote Teaching

The benefits of ERT include:

- ERT provides 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.
- ERT provides excellent opportunity for instructors to develop their skills through various teaching and learning strategies as a result of retraining they had immediately before deploying ERT to impact on students' skills and attitudes.
- ERT gives students the opportunity to become self-driven learners and convergent thinkers as a result of their interaction with the online materials and emerging educational tools such as Management Learning Systems, Modules, Zoom, Microsoft meet, Google Meet, WhatsApp, Telegram and others.
- ERT fosters the skills of students and teachers in dealing with modern technologies and enables them to exploit social networking tools.

Necessity for Continuity of Practice of ERT in Nigeria

The acceptance of distance learning as a major channel of widening access to higher education for the teaming population of over 200 million was widely used before the COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated emergency and compulsory online teaching. This transition can be justified because distance education provides higher education opportunities to a vast and underprivileged population (Ajadi et al., 2008). Ajadi et al., (2008) affirmed that the most common e-learning adopted in Nigerian schools was in form of lecture notes copied on CD-Rom to be played at the convenience of the learners.

The necessity for the continuity of ERT practice in HEIs in Nigeria is advocated based on the following justifications:

- **The possibility of occurrence of another grave public health crisis or conflict of catastrophic consequence in the future.** ERT emerged because of the closure of educational institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic which forced academic staff in HEIs in Nigeria to move their teaching online. As the global population size increases, there is the possibility that another public health crisis or conflicts of catastrophic consequences could emerge in the future. To adequately prepare for such a possibility, Nigerian HEIs should not discard ERT in the new normal.
- **The flexibility of ERT in combination with face-to-face teaching.** The bitter experience of the disruption of the Nigeria educational system by the COVID-19 pandemic clearly shows that HEIs in Nigeria cannot predominantly rely on face-to-face classroom education any longer as the practice was before the pandemic. As the new normal emerges, there is need for HEIs in Nigeria to adopt a blended learning model – the combination of face-to-face classroom education with ERT which was designed temporarily to be remote and distant – to cater to students in respect of their geographical location.
- **ERT as replacement for fully online teaching and learning.** In spite of the advancement and use of technologies in educational practice, the possibility of making courses go fully online in HEIs in Nigeria is not feasible for now. The best that such institutions can adopt is blended learning delivery mode or the combination of temporary access to instruction online with face-to-face teaching.
- **ERT will serve as a rich reservoir for using open educational resources.** As the new normal emerges, academic staff in HEIs in Nigeria can no longer predominantly rely on specific textbooks for their teaching. As ERT has required academic staff to take their teaching online, so also it becomes imperative for them to source for materials and contents of their teaching online too. The competence of academic staff to use ERT will also enhance their competence to source and search for easily and freely available online open educational resources.
- **ERT will enable tutors to engage students in synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning.** Synchronous learning allows tutors to engage students with class content and instruction temporarily at the same time as long as they can connect to the internet using videoconferencing technologies like Google Meet, Google Hangouts, or Zoom. It also allows students the flexibility to study in a self-paced manner: instructors and students do not get engaged online at the same time. In general, with the continuity of practice of ERT, instructors in HEIs in Nigeria will develop the skills to conduct teaching and learning temporarily online with students rather than completely rely on a face-to-face teaching and learning mode of delivery.

- **The ERT can help academic staff become digital scholars.** According to Weller (2018), a digital scholar is someone who “employs digital, networked and open approaches to demonstrate specialism in a field” (p.5). Scholarly authorship represents the core business of higher education – namely the creation and dissemination of knowledge. Academics are expected to continuously read, analyze, assess, and compare written texts, such as reports, academic papers and books, undergraduate assignments, as well as postgraduate and doctorate dissertations. They also produce written teaching materials and textbooks for student consumption along with research reports, monographs, articles and textbooks for publication” (French, 2020, p.4). These practices remain critical in the daily operations of academic scholars but are becoming increasingly complex with the rise of digital technologies in education (Weller, 2018), in terms of the commitment to equitable access to these technologies. With continuity of practice, ERT can help in building the capacities of academic staff to become digital scholars.

Working with Students While Using ERT: What Instructors Must Know

Every instructor in HEIs in Nigeria must communicate frequently with students. Communication is essential to ERT. Students should be allowed to ask questions and communicate with tutors, instructors, and lecturers outside of teaching hours through phone calls, emails, and school forum boards. They must prioritize needs. ERT can happen at any time which means an instructor is likely to be in the middle of teaching something and must have plans for what he/she wants to achieve. As such, every instructor must prioritize what must be done and what must be let go in all teaching circumstances. They must develop contingency plans. This is because technology may not work as planned and things may likely not always go as planned. Therefore, instructors must have back up plans when things fail. Instructors must practice and promote their well-being. Shifting to an online environment, occasioned by the adoption of ERT, from face-to-face teaching can be stress inducing. Therefore, instructors should remember to take breaks and give themselves time to adjust. They must practice self-compassion and patience. They must learn. Instructors must take time to take a step back from all the challenges of what may be going on when ERT comes into play. They should evaluate what works and what does not work and learn from each experience every day to get better over time.

Recommendations for Continuity of Practice of ERT in HEIs in Nigeria

Even though COVID-19 will soon be a thing of memory (with the discovery of vaccines and the growing massive vaccination of people across the world), and face-to-face teaching will largely be restored as it was before the pre COVID-era, it is suggested that HEIs in Nigeria should not completely discard ERT practices for face-to-face teaching; the likelihood of another grave public health crisis occurring in the

future will necessitate ERT again. Based on this submission, it is recommended that HEIs in Nigeria should do the following for the continuity of practice of ERT:

1. Adoption of a Blended Learning Model by Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Continuity of practice of ERT can be further ensured when it is combined with face-to-face teaching to form a blended learning model. Therefore, HEIs are advised to adopt a blended learning model in the post COVID-19 “new normal”. A blended learning model can be practiced through synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery. For example, in one week, students could work asynchronously by reading the learning resources and writing the posts at their own convenience. In the second week, students would read the learning resources before coming to the synchronous session at a specific time. In synchronous sessions, students would talk to each other, share their viewpoints, and interact with others in the learning community.

2. HEIs should have a contingency plan for ERT in advance of a crisis. Public health crises and conflicts of wider magnitude and catastrophic consequences, which could disrupt the education system again, can arise in the future. Therefore, HEIs should have a contingency plan for ERT in advance of these possibilities. The purpose of ERT, as a contingency plan, is to allow institutions to have a pedagogical model to ensure teaching and learning does not stop in the emergence of and recovery from an unforeseen crisis. Also, as HEIs are moving back to face-to-face delivery models post COVID-19, teachers must remain prepared to move online in the case of another crisis. The online or blended model of learning and teaching would be a good practice irrespective of any crisis.

3. Identification of the likely areas where academic staff and students struggle the most with ERT. The sudden transition from classroom education to ERT in HEIs brought along numerous challenges and left many academic staff and students unprepared. Some of the difficulties faced by academic staff relate to their digital competence in using ICT for teaching, lesson planning and creation of teaching materials, giving assignments and evaluating student progress, encouraging student self-education, and providing a positive and supportive atmosphere for students in the online environment. Some of the difficulties faced by students include taking online classes, acquiring knowledge, and maintaining a good emotional state and mental health for learning. Therefore, it becomes imperative for HEIs to identify the likely areas where academic staff and students struggle the most with ERT and develop strategic plans for solving the educational challenges associated with ERT.

4. HEIs should determine internal and external resources that are necessary in supporting ERT. HEIs should determine and collate internal and external resources that are necessary in supporting ERT for continuity of practice in the new normal. The compilation of these resources

will help these institutions prepare adequately for any crisis or emergency that could disrupt the educational system again and lead to the closure of educational institutions in the future.

5. ERT will help motivate academic staff to use open educational resources in teaching. If academic staff are continuously exposed to ERT in the new normal, they are more likely to embrace and utilize open educational resources in their teaching rather than relying predominantly on using specific textbooks as they do in classroom education. HEIs should put in place mechanisms that will motivate academic staff to use open educational resources that reside in the public domain and intellectually licensed for free use. Such easily and freely available online resources can be extensively searched for through Google and other search engines to enrich their teaching materials and contents.

6. Provision of sufficient digital technological infrastructure to enhance digital competences of academic staff. In order to enhance the digital competences of academic staff, HEIs should provide sufficient technological infrastructure for ERT practices. Academic staff members need to possess digital competences to foster effective, inclusive and innovative learning strategies using digital technologies. The Digital Competence Framework for Educators (1995-2021) developed by the European Union and licensed under CC by 4.0 can be adopted by HEIs to build the digital competences of academic staff. However, this is only possible if HEIs provide sufficient digital technological infrastructure. For example, HEIs can buy a license from Zoom to engage teachers and students in live discussion when using ERT. Zoom has a very good feature of breakout rooms where tutors can divide the whole class in small and large groups (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022; Serembus & Kemery, 2020).

7. Building the capacity of academic staff for ERT. HEIs should endeavor to continuously build the capacity of academic staff for ERT along the following areas: word processors and spreadsheets, file management, email access, Internet browsers, access to WiFi, development of PowerPoint and the use of digital whiteboards to teach, teaching through video instruction (Zoom), using media tools and recording videos, strategies for uploading lessons in a higher education institution's learning management system, strategies for recording student's grades online, and strategies for giving feedback digitally. The need for the acquisition of these capacities should encourage HEI to continue the practice and use of ERT in HEIs in the new normal.

Conclusion

It is easy to predict that teaching and learning in the post COVID-19 "new normal" will not be the same as it was before the pandemic. We advocate that HEIs should not be in a hurry to discard ERT in the

“new normal” considering the factors that could necessitate its continuity of practice. Therefore, HEIs in Nigeria should consider long-term solutions and develop plans to sustain the practice of ERT. This should be in contrast to the conventional remote teaching (RT) that many lecturers in Nigeria abandoned due to challenges like unreliable power supply, fluctuating network connectivity, and limited internet bandwidth. The lecturers were compelled to use ERT due to the unexpected pandemic that disrupted academic activities worldwide, necessitating a quick adjustment.

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