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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CONNECTED LEARNING: UNVEILING THE POTENTIAL AND THE LIMITS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN DADAAB REFUGEE CAMP

HAEUN KIM, MIRCO STELLA, AND KASSAHUN HITICHA

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, York University, through the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project, has provided higher education in situ to refugee and local teachers in Dadaab, Kenya, one of the world's largest and longest standing refugee camps. In 2020, COVID-19 aggravated the insecurity and marginalization already present in Dadaab, which had profound effects on the education infrastructure and tested the university's capacity to continue to offer equitable and quality education. In this field note, we explore and reflexively capture the innovative responses to the complex challenges encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and unpack the limits and the potential of distance education in Dadaab.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2013, York University (YU) in Toronto, Canada, has been delivering in situ university programs to refugees and locals in Dadaab, Kenya (Giles 2018). YU leads the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Project, which is a development project involving Kenyan and Canadian universities and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). These organizations are working together to improve the quality of education in northeast Kenya by

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offering internationally recognized and accredited certificates, diplomas, and degrees to untrained refugee and local teachers (Dippo, Orgocka, and Giles 2013). In 2018, YU began offering a tuition-free master of education program to BHER students in Dadaab who had completed an undergraduate degree. Since its launch, BHER has enrolled more than four hundred students in accredited tertiary programs. The project has developed considerable expertise in delivering blended university degrees in Dadaab, as it had to find solutions to continue programs through times of regional insecurity and violence, political strife, and environmental challenges (Duale, Munene, and Njogu 2021). Despite BHER's extensive experience, COVID-19 tested the boundaries of its capacity to continue offering equitable and quality education, and also pushed the limits of students, instructors, and project staff members alike.

This field note is a reflection and analysis of YU's response to the complex challenges encountered while offering online tertiary programs to refugee students in an encampment during the COVID-19 pandemic. We, the three authors, reside in Toronto and Dadaab; our collaboration signifies our desire to develop reciprocal relations in the creation of research and knowledge, particularly in the field of refugee and migration studies. We begin the article by contextualizing Dadaab and the BHER Learning Centre (LC), the hub of our programs. We describe the impact COVID-19 had in Dadaab, and then describe the potential and the limits of distance learning in times of crisis. We conclude with a reflection on the importance of place and human encounters as a foundation for connected and online learning, along with recommendations for future practice.

CONTEXT OF PLACE AND PRACTICE

DADAAB, KENYA

Dadaab is an isolated border town located in the semi-arid North Eastern Province of Kenya, 90 kilometers west of the Somali border (Giles 2018). In 1991, refugee camps were established around Dadaab to host an influx of refugees fleeing the civil war in Somalia (Mohaghan 2021). Dadaab has since been home to three generations of refugees, hosting more than a half-million people at its peak. As of May 2021, more than 226,000 refugees were living in three camps surrounding Dadaab: Ifo, Hagadera, and Dagahaley. Ninety-six percent of the refugees are Somali, the remaining 4 percent are from different parts of Eastern and Central Africa (UNHCR 2021). The insecurity, poverty, and historic marginalization in North Eastern Province means that there are few opportunities for residents

to earn teaching certifications, and trained teachers are unwilling to work in the region (Waswa 2012; Mwangi 2019). BHER was formed to help address the educational needs of refugees and locals in Dadaab through teacher training.¹

THE BHER LEARNING CENTRE

The construction in Dadaab of an on-site university campus for teacher-centered tertiary programs was a novel response to urgent educational needs (Dippo et al. 2013). Before BHER, the only university opportunities in Dadaab were international scholarships for select, top-performing students who moved out of the camps, and some limited technical and vocational education and training courses (Wright and Plasterer 2012). The LC was constructed in 2013 in Dadaab town, in an effort to boost opportunities for education in situ. The infrastructure enabled the project to reach a greater number of students at a cost benefit while maintaining the delivery of high-quality programs, as well as ensuring the safety of students, faculty, and staff in a marginalized and volatile region (Dippo et al. 2013).² The LC comprises three seminar rooms, three lecture halls, two computer labs, and administrative offices, all equipped with wifi and reliable electricity. Security guards and a dedicated project staff are on site to help the students with academics, information and communications technology (ICT), and logistics. In a region characterized by scarce resources, insecurity, and political tension, the LC offers a reliable, well resourced, safe space for students to come together, to learn, and to collaborate.

The LC serves as the hub for all BHER activities at which learning communities are fostered. Instructors from Canada and students from the refugee camps meet both face-to-face and online at the LC. YU programs follow cohorts of students through a blend of in-person and online distance learning models (Picciano et al. 2021). As most students are working teachers, face-to-face courses take place in the months of August, December, and April, when the Dadaab schools are on break. Instructors travel from Canada to teach intensive in-person classes during this time. Students then take online courses during the fall (September-December) and winter (January-April) semesters, meeting with instructors via Zoom once a week. The project pays a stipend for transportation and lunch to students who travel to the LC to attend classes. While not perfect, the LC and its infrastructure equalize the playing field for many learners: female students are able to learn and

1 The BHER admissions target is 75 percent refugee, 25 percent local.

2 Although the cost of constructing a local campus in 2013 was sizable, it proved to be more cost-effective for multiple cohorts of students than other higher education delivery modes, such as relocating students to local Kenyan universities or giving them scholarships abroad.

collaborate alongside male students in a safe space; a childcare/nursing room is available to students with young children; and students from households with no connectivity can access the internet (Dryden-Peterson, Dahya, and Adelman 2017; Brugha, Hollow, and Gladwell 2020). Even when Canadian instructors could not enter Dadaab for security reasons, the LC remained open, and students continued to collaborate and work together without instructors. The in-situ infrastructure has been and continues to be a critical part of our programs' successes.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020 resulted in numerous programmatic disruptions: (1) the cancellation of on-site courses in April, August, and December 2020; (2) program and financial restructuring; (3) institutional delays (e.g., postponed in-person exams, delayed graduation audits because university staff members worked from home) in Kenya and Canada due to university closures in both countries; and (4) a ten-month closing of the LC in Dadaab. Program activities were halted to protect the health and safety of our students and staff, who were our utmost priority. The closing of international borders meant that no instructors or staff members from Canada were permitted to travel to Kenya. In compliance with directives from the World Health Organization and the Government of Kenya, the LC closed on March 20, 2020, and the field staff returned to Nairobi. We were unable to reopen until January 27, 2021.

The cancellation of face-to-face sessions and the closing of the LC created significant challenges to learning and access. The lockdown and restrictions on movement in Kenya meant that students could not convene. Instructors and project staff members had to quickly reimagine courses so students could complete the coursework safely and successfully while studying individually, with no computer labs and only an unreliable power supply and networks.

POTENTIAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

During the ten-month LC closure, students studied in their respective camps. YU continued to offer courses; we were able to retain most of the students in the undergraduate and graduate programs (96% completion rate in certificate; 95% retention in undergraduate; 100% retention in master's). For the purposes of this discussion, we contend that program's success can be measured by high retention

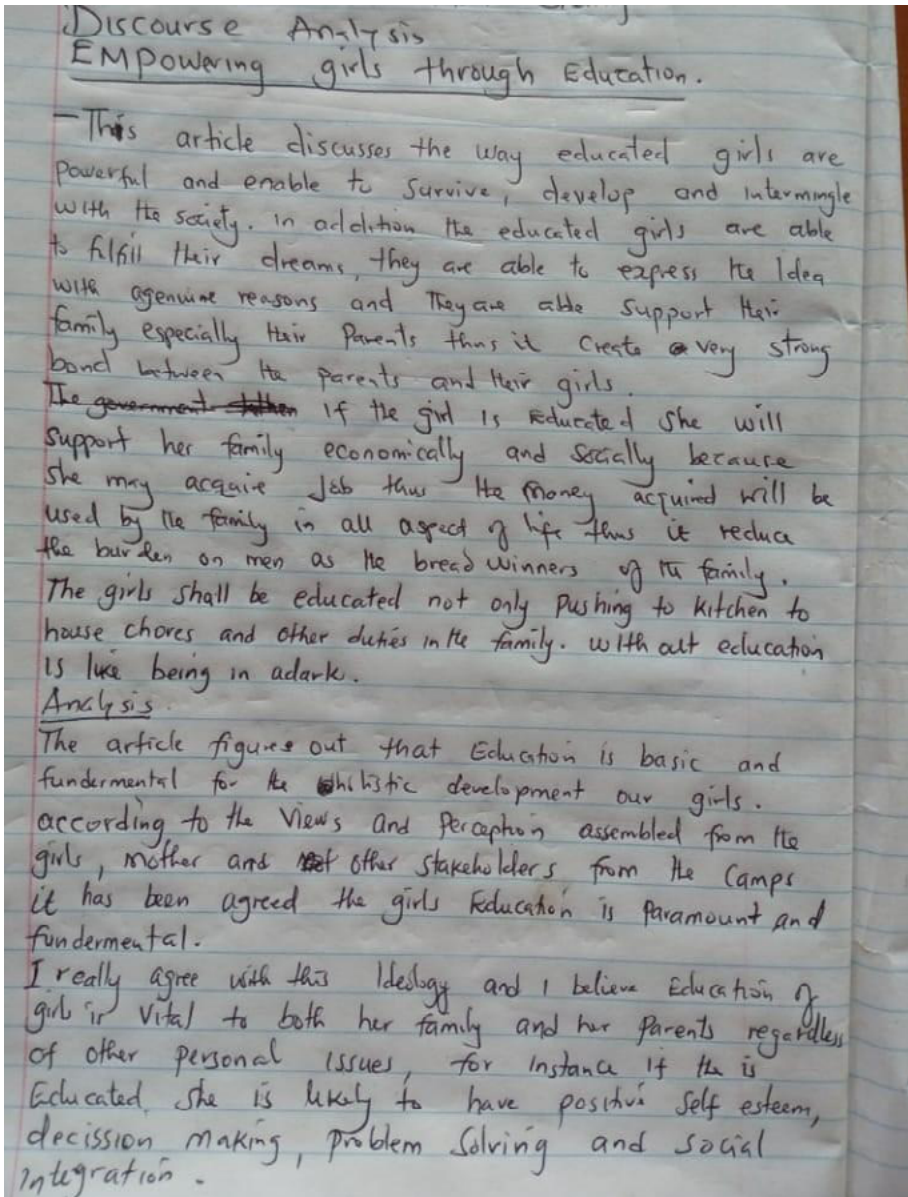
rates, which means we were able to have a “successful” year despite COVID-19 by tapping into the potential of technology and distance education.

ADAPTATION OF COURSES AND TECHNOLOGY TO LOCAL CONTEXTS

The prolonged closure of the LC meant that BHER had to secure the resources and infrastructure needed for students to study on their own. While there were procurement challenges and delays, the project secured laptops for graduate students, tablets for undergraduate students, and data bundles for all. Technology and internet connection were made available, but the coursework had to be adapted into low-bandwidth models because of the unreliable power supply and connectivity in the camps. Courses were redesigned at the onset of the pandemic, when international travel became impossible; however, a continual recalibration of course designs took place throughout. As online teaching commenced, student engagement was a challenge. Many instructors responded with emergent and ongoing replanning and by re-spatializing the “flows” (i.e., pacing) of courses. Examples of this include changing the pace of courses by switching to biweekly or even three-week cycles to complete the readings, which allowed the courses to slow down and afforded students ample time to review previous readings and materials. One instructor used a careful evaluation to structure a system of differentiated instruction, which involved creating smaller cohorts within the classes of students who had similar outcomes and goals. These cohorts functioned as focused learning communities in which students encouraged and supported one another in an otherwise overwhelmingly challenging time.

Conference calls facilitated by local peer mentors were implemented in other courses to enable students’ real-time collaboration and discussion of readings across the camps. Instructors adopted differentiated resources (e.g., interactive summary notes through Otter.ai, Zoom Whiteboard) to supplement the weekly classes. In addition to the traditional way of submitting digital assignments using learning management systems, students were able to submit select assignments via smartphones using voice notes and photos of handwritten texts on WhatsApp (see Figure 1). Ad hoc strategies took place in each course, based on key updates from the field staff members, who made weekly phone calls to the students. The university developed greater acceptance and flexibility in terms of creative online solutions. This meant that, as the project staff liaised continually with instructors and students, they were able to adopt creative and multipronged solutions for engagement, assessments, retention, etc.

Figure 1: Handwritten Assignment Submitted via Photo Sharing on WhatsApp



CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS

Having to rely solely on distance education prompted instructors and staff members to interact and collaborate in new and creative ways for the benefit of the students. The field staff in Kenya and instructors in Canada worked together to develop and support differentiated instruction for the students. Working across Zoom,

WhatsApp, and GoogleDrive, the instructors and field staff prepared assessments and summaries and coordinated teaching sessions based on student evaluations. Continual communication throughout this process was crucial: staff members and instructors met using a blend of synchronous meetings via phone and video calls, while collaborating asynchronously on shared cloud platforms to develop detailed documentation of students' ongoing progress. The field staff typically provided logistical support in order to create an optimal learning environment for YU instructors in Canada to teach in, but COVID-19 created a need for new solutions. The cofacilitation of coursework by both instructors and staff members in Canada and Kenya was an innovative strategy that enabled the delivery in Dadaab of a weeklong, graduate-level remedial workshop across time zones. The field staff worked on course content with students in the morning in Kenya (night-time in Canada), provided formative assessments that were uploaded online, then in the afternoon (early morning in Canada), the YU instructor and teaching assistant would use feedback from the field staff to work online with students in the afternoon via Zoom. This represented a noteworthy pedagogical innovation that we hope to repeat and adapt in the new academic year.

We note here that stepping out of our typical roles represented a “beautiful risk” (Biesta 2013), but it also required the staff members and instructors to share a strong commitment. Prior collaborations, strong collegiality, and understanding across great distances generated the motivation and synergies to implement these solutions.

LOCAL CAPACITY-BUILDING

To support undergraduate students during COVID-19, the project staff and instructors worked closely with, and relied heavily on, local peer mentors, who were on-site BHER master's students in Dadaab. BHER had implemented the peer mentorships before COVID-19, but the pandemic expanded these opportunities for master's students. The peer mentors attested to becoming better adult educators through this experience, as they learned to be more flexible and to build and maintain trust with the students. While the experience was challenging, the additional responsibilities enabled the peer mentors to ascertain which strategies worked and which did not, and to feed that knowledge back into the project. Local capacity-building had implications beyond the academic programs, as the peer mentors also collaborated on supporting a refugee-led project to distribute soap to BHER students across the Dadaab camps.

LIMITS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

While YU students completed the 2020-2021 academic year and remained on track to complete their programs within the project funding cycle, we remain critical of our “success.” Students were successful in passing their courses, but this does not necessarily translate into a satisfying and quality learning experience. Momentum, community, and the dialogue of learning were fostered through intangible face-to-face encounters embedded in the blended model, and were sorely missed when we moved fully online. The following section explores the limits faced while delivering distance education during COVID-19.

CONNECTIVITY, HARDWARE, AND ENVIRONMENT

Despite our best efforts to secure the resources and infrastructure needed for the students, we were limited by the overall infrastructure of the camps. The refugees do not have access to an electric power grid, so charging devices was a significant challenge. The function of the cell towers in the camps is also spotty. Without the LC, inequities among the students became more evident. The students’ different social and geographic locations and the physical limits of the camp appeared more significant than ever, which led to wider performance gaps. Even for those with connectivity, studying in the camps amid the heat, noise, and internet traffic was extremely challenging, as one student noted:

The home environment was also not like the Learning Centre where you easily interact and socialize with fellow students. It is not conducive for reading and concentration. The outside environment is very hot during the day, and noisy. This is unlike the learning center where I have the advantage of enjoying air conditioner while in the learning room...I have to sleep too early and wake up at around midnight so that I focus on my work, as the internet past midnight is always strong.

The lack of ICT support emerged more clearly every time YU updated the online security and access requirements for the e-learning management systems from Canada, which further disrupted students’ learning experience.

FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTERS, RELATIONALITY, AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY

BHER's blended model enabled us to hold three face-to-face sessions at the LC each year. These sessions were a regular convergence of operational staff, instructors, and students from Kenya and Canada. When everyone came together physically in the place of learning, the moments of interruption in the online coursework enabled the administrative staff and instructors in Canada to better understand the context and challenges, which helped them improve the course and program design. It also enabled students to build a trusting relationship with their instructors. The stories and affective bonds stemming from those moments represented the promises (in a political-Arendtian sense; Orlie 1995) we made to each other. Our face-to-face commitments refreshed our subsequent online interactions, as we enjoyed new energy, motivation, and shared understandings of each other and of new ways of being together. These regular face-to-face encounters were critical in gearing up momentum and building the relationships that laid the foundations for a strong social, cognitive, and teaching presence in the virtual learning communities, and for the overall success of the online programs (Lomicka 2020). The loss of these repeated cycles of face-to-face interaction became increasingly evident as the pandemic progressed, as the students' engagement and performance began to drop.

FROM COLLECTIVE TO INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

Social distancing and movement restrictions meant that students could no longer come together physically. This made doing collective work very difficult, so instructors and students had to focus on doing individual work online. Learning divorced from the community translated into a heightened focus on knowledge as ready-made "content"—skills, tasks, concepts, and parceled-out knowledge that was "reduced to the bones" (Yosso 2005). The content and knowledge were further removed from students' lived experiences, and the possibilities for more critical and collaborative engagement were reduced or limited. To account for these challenges, instructors and peer mentors were continually lowering their expectations, which at some point was no longer fair or beneficial to the students. It tied education to "what is," which essentially meant "handing over the responsibility for education to forces outside of education" (Biesta and Säfström 2011, 541).

The individualized learning experience was an unfortunate necessity for online learning during COVID-19. But it meant that each student was left to their own devices—both literally and figuratively. This was reflected in the stale and unrehearsed quality of the work submitted.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: HUMAN ENCOUNTERS

The last decade has seen the rapid emergence of connected learning (CL) in higher education projects like BHER. CL is described as “the development and exchange of knowledge and ideas among students and faculty through the use of information technology that enables learning not bound by geographical limitations...in the contexts of higher education in displacement/fragility” (CLCC 2017, 2). These projects aim to use “technologies to decrease rather than increase disparities” and to “create universal learning-on-demand opportunities” (Chambers 2010, cited in Wright and Plasterer 2012, 50) in the margins, including in refugee camps, where the demand and need are greatest.

Universities in the Global North and South have been developing and delivering degrees, diplomas, and courses using a variety of blended learning models. They have been making use of ICTs such as Open Education Resources, Massive Online Open Courses, and others (Giles 2018; Crea and Sparnon 2017; O’Keeffe 2020). Students also benefit from on-the-ground technical assistance, academic counseling, and a variety of open resources (digital and non), while also interacting and collaborating with peers and mentors, face-to-face and/or online. Blended designs steer away from fully online and individualized experiences, which often lead to high attrition rates (O’Keeffe 2020). They also would be nearly impossible in precarious and low-resourced contexts like refugee camps (Brugha et al. 2020). CL projects built with a community-centered approach to ICT (Dippo et al. 2013) promise a more sustainable design that has a wider reach, as well as extensive social impact at the local level (Wright and Plasterer 2012).

There is need for more research on CL in contexts of crisis, especially from the grounded experiences of students whose perspectives have thus far received limited attention. There also is a need to describe and explore in greater detail the daily practice of educators, as well as the overall foundational material and intangible infrastructure required to deliver and sustain quality online learning. We learned that the physical infrastructure of the BHER LC enabled relational infrastructures that optimized online engagement and learning, not only between instructors and learners but among the learners themselves. It is critical to explore the purposes of education beyond programming and accreditation, and to pay greater attention to the relationships that sustain and embed the pedagogies adopted. This discussion is timely, considering that the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a “redoubled reliance on technology as the primary convening mechanism” (CLCC 2020, 4), also birthed much favorable and critical discourse on the value and meanings of online distance education (Picciano

et al. 2021; Azubuike, Adegboye, and Quadri 2021; Oppong Asante, Quarshie, and Andoh-Arthur 2021). The immediate effect COVID-19 had on conditions of displacement, specifically on education in protracted refugee situations, has begun to surface through the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' 2020 report, *Coming Together for Refugee Education*. However, the contextualized and long-term impact will only be seen in the years to come. For those who were engaged in CL in contexts of crisis during COVID-19, there is a sense of responsibility to document the breakdowns, the limits encountered, and the creative responses in order to help rethink and inform future strategies and practices.

We conclude that our success with distance learning during the pandemic was only possible because of the relationships, community, and infrastructure we had built over the previous decade of offering blended programs, which were centered around moments of connection through in-person interaction. Human encounters fostered a common purpose (learning) and forged relationships between instructors and learners and among the learners themselves that were rooted in a dedicated place—the Learning Centre. These encounters enabled rich online learning to take place in an otherwise difficult and volatile environment. Even though fully online programming is ideally suited to and completely justified in emergency health crises like COVID-19, by itself it is not enough to provide the types of robust education so desperately needed in these regions (Moser-Mercer, Hayba, and Goldsmith 2018). We strongly encourage any university or education institution considering working in such contexts of displacement to plan for and develop in advance various forms of blended instruction, and the physical infrastructure needed to deliver the programs. Blended engagement in a dedicated physical space, where safety and resource inequities are addressed, enables the development of online and face-to-face learning communities that are engaged in active learning and sustained through a sense of “connectedness” (Rovai 2002).

Strong collaboration among local partners is also essential to the successful delivery and completion of programs. BHER programs hinge on partnerships and creative solutions. The commitment of students, instructors, and operational staff members to implement proactive and collaborative responses to contextual changes is critical. We recommend, finally, that CL programs for emergencies include capacity-building opportunities in their design. Local graduate students previously trained as peer mentors were critical to our programmatic response. The pandemic demonstrated that, amid volatility, local experts can find lasting solutions for their communities. The ingenuity and commitment of our local partners and peer mentors makes it possible to maintain a sustainable learning model, both within and beyond COVID.

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