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Regulating Multitasking Rule for Students Submitting Concurrent Tasks During ODL

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has irrevocably caused almost everyone to be in a state of confusion, frustration and dilemma. Students all over the globe are required to be at home and attend classes online for almost three years now. The open distance learning (ODL) is a blessing to many who believe that the responsibility to gain education must go on and such a faith is rendered at the tips of the fingers with amazing technological advances and gadgets. However, studies have shown that not many could happily adapt the ODL for various reasons. Despite the availability of technologies that could offer information and knowledge to students and guide them throughout their learning time, students have truthfully admitted that they could not cope satisfactorily. One of such reasons is because there were too many tasks and too little time given simultaneously (multitasking) by instructors who were probably trying to maintain their sanity at the end of the rope too. This writing was a mixed method study that focused on the reasons students get depressed during ODL and has offered some specific solutions, legal or otherwise, for one particular contributory factor for that depressed feeling, namely expectations from all teachers/lecturers for concurrent submission of tasks. The paper also aimed at establishing a rule by the Ministry of Education to make it mandatory not to compel students to submit tasks and assignments all at one time. Such a rule has the purpose of mandatorily facilitating both students and lecturers/teachers to organise their task submissions in a schedule so that there will not be clashes from one lecturer/teacher to another.

Keywords: Multitasking, Open Distance Learning, Clashes, Stressful Learning, Ministry of Education Rule.

Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly set up the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) or Global Goals in 2015 to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Number four in the list says "Quality Education". This study was carried out to ensure this goal is achieved because quality comes with efficient planning and in learning, planning efficiently is undoubtedly crucial and could be a life saver. Read further to grasp what this study is all about.

The current situation where a pandemic is taking control of our life offers a different three hundred and sixty degree turn to almost everything that we used to do before. Our children's education process is also not spared. Students found that they had to attend classes online where lecturers/teachers gave online instructions on what to read, write, calculate, discuss, present and others at the "comfort" of our home.

ODL is now the accepted mode of teaching and learning everywhere in the world. It is the norm and the change that everyone must embrace. It is necessary in order to avoid the coronavirus from spreading. School closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have shed light on several issues affecting access to education. COVID-19 is soaring which inevitably causes considerable numbers of children, adults and youths being unable to attend schools and colleges (UNESCO, 2020). Lah & Botelho (2012) contended that the effect of school closing on students' performance is rather obscure. But Gopal et.al (2021) mentioned that schools closing might also affect students in a subdued manner because of disruptions of teachers' and students' networks, leading predictably to poor performance. Since there is not much option to carry out classes during the pandemic, Bridge (2020) reported that schools and colleges are moving towards educational technologies for student learning to avoid pressure and tension during the pandemic season. Shehzadi et. al (2020) also described in their study that UNESCO recommends distance learning programmes and encourages applications of open educational systems during school closures caused by COVID-19 so that schools and teachers can continue to teach their pupils to prevent any interruption in their education progress. Where Malaysia is concerned, the Malaysian Education Ministry has given the approval for all higher education institutions to conduct online teaching or e-learning (Malay Mail, 2020). The Ministry also emphasised that online teaching could only be conducted if all students have access to instructors and all infrastructure requirements are in place (Chung et.al., 2020).

However, as is with every single change in life, ODL is not without difficulties and complications. The ODL has indeed caused several repercussions amongst all involved. This paper singled out one problem faced by the students during ODL classes, namely the requirement by their instructors (teachers/lecturers) to submit tasks given simultaneously or at almost the same time. Such a situation can be referred to as multitasking where in this respect, students are obligated to perform multiple tasks at the same time by their instructors in schools, colleges or universities so that the tasks must be submitted at relatively the same time or on the same date.

Where learning is concerned, multitasking is inevitable. This occurs because students are required to learn several courses and complete tasks given by the instructors for all the courses. Multitasking is the act when one engages in two tasks or streams of information during the same time period. May & Elder (2018) stated that multitasking is performed because it has a perceived efficiency but nonetheless concluded that multitasking is associated with less efficiency for learning; meaning, it takes more time to complete a learning task than when only engaging in the learning task. A study carried out to determine the relation between multitasking and individual performance by Marchewka et.al (2020) shows that multitasking requires more time to accomplish tasks and deteriorates creativity. Feng et.al (2014) admitted in their study that human beings are famously poor at multitasking. They felt that humans are admired for their capability to control processes with their power and flexibility but they do have limitations in doing so. Another study by Miller (2017) discloses that attention to one thing will give less attention to other things. Miller further mentioned that when one multitasks one actually is actually switching tasks at a great cost.

According to Jarmon (2008), multitasking has been shown to slow learning and reduce efficiency. Clinton-Lisell (2021) declared that generally multitasking on reading comprehension has a negative effect.

A survey conducted displays that students clearly disclose their concern over piles of homework, assignments, projects and tasks that must be completed and targets accomplished within a very limited period of time. One of the many factors that contributes to this so-called concern is the fact that all lecturers/teachers simultaneously expected the students to submit and present their tasks in a specified range of weeks or days. Imagine having had courses/subjects more than five and all of them must be completed and submitted on any particular day or week as instructed by the lecturers or teachers! Such a multitask would be a nightmare for students at the university level, those who are still at the primary and secondary levels would certainly perceive education as a horrifying inexplicable experience.

This paper suggested a legal solution to overcome the above mentioned problem so that it would prevent any issues arising at the schools' and universities' levels. A rule passed by the executive concerned for all academic institutions to conform to would reduce various initiatives taken to overcome the problem in multitasking during ODL classes. Clearly, there are several other suggestions to tackle the issue but a rule or regulation passed by the Ministry of Education would definitely avoid any uphill attempts to disable the problem.

Literature Review

As can be seen from the preceding paragraph, a great deal of previous research into multitasking has focused on the effects of multitasking. Many had given suggestions as to how to overcome problems that could arise because of multitasking or how to intelligently manage multitasking in general. Parry & Le Roux (2019) presented 15 interventions designed to weaken the negative effects of multitasking on cognitive performance. These interventions were categorised as promoting awareness (e.g., reminders to focus on the primary task and logging activities at set intervals), restriction (e.g., removing smart phones from the study environment and disabling notifications from smart phones) and mindfulness in which participants engage in exercises or training on how to be aware and attentive to the present moment. Miller (2017) also suggested that one should prioritise to work on the most important task first and to be self-aware and resistant where humans have the temptation to multitask but it has been proven to be not effective.

However, there is still insufficient specific study on how to effectively multitask during today's ODL era. Lederman (2019) mentioned that students tend to be distracted when multitasking during the face to face classes; so, having classes online would inevitably distract them more especially when they are aware that their instructors are not watching. Lepp et.al (2014) carried out a research as to the role of multitasking for online study and discovered that multitasking should be discouraged for online learning while recognising that the methods for doing so may be very different than in face-to-face courses. Lepp also mentioned that *"the developers of online courses should explore technological and pedagogical solutions aimed at keeping online learners focused on their primary task in the absence of a physically present instructor"*. Nothing in the study touched on the multitasking aspect for students to submit tasks and submissions concurrently. In another study (Lepp et.al., 2019) the researchers admitted the need for future research to identify and teach self-regulatory strategies specific to online educational settings. Yet, there was nothing in the paper that

stated the need to come up with a specific tool to avoid students to multitask in task submissions.

Materials and Methods

The study was carried out to determine what made students feel stressful during the ODL. So, the study applied the non-probability sampling where the samples were selected through purposive and judgmental sampling. Data collection involved semi-structured written questions distributed to 607 respondents aged from 12 years old and above, located all over Malaysia using the Google Form because of the pandemic. Respondents were required to state their gender, age, location and level of education in order to ensure that they were fit for the purpose of the survey. Some of the questions required the respondents to choose answers from several options given using the Likert-scale ranging from 1 to 5. There were 8 questions asked in the survey. Telephone calls were made to teachers and counsellors of several schools to discover the reactions and impacts of students who were forced to undergo classes online. They were contacted because they had statistics of the performance of students at their schools. Some of the data was also gathered using internet messages such as *WhatsApp's* and personal messages. Secondary data were also obtained from online materials such as journal and newspaper articles and several websites that focus on student's learning skills and developments.

Negative Effects of Multitasking

Multitasking is inevitable. We do it every day, consciously or not. A mother while driving a car may be asking simple mathematical or language questions to her primary school children before their tests or quizzes. A woman in the kitchen may be watching her favourite Korean drama whilst peeling the onions at the kitchen counter. This paper focuses on the negative impacts of multitasking during ODL, but concentrates on the impact of having to submit tasks simultaneously online. Several general negative effects of multitasking are hence listed.

1. Delay in tasks completion
2. Reduce creativity
3. Create confusions
4. Reduce performance
5. Increase in distractions
6. Lower accuracy for recognition and sensitivity
7. Lower reading and comprehension scores
8. Lower recall skills
9. Lower question response
10. Loss in benefits of automaticity and efficiency

Finding and Discussions

From the survey conducted, we managed to gather 607 responses from students at various levels ageing from below 12 years and above (the survey required the respondents to disclose their age ranging from below 12 years until above 30 years old). Most of the respondents were female (437 people) and the rest were male (170 people). Most respondents were 18-23 years old representing 441 people, 124 people came from the age group of 13-17 years old, 26 respondents were between 24-30 years old, 9 people were above 30 years and only 7 respondents were 12 years and below. Respondents came from all 14

states of Malaysia. The following table shows the states they were staying in when they took part in the survey.

Table 1
Number of Respondents from Each State

States	Number of Respondents
Selangor	132
Sabah	129
Johor	73
Melaka	64
Kelantan	49
Kuala Lumpur	40
Pahang	32
Negeri Sembilan	26
Perak	16
Terengganu	16
Kedah	14
Pulau Pinang	11
Sarawak	4
Perlis	1

From the above figure 463 respondents were Public Higher Learning Institutions' students and 121 people were secondary school students. The rest of the respondents were either from primary schools, private learning institutions or others.

The first question from the survey required the students to choose from the list of situations they might have faced when having classes online during the pandemic. The results are as follows.

Table 2
Situations Faced During ODL

SITUATIONS	YES (pax)	NO (pax)	MAYBE (pax)
Lack of internet data	349	109	109
Sharing of hand phones or computers	133	442	32
Working part time jobs	78	510	19
Helping family business	110	464	33
Taking care of siblings and/or others	268	289	50
Anxiety	387	123	97
Confusion	496	40	71
Migraine	278	252	77
Depression	309	173	125
Wanting to give up	385	105	117

From the above figure, we can deduce that a lot of students had problems with their internet data and the figures for the possible effects of such a problem could be gathered from the five bottom rows from the above table. Internet data is crucial at all times when students are having online classes because it can cause lagging in getting the information from

instructors during classes. Impacts such as lack of understanding, confusion and inability to gauge the expectations from teachers/lecturers could be something intense and challenging for the students to endure. This definitely could result in a lot worse consequences for them such as failure in the subject/course or health problems.

The survey further required the respondents to disclose their resources in completing their tasks during the ODL. The respondents were allowed to choose more than one option. The table below is the result.

Table 3

Resources of Information

RESOURCES OF INFORMATION	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Internet	601
Textbooks	301
Reference Books	303
Friends	540
Lecturers/Teachers	424
Learning materials from lecturers or teachers	519
Television/Radio	36

As can be seen from the above table, most respondents (99%) relied on the internet to complete tasks given by their instructors. In other words, whatever assignment the respondents had, they searched for answers on the internet. The Internet is thus by far the most dominant source of information for students during the ODL. Relating this to Table 2 result above, it can be concluded that lack of internet data could be fatal to the students' affairs when learning is concerned. From Table 3 also we can say that students relied heavily on the materials they obtained from lecturers/teachers. However, because the classes were carried out online, they probably had to buy the materials online too. For some students, this could be burdensome as they would have to rely on their parents for online banking. Not everyone had the privilege of such a facility. The possibility of having to work part time could be because of the necessity of buying learning materials online because such materials could be very expensive compared to acquiring them directly from the instructors. As such, these could slow down the learning process for the students.

The survey further invited the respondents to opine what the possible reasons are for not having ample time in completing their tasks. The result is as follows.

Table 4

Reasons for Not Completing Tasks on Time

REASONS FOR NOT COMPLETING TASKS ON TIME	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Internet problem	345
Own carelessness	367
Tasks given concurrently by lecturers/teachers	488
Problem discussing with friends	324
Inability to communicate with lecturers/teachers	229

It can be seen that the respondents declared that the main reason for them not being able to complete the tasks given on time was that the tasks were given concurrently by their

instructors. This is obvious because once the tasks were distributed by the instructors, they would expect the students to submit them according to the time allocated to them. If there were many tasks to be completed simultaneously, it is almost certain that the outcome of the tasks would not be as good as if ample time was afforded to them. Having more time to complete an assignment would definitely afford the students more information and understanding of any particular topic and would subsequently deliver good grades for them.

The last answer required from the respondents from the survey was to ascertain their stand regarding a scheduled task submission, if any. There were six possible outcomes laid down by the survey about this view. The following table explains this position.

Table 5

Output for a Scheduled Task Submission

A SCHEDULED TASK SUBMISSION WILL HAVE THE FOLLOWING OUTPUT:	NUMBER OF RESPONSES
Better academic results	364
Less stress	576
Better relationship with lecturers or teachers	271
Motivation to strive harder	416
Harmonious relationship with family	291
Less tendency to get sick	365

As can be seen from the above table, the students who took part in the survey agreed that a scheduled task submission would prompt a less stress environment since 576 responses believed that so. Another 416 responses trusted their will to strive harder would increase as a scheduled task submission would heighten their motivation to do so. Obviously, better academic results and less tendency to get sick were also favoured by the respondents because their daily life and routine would be much more enhanced with a scheduled task submission. This is quite apparent because when all instructors do not demand tasks submissions simultaneously, students would have ample time to prepare all assignments. Subsequently, this would avoid any negative repercussions to the students which would result in better academic performances and better attitudes looking at all matters.

Apart from the online surveys distributed, the authors had also gained data from several respondents interviewed through calls, messages or emailed from their respective numbers and email addresses. All respondents contacted through this method were school teachers, education officers at the state education offices and also officers from the Higher Education Ministry.

From the interviews, most of the teachers agreed that they had to attain certain targets in order to reach the key performance index set by the Education Department for the subjects that they taught. Hence, the demand for tasks submissions be done at nearly simultaneous dates every year to evaluate the students' performance. There should be no problems for the students since they are regularly reminded about their tasks all year long. If they were complaining about the simultaneous tasks given to them, that only indicates that they were not well organised with what the teachers were saying during their classes.

Officers from both the State and District Education Department also concurred with the above disclosure from the teachers. They were referred to since most education policies are formed at these levels to be applied by the teachers in schools of the respective districts.

Obviously, the authority comes from the Ministry of Education at Federal level and the implementation of policies is at the discretion of officers at State and District levels. Officers interviewed admitted the schools must submit reports annually to the respective state and district departments to recount conformity to policies made.

On the other hand, several lecturers from various local universities agreed that a system is needed whereby the students should be given different weeks for their task submissions. This is to avoid overlapping of tasks which render the students to be in a stressful condition since all lecturers would demand good submissions as well as presentations from their students. An organised submission plan would also inevitably result in the lecturers' planning to be clear and certain. This subsequently facilitates the lecturers to have more time to do other tasks like research and article writing.

Suggestions and Conclusion

Before going to the conclusion, there are a couple of suggestions which can be proposed so that the objectives of this paper can be attained. We find that there should be a system or a mechanism available for university students to schedule their task submissions. An application can be created whereby all students and lecturers of any particular groups in the on-going semester can collectively refer to the apps for guidance and there should not be any overlapping tasks for the students. The apps should include the student's profile; the main calendar which comprises of every assignment and tutorial submission datelines, tests, quizzes, presentations and final exams dates; the main checklist where students need to check the respective boxes whenever they have completed the tasks being set in their To-Do List; the customise week section should allow the students to customise their own desired schedule by including "Numbered Weeks" so that they can easily track the tasks given. Where the lecturers are concerned, there is a button that can be adjusted by clicking in the respective boxes. Lecturers can simply book the slots for their courses based on the First-Come-First Served basis. Therefore, if the slots have been booked by the First Lecturer, the apps will automatically restrict other lecturers' requests to book for their slots. There should be a reminder that there should only be a maximum of two slots per day to avoid unnecessary multitasking for students.

The other suggestion is for all institutes of higher learning to arrange an understanding for all academic staff to come up with harmonious solutions when it concerns the students' welfare. Since they are the stakeholders of each institution, it is pertinent to guide them academically without having to tarnish their trust in the education system they are involved in. It is definitely advantageous to have a humane regulation which benefits both the students and their instructors. Thus, we propose for the Higher Learning Ministry to pass a regulation to this effect so that all higher learning institutions have uniformed sets of directives for their academic staff. This is important because a regulation passed by the Ministry will ensure cooperation from all lecturers to conform.

In conclusion, we found that school children are more receptive to multitasking because they are given ample time to complete the tasks given. A whole year syllabus can successfully be accomplished to attain the objectives of the Ministry of Education. All schools are required to send an annual report to each State Education Department to justify their degree of compliance to the plans generated by the respective education agencies. By far, reviews found from this study did not suggest any major changes to the policies made. On the other hand, we found that students at the local higher learning institutions found it burdensome to have multiple task submissions at the same time. This could probably be due to the fact that

they also have other activities to participate in order to gauge their status as university students as well as the need to do well in all academic requirements. High competition among peer university mates is another factor that could cause the students to appreciate less multitasking. Although it could be necessary for the students to multitask, its extent must be controlled to facilitate them to get through the learning process effectively.

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