



Resistance to Online Learning in Zimbabwean Secondary Schools: the Content and Reasons

Simon Vurayai

Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Corresponding author: vurayais@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study examined the content and reasons for the resistance to the implementation of online learning in secondary education in Zimbabwe in light of the lessons and experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed a systematic literature review as its methodology that relied exclusively on secondary data. The Overcoming Resistance to Change (ORC) model was exploited as a desirable model for the review, findings, and recommendations. The study found that online learning as a pedagogical innovation is and has been resisted by stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and learners due to factors like poor communication, unpreparedness, education, and training. Other factors like isolation, costs, fear, vested interests, ingrained habits, and workload also compounded and increased the magnitude of resistance. The study recommended the need to overcome resistance to the implementation of online learning by proposing strategies such as education and communication, participation, negotiation, resource provision, and positive soft power.

Keywords: Innovation, Online Learning, Overcoming Resistance to Change, Resistance, Secondary Education

INTRODUCTION

Education and social change have a symbiotic relationship and are inexorably intertwined. Of importance is the acknowledgment that education is a stimulant for social change, while social change also brings considerable alterations in the education system. “With the value of education emphasized, it is understandable that when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11 March 2020, an immediate major concern was how best to maintain a continuity of education for all children amidst this devastating global disruption” (Cunningham & Gibson, 2022, para1). Education had to proceed besides the barring of face-to-face interaction to contain the spread of the virus. “With the Coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic which resulted in

national lockdowns across countries, there was a need to adopt (ICT) to make sure that learners still had access to their basic right to education” (Zinyemba, Nhongo, & Zinyemba, 2021, p. 223).

Remote and online teaching methods were adopted in an attempt to save the education of Zimbabwean secondary school students like the rest of the world. “There has been a shift towards virtual classrooms as a mode of education delivery with students being taught remotely through electronic platforms in many developed countries but for countries like Zimbabwe, virtual classrooms were prematurely delivered having been induced by the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic” (Zinyemba et al, 2021, p. 223). However, the rupture of education during the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing

inequalities in education systems worldwide (Cunningham & Gibson, 2022; Mukute, Burt, Francis, & De Souza, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented educators at all levels of schooling with the challenge of converting face-to-face instruction to online learning. “Past efforts to enact educational change, especially the adoption of technology in the classroom, have had mixed results” (McQuirter, 2020, p.47). This in many instances resulted in resistance among learners, parents and teachers. “Resistance to change is a well-known phenomenon. It is natural to resist modifications since they can mean more risks, upsetting the established balance and emotional stress” (Martins, 2016, para 2). Today’s teachers are faced with a myriad of platforms and ever-changing digital tools in their delivery of new content (McQuirter, 2020) hence more changes of resistance are expected. Any change will mostly be met with some resistance at first as long as people are still not aware of the purpose of the change (Mandukwini, 2016; Juli, 2017). The resistance by teachers and other stakeholders may be a sign of the burden they bear in the implementation of online learning as a pedagogical innovation. It may mean that “the demands have multiplied over the past years when teachers had to move from a face-to-face model to a fully online platform in the absence of prior training, modelling of best practices, or easily accessed technical support”(McQuirter,2020,p.49).

A social change or an innovation comes with it some social, economic, psychological and cognitive costs and burdens. As a result, stakeholders tend to resist avoiding upsetting the status quo and ingrained habits. Having noted that online learning has faced resistance in some sections of the society by some stakeholders in Zimbabwean secondary education, the study found it prudent to examine the content and reasons in light of the experiences, lessons and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The argument is that,

although the COVID-19 pandemic was devastating it opened opportunities to improve pedagogy so as to avoid loss of learning in the case of future emergencies. However, online learning as a pedagogical innovation has been met with strong resistance and as such the content and reasons need to be examined. This was the main focus of this systematic review paper. As the bedrock of this study, the Overcoming Resistance to Change (ORC) model was employed. The literature was reviewed in light of factors such as isolation, low education, vested interests, the cost of change, workload, ingrained customs and habits, fear of the unknown and role conflict.

THE PROBLEM

Instead of being an equaliser, technology in education is certainly an area of change that has been problematic through the amplification of already existing social inequalities. “The unexpected arrival of COVID-19 and the almost overnight need to move delivery of programs online at every level of schooling has exacerbated an already uneven implementation of digital technology” (McQuirter,2020,p.48). This innovation was met with resistance from the stakeholders in Zimbabwe such as teachers, learners, and parents. It was therefore important to examine the content and reasons for resistance and suggest ways of overcoming the barriers. Solving this problem is of value because it helps the user system and change managers in coping with the challenges of implementing technology-related innovations and overcoming the related resistance and inequalities respectively.

AIM

The aim of this study was to examine what (content) and why (reasons) teachers, learners and parents in Zimbabwean secondary schools resisted in implementing online learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study hinged on the Overcoming Resistance to Change (ORC) model as articulated by proponents such as John Kotter and Leo Schlesinger (1989; 2009). The model claims that change is basically stressful and burdened with uncertainties hence individuals naturally develop strategies to cope with it. The first strategy is natural coping in order to adjust (Abbas, 2022; Kotter & Schlesinger, 2009). This process is characterized by stages such as denial, resistance, exploration, and commitment. In other words, the individual first refuses to recognize an innovation or a change upon first encounter. When realizing that the innovation is real an individual starts mourning the past using passive and active strategies of resisting the change (Abbas, 2022; Miller & Guerrero, 2022). Upon realizing that change is inevitable individuals begin to regenerate to explore the change. Finally, the individual gets committed to the demands of the innovation and takes action required for its implementation (Miller & Guerrero, 2022).

Individuals have different tendency towards change. They have their own pace of coming out of the emotional phase and adjusting with change. Some individuals remain stuck in denial and resistance, and this is where change managers should not leave it to natural coping strategy and find some other ways or resort to other strategies (Juli, 2017; Abbas, 2022; Miller & Guerrero, 2022). It is when the natural strategies fail that attraction strategies could be used to overcome resistance to innovation or change. In this case the change managers need to communicate the change or innovation in a way in which the change agents would clearly decipher the tangible and intangible benefits of the change (Grace, 2018). People who are affected by the change need to be convinced that their prior knowledge, values, and beliefs are significant and that the change is necessary for the advancement of the quality of education (Mandukwini, 2016).

Proponents, Kotter and Schlesinger (2009) suggest that contingency strategies can be brought to use if the natural coping strategy and attractions fail to work. The contingency strategies they raised are discussed below.

Education, training, and communication

This is the most common way of reducing resistance to the proposed change. The change agents need to be educated effectively by means of useful communication on the benefits and significance of change. This strategy will benefit the change agents in terms of clarity, skills, and knowledge that are needed in implementing online learning in the case of this study. The change can gain the much needed support if there is two-way communication between the change managers and the implementers especially on the problems and challenges that are likely to be associated with the change.

Participation and involvement of stakeholders

Closely related to education and communication is the participation and involvement of stakeholders. The user system needs to be given the chance to collaborate and to take part in active consultation when an innovation is coming. In this case, resistance will be minimized because the user system feels ownership of the innovation as an active participant in bringing it.

Facilitation and support

When the user system goes through the process of change, it faces challenges like stress, fear, anger, anxiety, and others. They need great emotional support and facilitation from the change managers and be allowed to express their fear so that they will eventually allow them to cope with the challenges of implementing a new innovation. For example, in online learning as a new pedagogical strategy, the user system may fear the cost of training and the

gadgets that are involved. Their fear should not be suppressed as it is genuine for them to do so in order to cope with the innovation.

Negotiation and agreement

This strategy involves bargaining on the various concerns of innovation that emanate from the change managers and the user system. In this strategy, every concern that is seen as a threat to the implementation of an innovation is regarded as important and is given the due consideration it deserves so as to reduce the resistance.

Manipulation and co-optation

This strategy involves persuading the user system to accept the innovation. The change managers can manipulate the information that they think may increase the resistance by concealing it in favour of the change. The strategy may also involve the change managers co-opting other individuals to help in favor of implementing innovation. For example, assigning skilled and knowledgeable individuals to assist other teachers in using online pedagogy.

Explicit and implicit coercion

This strategy involves the use of hard and soft power so that the user system accepts the innovation. In this study, the researcher recommended the use of soft power such as persuasion because it reduces resistance to explicit power such as threats and the use of fear.

The study found the ORC model more suitable and thus employed it to examine what stakeholders resist (content) and why stakeholders resist (reasons) in implementing online learning as a pedagogical innovation. The model also goes further to suggest some possible strategies to overcome resistance, and this makes it a self-contained model to deal with the problems and solutions of resistance to change.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a systematic literature review as its methodology. A systematic literature review entails a comprehensive search that gathers all relevant published studies that focus on research questions so as to reach a logical presentation and incorporation of findings of the results of that search (Siddaway, Wood & Hedges, 2019). In other words, a systematic review is a well-planned and careful examination of published research under the guidance of research questions so as to come up with unified and consolidated findings in an area the researcher finds problematic and requires a panacea.

Foster (2018) recommends the important steps when doing a systematic literature review as planning the methods, identifying and searching for studies, evaluating all retrieved articles, collecting/combining the studies, explaining the results, and summarizing results in a clear and transparent manner.

In this study, rigorous planning was done first to map out the systematic review process in terms of the structure and direction of the study. The structure and direction of the systematic review started by identifying the research aim which is examining the content and reasons for resisting online learning. The research aim then determined the relevance and quality of the publications to be included. The researcher identified and evaluated the relevant theories and studies, particularly from journals and book chapters on resistance to online learning. The ORC model and those studies that were related to the content and reasons for resistance to online were reviewed to come up with integrated findings on what and why the stakeholders resist in online learning. A summary report of results was later presented.

THE REASONS AND CONTENT OF RESISTANCE TO ONLINE TEACHING

This section examines why there is resistance and what is resisted in implementing online learning.

Isolation or lack of relationship with other

In this case, isolation shall be considered in three elements. Firstly, isolation as a geographical aspect, secondly isolation in relation to the differences between the past habit and new innovation and lastly isolation of learners from teachers and peers during online learning. Geographically some areas in Zimbabwe are isolated from the rest hence they tend to resist innovations because of a number of factors that stem from their geographical isolation. Students in the rural areas in Zimbabwe face greater challenges because these areas are highly underdeveloped in terms of internet accessibility, infrastructure, and power generation – requisites that are essential to e-learning (Matimairé, 2020; Moyo, 2020). “To worsen the situation of rural learners most of the educators noted that even if the educators were available at their rural duty stations, no online learning could have occurred as there is no proper infrastructure and basic resources that could enable them to conduct online learning” (Zinyemba et al, 2021,p. 226). Online learning as a pedagogical innovation needs essential requisites such as the internet, power, and infrastructure which are unavailable in most underdeveloped and isolated rural areas of Zimbabwe. The teachers, parents, and learners in the marginalized rural areas of Zimbabwe are poorly connected or may never be connected at all. Given this kind of isolation, such stakeholders are more likely to resist the implementation of online learning because they do not have access to the prerequisites that the rest of the country has.

Apart from geographical isolation, there is peer isolation. Teachers and learners need peer interaction in the implementation

of online learning. “Peer support during change initiatives is important. Teachers work in isolation for significant parts of their days. However, isolation is one of the greatest impediments to enacting change” (Mandukwini, 2016, p.304). Teachers need to work with fellow peers sharing ideas on the implementation of online teaching as this will improve their understanding and acceptance of the innovation. Isolation impeded the implementation of online learning more during the COVID-19 pandemic because “many teachers were still in the Disruption stage, dealing with the technical aspects of delivery, unable to ask larger questions related to the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of children in an online environment” (McQuirter, 2020, p.49). The situation was even worse for some of the educators whose rural workstations did not have electricity and internet connectivity (Moyo, 2020). The disruption stage has been raised in the ORC model as a critical phase of coping naturally with change that needs to be handled with care if the proposed innovation is to be accepted.

Learners also need interaction with peers and teachers for effective online learning. Teacher and learner isolation was more ‘painful’ in practical subjects where learners needed teachers close. “Most practical modules in sciences and technology were severely affected since these areas need clinical supervision and a hands-on approach. They were also finding it difficult to get across new and difficult concepts to children via non-interactive virtual lessons” (Mukute et al, 2020, p.5). A related study in Zimbabwe adds that.

“Lack of self-encounter with educators was a great challenge as there are some topics which require face to face interaction with the educator and difficult to understand while making use of social media platforms like WhatsApp, which were affordable to the majority of the learners and educators, like areas to do with numbers and experiments” (Zinyemba et al, 2021, p. 227).

From the anecdotes above, teachers, learners, and parents among other stakeholders need to interact and share ideas on how best online learning can be implemented and improved. If an innovation is implemented by isolated stakeholders, it is likely to be resisted and suffers from rejection.

Low education/ and poor planning/ time

If there is no training to develop new skills to cope with the change, then the change will be resisted (Juli, 2017). This takes us to the point why education and communication have been some of the contingency strategies to overcome resistance in the ORC model. “Strong institutional support for the development of technical skills, coupled with collegial sharing and building on current practices, leads to a sense of agency among instructors and a greater willingness to embrace change” (McQuirter,2020,p.47). An immediate upgrading of digital proficiency was required by many teachers as they navigated a path for their students from the traditional classroom to online learning(Cunningham and Gibson,2022). During and after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, “teachers in elementary and secondary schools were offered little if any systematic training in full online delivery” (McQuirter, 2020, p. 49).

The attraction strategy of the ORC model makes it clear that “teachers carrying out the change need information about the aims and benefits of change, what is needed to introduce the change, and how the change will be introduced. If this information is not provided, then change will be resisted” (Ncube, & Kajengo, 2000, p.38). It can be inferred that educators, teachers, and parents admitted that online learning was left to trial and error as both the learners and educators were not prepared for online learning and did not know what to expect and how to proceed with online learning and assessment. If the stakeholders in Zimbabwe and the rest of the globe are not educated,

trained, and communicated with regarding an innovation, that is a recipe for resistance and the ORC model is very clear about it.

Strong vested interests

The ORC model is clear about the fact that if an innovation is benefiting the stakeholders, then resistance will be minimal. When change comes, power, income, and control of resources may be redistributed. There may be resistance among people who feel they are losing power (Martins, 2016, Vurayai,2023). Some changes may call for a reduction in the size of an organization. This means that some people may lose their top posts or positions (Juli, 2017). There, therefore, needs to be an understanding of what happens to people’s personal interests and their power (Martins, 2016; Vurayai, 2022). It may be reasonable to infer that online learning was resisted by Zimbabwean secondary teachers who saw it as a threat to their expert power in face-to-face teaching who were and are now required to attain new skills for lesson delivery.

The cost of Change

Change and innovations are rarely free. They have costs associated with them and the ORC model raised the concern that this is enough to trigger resistance among the user system. Change impacts on the budget of stakeholders and their financial standing.

In education, one other factor that influences curriculum implementation concerns the particular economic circumstances of each school. Schools located in rich socio-economic environments and those that have adequate human and material resources can implement the curriculum to an extent that would be difficult or impossible for schools in poor economic environments (Chaudhary, 2015, p.984).

Online learning brought costs related to gadgets, infrastructure, data, and power

supply, among others that the stakeholders would rarely incur before. It requires an extra budget that some may not afford, and this may result in resistance.

There is no doubt that “no meaningful teaching and learning take place without adequate facilities and resource materials. The availability and quality of resource material and the availability of appropriate facilities have a great influence on curriculum implementation” (Chaudhary, 2015, p.984). Online learning was faced with a lot of educator resistance as not much was done to ensure that the learning could be conducted in a conducive environment. The most cited challenge by the educators in Zimbabwe was footing the internet bill from their meagre salaries and making use of their personal gadgets to accommodate hundreds of assignments (Matimaire 2020; Vurayai, 2022). It was very difficult to conduct the online learning as not all the learners and educators had the electronic devices that could be used for online learning. Most of the educators in Zimbabwe complained that the internet bundle was beyond their reach as they normally used Wi-Fi at workplaces, while the learners had to depend on a daily night bundle that was affordable (Matimaire 2020; Mukute et al, 2020). Some of the learners despite the availability of such learning platforms did not attend all their lessons due to a myriad of challenges that were beyond their control like power cuts with no backup power at home; poor internet connectivity; no connectivity at all and depletion of the paid-up bundle (Mukute et al, 2020).

Apart from data and gadgets, online learning as a pedagogical innovation carries with it more costs in the form of backup power, maintenance, basic devices, availability of additional peripherals, upgrading, and training that are demanding and uncertain for the common person and the poor. The burden to meet these additional costs is so stretching and may result in resistance by stakeholders to implement online learning.

Ingrained customs and habits

From the ORC model, most people find change to be uncomfortable. “We establish comfort zones and routines. Consequently, we need to have important reasons to change our routine” (Mandukwini, 2016, p.304). A change or innovation would deskill or disempower certain individuals in society as they will be required to change their customs and habits. Changes that tamper with traditions and customs are seen as a threat, hence they are resisted (Miller & Guerrero, 2022). When a new change is implemented, new rules and regulations are created in the organization (Martins, 2016). A change may mean adopting new ways of doing things. Old ways that teachers are used to or are competent in are now useless (Juli, 2017). This may also result in new skills becoming essential (Martins, 2016; Vurayai, 2023).

Some changes can reduce the influence one has in a school. Such a change will be resisted by the affected persons (Ncube & Kajengo, 2000). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Matimaire (2020) reports that despite the call for online learning, the situation for urban learners in Zimbabwe was a different story as some of the learners were reported to be going for face-to-face extra lessons with private tutors for a fee. Some teachers were cashing on face-to-face private tutorials even in the school premises. The shift to online learning implied loss of income, hence such teachers would resist the innovation. The same also applies to parents. Due to traditional customs and habits, there are many parents who contend that old and traditional teaching approaches are actually the best. If parents decline to accept new, and innovative pedagogic strategies like online learning, then it can be hardly implemented.

Fear of the unknown and fear of failure

As noted in the ORC model, fear of the unknown is normally found in the natural coping stage. At this stage

individuals have no information about an innovation hence they become afraid of a strange and unfamiliar change. This may culminate into anxiety, stress, phobias and panic attacks. Ncube and Kajengo (2000) clarify that

“Teachers resist change because of the uncertainty about causes and effects of the change. Teachers may fear to try out new ideas because they are not sure of the results. They fear of looking stupid. Resistance occurs when the procedures for implementing the change are not explained and they are unfamiliar” (p.38).

In the case of online learning, teachers, parents, and learners were using trial and error. They had no adequate information on how to proceed in lessons and assessments (Vurayai,2023). They had a fear of mistakes and failure, and this compounded the magnitude of resistance that was also induced by other factors. It is important that the fear of the unknown is allayed and mitigated among the stakeholders for change for it to be acceptable and implemented.

Increased workload and Role conflict

A social change or innovation may mean increased workload and complex role conflict. The outbreak of COVID-19 resulted in the rapid digital revolution in the education system through online lectures, teleconferencing, digital open books, online examination, and interaction in virtual environments (Kapasia, Paul, Roy, Saha, Zaveri, Mallick, ... Chouhan, 2020). This implied that the stakeholders like teachers needed more time and energy to plan and execute their duties as compared to the traditional face-to-face approach. “Their workload had increased due to virtual learning” (Mukute et al., 2020, p.5). When the stakeholders realize that innovation would increase their workload without a proportional increment in their income, they are likely to resist it.

Online learning may imply that the home becomes a more active site of formal learning. The teachers, parents and learners have other roles to play in the same home. In Zimbabwe, the home space and equipment also have their traditional roles and functions to play which would then be shared with formal teaching and learning. This may pose a challenge of role conflict to the stakeholders. In Zimbabwe, Zinyemba et al (2021, p. 227) observed that home learning “was also a cause of conflict as most of the parents and guardians felt that one could not spend many hours on the phone and viewed that as an excuse for not doing household chores.” On the other hand, the home environment itself, particularly for the overcrowded poor, is not conducive for learning as there are a lot of disturbances. It is prudent to note that role conflict may impede the implementation of an innovation like online learning.

Way forward

The deliberate and rational choice of the ORC model was also on the basis that it provides strategies for reducing resistance and also facilitating change management. According to the ORC model, some individuals may get stuck in the denial and resistance stage hence attractions and contingency strategies need to be applied for an innovation to be implemented successfully. “Successful implementation of any programme needs positive behaviour that is free from fear. Teachers should see the change as relevant to their professional lives and necessary to improve the quality of their teaching. Teachers’ concerns should be taken into account, considered, and addressed so that they can feel that their opinions are valued” (Mandukwini, 2016, p.19).

The other strategy to contain resistance to the implementation of online learning is supporting the stakeholders in Zimbabwe through education, training and communication and the ORC model is clear about it. “Partners at community levels must

offer well-ness support to children, and especially to those with various vulnerabilities. The government is encouraged to spearhead the training of teachers and learners to make use of educational technologies” (Mandikiana, 2020, p.304). “This can be done by facilitating, retraining, and providing staff development programmes which will help the Zimbabwean teachers acquire new skills to cope with the change. Staff development programmes can be in the form of in-service workshops or seminars” (Ncube & Kajengo, 2000, p.38). Once stakeholders in the Zimbabwean education are supported and educated on the innovation, the greater are chances for it to be accepted.

Robust efforts are to be put in place to cater for the rural and other disadvantaged urban populace to ensure access to education during pandemics like COVID-19 to curb inequality and exclusion. (Mandikiana, 2020, p.304). Establishing more community ICT centers in rural areas in Zimbabwe could be one of the strategies to mitigate access to digital information and knowledge (Vurayai, 2022). It is also important to establish the provision and support of online learning platforms, which can be supported by radio and television broadcasts, universal access to internet and for the government to partner with internet service providers so that it becomes accessible and affordable to the majority of the populace (Mukute et al, 2021).

A new innovation brings with it new challenges. There is a need to take the challenges encountered with a positive mind because they also bring with them some opportunities to identify areas that need to be improved for excellent digital learning across socio-demographic groups (Vurayai, 2022). “Teachers also need to know that change is not final; there will always be new

methods and techniques to try out, which make curriculum change and implementation an ongoing process” (Mandukwini, 2016, p.19). Once teachers develop this mindset, they are more likely to be receptive to more new innovations.

This study cannot rule out the role of positive soft power in change management. “Adoption of a change does not occur without some form of pressure, preferably positive in nature. The exerted pressure to change must exceed the pressure to return to the status quo” (Mandukwini, 2016, p.19). The change managers in Zimbabwe need to employ strategies like persuasion, co-optation, and negotiation for an innovation to be accepted. Implicit and explicit coercion are strategies that fall under the proposed contingency measures of change management in the ORC model that have proved to work in the past.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing study examines the reasons and content of resistance to online learning by stakeholders in Zimbabwean secondary schools such as teachers, learners, and parents. It is important to note that resistance is a useful form of feedback to show that there is something that needs to be corrected on the innovation. The stakeholders in Zimbabwe need full information, training and communication for them to accept online learning as a beneficial innovation that is implemented to improve rather than disrupting pedagogy. Online learning as an innovation is resisted because it brings with it burden and loss in terms of cost, workload, time, habits, skills, interests, power, status, and income. As posited by the ORC model there is a need for education, participation, negotiation, and positive coercion (soft power) among the stakeholders in online learning for the innovation to be implemented successfully.

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