Chapter 14
Translating Distance Education Theory into Practice: Developing an Emergency Teaching Framework for a Caribbean University

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic compelled universities worldwide to address the issue of continuity of teaching and learning. The request for teaching and learning continuity took many by surprise and as such, many universities were unprepared for the rapid shift. The transition from face to face to remote teaching therefore required a quick, but careful consideration to the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of remote teaching and learning. Notwithstanding this challenge, it becomes necessary to ground decisions within theoretical contexts that support and advance effective remote teaching and learning practice. Theory is well established as a tool to shape the effective teaching and learning within the higher-education setting and while there are frameworks that support traditional teaching and learning, not much attention is given to distance education frameworks. This chapter therefore intimates reflection on the utility of distance education theoretical frameworks to advance and sustain remote teaching practice at a Caribbean university.

1 Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the governments of Caribbean territories mandated lockdown of all higher education (HE) establishments resulting in the push for HE institutions to switch teaching and learning to the online setting. The Caribbean university presented in this study was therefore required to address the need for an emergency remote teaching (ERT) framework. While online teaching and learning was not new at the university, teaching and learning posed a unique challenge as the entire university had to shift to an ERT approach with little time to spare. Therefore, there was a need to design an ERT framework that was grounded

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in best practices in order to address effective teaching and learning in the ERT setting. As lead learning designer and head of department, I wanted to explore an approach that valued theory and practice. This, led to careful consideration being given to theory as a way to ensure greater success of the response to an ERT framework. This chapter demonstrates learning design innovation by testing the utility of distance education theory in advancing the development an ERT framework for the specific Caribbean university context. More so, the chapter showcases how a Caribbean university grounded its ERT framework to theory as a way of ensuring adherence of best practice in the distance, online education context. Online education in this chapter is presented as a subset of distance education and at times is used interchangeably for ease of reference. The use of theory to support best practices in traditional teaching and learning in HE is well established. There is however, the continuous disparity in the perception of quality and credibility of online education that continues to present itself as a recurring concern within the HE sector (Stith, 2000; Ulmer et al., 2007). Notwithstanding this disparity, it made sense to ensure quality of the teaching and learning during ERT setting was guided by relevant distance education theoretical conceptualisations. I begin by giving some attention to the organisational context.

1.1 The Organisational Context

The Caribbean university employs both traditional FTF and distance education. Distance Education at the Caribbean university has its genesis in the introduction of extension campuses in 2005. The introduction of the Learning Management System (LMS) in 2008 served as a way to support the growing demand for blended and online courses. Faculty increasingly adopted the university's LMS to teach blended and online courses. Against the growth of extension campuses across the Caribbean as well as the increased demand for flexible online and blended offerings, the university in 2015, established a department with specific attention to growing and managing distance and online education at the university. In that same year, the first fully online programme was launched. The development of the department saw the rapid advancement of systems to support the growth and development of distance and online learning at the university and by 2017, the department managed six extension campuses and four fully online programmes.

Accordingly, by March 2020, online and blended teaching and learning was well-established within the university. Against this setting, careful consideration was given to address an approach that would ensure that the online and blended courses and programmes would continue parallel to the ERT framework. Consequently, FTF was deconstructed as 'remote teaching' as this allowed a clear communication regarding the narrative around an equivalent approach that FTF learners could identify with. This equivalent approach was foreshadowed against the premise that ERT learners were not typical distance education learners. Additionally, students and faculty had expectations regarding an approach that

would be equivalent to FTF and as such, it made sense to create an ERT framework that valued greater emphasis on the provision of synchronous sessions supported by appropriate videoconferencing tools. Notwithstanding the theoretical and practical implications of this approach, there was a universal question that served to drive the design and development of the ERT framework:

How do I go about developing a framework to guide effective ERT?

In the following sections of this chapter, I present a learning design case as a perspective through which I present the operationalization of turning theory into practice. Specifically, I wanted guidance on a framework to support:

- Capacity-building approach to address faculty and student readiness for ERT,
- Structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy for ERT
- Methodology to monitor and measure success of ERT framework

2 Response to Challenges

The response to the ERT challenges needed careful consideration of the organisational, pedagogical and technological constraints and affordances to address the development of an ERT framework. There was consequently, a need to attend to the organisational response for the most efficient implementation of distance education, technology integration while valuing student success (Olson & Einwohner, 2001; McFarlane, 2011) in the ERT setting. The importance of this ERT framework is measured in part by the value placed in its adoption as part of institutional decision-making and response to ERT since the framework served to guide decision-makers in the move to support teaching and learning continuity against the constraints of the COVID-19 setting.

To address the level of student and faculty readiness, I used an approach where I conducted a number of meetings and consultations with various stakeholders. Drawing on data it was clear that a greater portion of students and faculty were not prepared for teaching and learning in the ERT setting. Additional consultations in gauging the readiness for ERT was done through an advisory committee—a committee comprising a wide cross-section membership across the university. The level of readiness while posing a challenge provided impetus to plan and implement faculty and student development and support events. The faculty and student development sessions focused on providing faculty and students with the foundational socio-technical skills in the use of the LMS as well as the videoconferencing tool as a way to ensure teaching and learning continuity. The professional development sessions were conducted for an entire week. Faculty and student support sessions was added as part of the professional development framework and this focused on providing individual (one-on-one) sessions to faculty. During the faculty support sessions, the aim was to deepen their value for structure, dialogue and developing learner autonomy in the ERT setting. The thematic focus of the professional

development sessions emanated from the operationalisation of two distance education theories and the evolution of this is described in next section.

2.1 Turning Theory into Practice

To address the appropriate level of structure, dialogue and learner autonomy needed during ERT, I deepened focus on distance education theory. There are a number of theoretical conceptualizations that serve to provide guidance in supporting teaching and learning in the distance and online setting. More importantly, within the context and setting of ERT, it became necessary to review frameworks that provided plausible guidelines in shaping the ERT framework for teaching and learning continuity. Primarily, the goal of planning in the ERT setting is to ensure that there was appropriate support to ensure adequate equity in student learning experience when compared to FTF (Simonson, 1999). Moreover, online teaching and learning was new to many faculty and students and since I wanted to control the narrative regarding the ERT framework, I adopted Equivalency Theory (ET) (Simonson, 1999) and Transactional Distance Theory (TDT) (Moore, 2007) as they supported the development of an acceptable response to guide the planning, implementation monitoring and evaluation of ERT at the university. These two theoretical conceptualisations were core in translating theory into practice and provided a meaningful way in addressing some of the foreseen challenges regarding the incongruence of thinking and practice among faculty regarding effective teaching in the ERT setting.

2.2 Implementing Equivalency Theory

Simonson's Equivalency Theory promotes the idea of a learning environment where online learning experience is equivalent, and not identical to traditional FTF. The theory is guided by the premise that traditional and online education are inherently different teaching and learning contexts and as such, there should not be the attempt to apply the same FTF practices to that of the online setting. Owing to this, it was felt that ET would serve as a theoretical frame to assist faculty in understanding the need to design learning activities and courses that support and sustain equivalent experiences in the ERT setting. This is particularly important to note since faculty when prompted to convert their FTF to online were tempted to apply the same approaches without careful consideration of the affordances and constraints of the ERT learner and learning context. This consideration is particularly important as learners in the ERT setting would require a different mix of learning experiences (Simonson et al., 2011). Above all, ET supports the need to value instructional planning and implementation that provides an appropriate and equivalent FTF opportunity for each learner (Simonson, 1999). In operationalising the theory, I wanted to ensure that faculty understood their role in translating good instructional practice in

the remote teaching environment. This value was heightened in the communication strategy to ensure that faculty understood expectations regarding the ERT framework. Against this thinking, facilitators were encouraged to provide a collection of learning events, artefacts and opportunities that would not only be equivalent but appropriate for each learner or target group in the online learning situation. However, simply telling faculty to provide equivalent online experience was not sufficient to scaffold their full understanding and application. For this reason, I adopted TDT as it provided further guidance on structure of learning to include careful attention to dialogue as well as the level of support needed to develop learner autonomy.

2.3 Implementing Transactional Distance Theory

Transactional distance is described as primarily a psychological construct which supports the proposition in TDT of reducing the transactional distance in the teaching and learning process as a way to address student success in the online education setting (Moore, 1997). Specifically, educators should during the planning and execution phase take into consideration the structure, dialogue and learner autonomy as a way of reducing the level of transactional distance. It follows therefore that facilitators at the university should be intentional in planning events, activities and online learning environments that are not only equivalent but also factor in the level structure, dialogue and learner autonomy in order to present a learning environment that is relevant and meaningful during the ERT setting. If these factors are not addressed, then this would impact the teaching and learning experience of the distance learner (Moore, 1993; Shearer, 2009). It should be noted that structure in this setting refers to what information is needed as well as how learners are going to access the information. Consequently, facilitators should provide a clear idea how the learner is going to access, locate, use and manage the information. However, even if a course had the necessary structure, there can still be high levels of transactional distance if dialogue is not sufficient. Dialogue in TDT refers to the spectrum and level of communicative events and activities used to support learning within the course. It follows therefore that in order to reduce transactional distance faculty are recommended to design courses with sufficient dialogue or opportunities for dialogue between learners and learners, as well as learners and facilitators (Moore, 1997). Naturally, the inverse can also lead to where a course has good dialogue and poor structure and if both structure and dialogue are low then transactional distance would logically be high. The aim therefore is to ensure that the ERT framework values a sufficient balance between structure and dialogue. Learner autonomy is the third factor in TDT and this indicates the level of the teaching and learning dependency between faculty and learners. Learners with a high level of autonomy are more emotionally independent of facilitators and therefore have better understanding of self-directedness while learners do depend more on instructors for guidance (through course structure; dialogue) have low levels of autonomy (Muller, 2003). It follows then that the greater the transactional distance, the greater the need for learners to demonstrate

learner autonomy. The goal therefore was to strike a balance between the variables of learner autonomy and the other variables of structure and dialogue, with a clear understanding of the expectation that the ERT learner needed to increase their level of self-directedness in the ERT environment.

I therefore adopted strategies that provided a framework to allow sufficient structure and dialogue as well as opportunities to deepen learner autonomy in the ERT setting. Adopting theoretical frameworks is one thing, but what is more essential is how these theoretical conceptualisations are applied to make meaningful the teaching and learning process in the ERT environment. This complex milieu is illustrated in Fig. 14.1 and it is clear that there were a number of factors that influenced the development of the ERT framework for the Caribbean university. Thus while theory was seen as a basis for grounding the ERT framework to best practice, there were the social, personal and the wide-ranging COVID-19 influences that shaped the emergency response in the institutional context. Factors such as the expectations from students, faculty and the accreditation agency also played an important role in shaping what the ERT framework looked like. Answering the question of what an ERT framework for the Caribbean university look like, therefore demanded a careful attention to the various organisational, pedagogical and technological constraints and affordances some of which were supplemented into a ERT checklist (see Fig. 14.2) as a way to guide the implementation and monitoring of the ERT framework in the Caribbean university context.

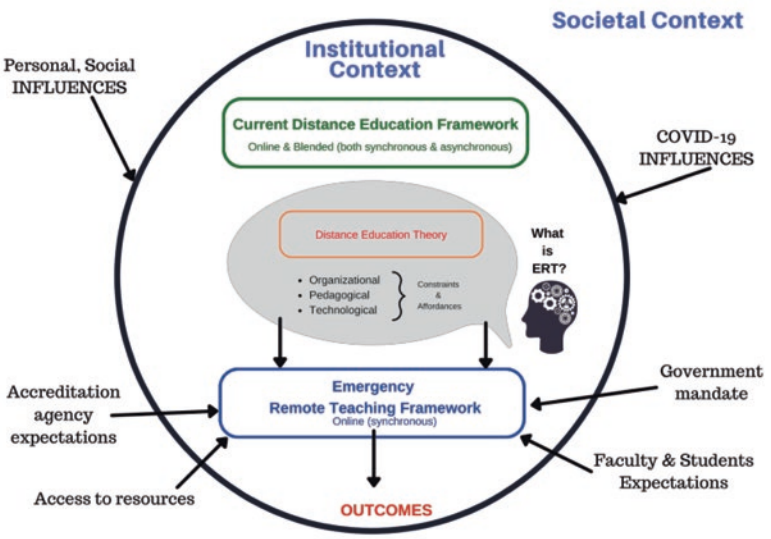

Fig. 14.1 Showing context for ERT framework

ERT CHECKLIST	
Action/Activity	**Above Standard, At Standard, below Standard**
ORGANISATIONAL	
Developed Emergency/disaster continuity policy	
Development/revision/approval of ERT framework	
Updated policies and guidelines	
Implementation of monitoring and evaluation mechanism for ERT	
Sustaining faculty and student support regarding ERT	
Communicating and sharing framework with stakeholders	
Contingency plan to support digital divide among faculty & students	
Access to support personnel to meet ERT demands	
PEDAGOGICAL	
Assessment framework/guide for ERT	
Implementation of faculty development events that integrated approaches to addressing theoretical underpinnings of EQ and TDT;	
Provision of LMS templates to simplify ERT implementation and structure of RT learning experience	
Remote teaching guide & checklist	
Deepening appreciation and understanding of need to the translate theory to practice;	
Advocating for virtual office hours.	
Student support system (counselling, IT, Advising, Finance)	
Provide a variety of communication strategies to faculty	
Continuous faculty & Student development sessions and Support	
Schools/faculty revise instructional content and guide for greater student engagement, presence and student-centeredness	
Revision of course syllabus for guiding ERT expectations	
TECHNOLOGICAL	
Creation/revision of online centre for student success	
Technological security audit for emergency/disaster	
Subscription of tools to be used during ERT	
Technology plan/policy regarding assessment security during ERT	
Introduction/upgrade of LMS or delivery system to meet ERT demands	
Develop/Revise Data recovery plan/data redundancy plan	
LMS, SMS, web portals addresses accessibility standards	

Fig. 14.2 Initial ERT checklist

2.4 Translating Theory into a Checklist

Translating theory into practice in this setting provided an opportunity to meaningfully address the knowledge barrier among decision-makers and other stakeholders regarding ERT. I wanted to influence decisions that resulted in accepted framework that supported a frame for good level of structure, dialogue and learner autonomy. Grounding the design of the ERT framework to a research-based, data-driven approach meant provided stakeholders with a sense of surety of the framework. Moreover, activities, actions and events in the wider organisational, pedagogical and technological setting were mapped to ET and TDT. This checklist serves as an innovative contribution that while not prescriptive is useful in contextualising key aspects regarding an option to guide ERT.

2.5 Sustaining Framework Through Communication, Monitoring and Evaluation

In order to sustain the framework, it became necessary to constantly and consistently promote the framework to faculty and students. Weekly reminders were sent to faculty outlining institutional expectations regarding the ERT. There was also a need to gain deeper insight into how faculty and students were coping with ERT transition. To support this need, a survey was conducted among faculty and students in April 2020. The survey results pointed to a number of positive outcomes. Faculty and students responded that they were able to successfully transition to the ERT framework. However, a closer review of results revealed that students longed for greater engagement and against this challenge, a number of resources, and faculty development activities focused on student engagement strategies.

As a way of ensuring compliance to the framework and standards, a monitoring and evaluation system was instituted. This system adopted a data-driven approach where data regarding the use of videoconferencing tool was aggregated in daily and weekly reports which were made available to Chairs, Deans and senior management. Moreover, Chairs, Deans and senior management at the university had access to a database of course access information, and with this data could conduct virtual walk-ins or virtual classroom supervision sessions.

3 Conclusion

Turning theory into practice in the ERT setting at the Caribbean university provided a unique way of addressing response to emergency teaching without compromising the quality of teaching and learning. Quality here is contextualised within distance education setting. Therefore, grounding the university's ERT framework served to test the utility of two distance education theoretical conceptualisations. It should be noted that the application of these theoretical conceptualizations into an ERT framework is not intended to be generalised to other HE settings. The aim of this activity was to find a meaningful way to factor the careful consideration of key social and institutional constraints against the challenges by the COVID-19 emergency teaching situation. A key takeaway of this process is that policy-makers, and academic leaders alike should value data-driven and research-based approaches when making important decisions regarding university-wide teaching and learning. What emanated from this activity was the development of an indigenous educational innovation in the form of a ERT framework and by extension a ERT checklist. This ERT checklist was grounded in distance education equivalency and transactional distance theory and this further serve to support their relevance as tools in assisting learning designers put forward meaningful conceptualizations to support quality teaching and learning.

It is recommended that further research into the development of other ERT frameworks be explored. This can only serve to deepen the discussion on what quality teaching and learning looks like in the ERT setting. Additionally, the Caribbean university ERT framework while not designed for generalisation to other contexts can be compared with frameworks used by other institutions within the COVID-19 setting. Doing so would strengthen the Caribbean university ERT framework. I also acknowledge the need to compare and further develop the Caribbean university ERT checklist against established benchmarks for measuring quality of programming in the online and distance education setting.

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