

The COVID-19 Metaphor: Manufacturing a New Reality

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Abstract

COVID-19 in Kenya, specifically at Kisii University, was received with bewilderment, anguish and trepidation. As the university closed down, as did all schools, colleges and universities across the country, lives were disrupted amid heightened anxieties and uncertainties. Students and faculty were dispersed from their normal environment and ushered a new way of living, thinking, and seeing. This opinion piece, therefore, examines the effect this disruption had on Kisii University, one of the public universities in western Kenya. It also traces the implausibility of the financing model of self-sponsored programs, which led to an unprecedented expansionist project of Kenyan universities in the last two decades. The disruption of the physical space, occasioned by the contact spreading of the virus, instantiated a historical moment for the university to rethink its financing model. Although this piece focuses on the disruptive effect of COVID-19 on the lives of the Kisii University community, this representation is a microcosm of the nature of public university financing models across the country. The paper concludes that having moved 14000 students from face-to-face to virtual learning, the university has embraced a paradigm shift and is on its way to benefitting from the technological dividend.

The COVID-19 Metaphor: Manufacturing a new reality

Hilly. Rainy. Densely populated. Kisii town, the hometown of Kisii University, would on a normal day be teeming with thousands of bustling determined lives milling around every conceivable space: road walks, pavements, even, in dark alleys, with concentrated urgency, eking a living, one way or the other, or running all sorts of errands in the incredibly commercially active small town about 380 kilometers, west of Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. This normalcy was about to change forever. Among these boisterous urbanites are young university students: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, finalists crawling from their hostels that have mushroomed all over the town — some, dingy and sleazy in surrounding slums, others better, in middle class estates depending on the pocket size of parents, guardians or sponsors — worming their way through the bustling town, shuttling on foot, back and forth between the university's main campus and its town center campuses: Elimu Centre and Twin Towers. The need for a physical space, pen, paper, white board, marker pen, eraser, a real human, visible, talking, explaining, relating . . . The need for a human connection.

It is a strenuous and exacting prospect. One may say he or she has a class from 7.00 a.m. to 9.00 a.m. at main campus and another class at 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., two kilometers away, at the Elimu Centre, yet shuttle back to main campus for maybe another class. It may rain. It does rain in most afternoons in Kisii. Excruciating as it is, one sees bubbling youthful energy, colorfully dressed and trendy. Boisterous laughter. Loving. Hating. Living. Determination written in their

glistening youthful eyes. All this would soon come hurtling down like the gushing water of a raging ocean before a lull of deafening silence and inactivity. But, just for a while, before a new idiom is created, a new norm was taking shape.

First announced in Wuhan City, in Hubei Province of China, the novel coronavirus was first detected in Kenya on 12th of March 2020. Three days later, the government abruptly closed schools and colleges. Lockdowns and cessations of movement followed. The university was in the middle of the semester. The semester needed to be completed. Lecturers and students, having been scattered in different directions off campus, the university turned to the Learning Management System (LMS) to complete the semester and stabilize the learning environment.

Set up in April 2019, under the Directorate of E-Learning, the LMS was meant to infuse technology into learning and trigger a paradigm shift. Unfortunately, change trudges on as an unwelcome guest to many. The uptake within the various schools and departments had remained lukewarm with minimum enquiries about the system. One or two, especially the campus smart alecks, had loaded material to the system. Then COVID-19 happened. At the onset of the pandemic, the LMS was thrust into the middle of university functions, and fundamentally changed how the institution would henceforth operate, especially, in the academic division. This change was not just a short time convenience; it was a cultural disruption reorienting the traditional paradigm of teaching and learning on campus. The Web Conferencing System (BigBlueButton), integrated in the learning management system, became crucial in student teaching, holding meetings, postgraduate defenses, seminars, conferences and, generally, effectively refocused the university community's life from the physical space into a new normal of virtual performativity.

Digital boardrooms and halls for classes were created at all different levels: boardrooms for meetings, management, dean's committee, senate, postgraduate and various schools. Restriction keys were created, and users vetted. Initially, there were challenges of digital literacy, adaptability to new changes, airtime bundles and connectivity both from the academic staff and students. Training had to be mounted. Meetings. Many meetings. Capacity building, change of mindset meetings, testing the system meetings. Decisions had to be made. Headaches suffered. System capacity. Airtime Bundles. Connectivity. Cheaper telecommunication operators had connectivity challenges; those with better connectivity were inordinately expensive. Mistakes were made and lessons learnt. Finally, though, teaching and learning was lifted from the ground. A new idiom had been created. A new norm was taking shape.

Initially, it was challenging to navigate around many virtual boardrooms and lecture halls. You may have forgotten the password or missed a step while navigating. And then, of course, the gaze. In a traditional classroom, you are the boss. You know you need to prepare well for the lecture and valuably spend each minute of your time. But you may not. Unprepared or underprepared, you veer off topic to tell unsavory stories. If students like them, and they often do, you may survive for as long as, even, a semester passing on unworthy content to the unsuspecting students. Not so in a virtual classroom. You would have loaded your course outlines and course content into the system before commencement date. Students would have interacted with your material before the lecture and bookworms would have questions for you. And then, the recording. As you record your lecture you are only too aware of procedural scrutiny.

I had not thought about the effect of this power of the gaze on personal self-regulation until I attended the first postgraduate proposal presentation under the LMS. Having served in postgraduate, in different capacities, for some years, I had come to view proposal presentations or

thesis defenses as war zones. Candidates come prepared for the worst. It is gruesome. It is ruthless. Candidates have walked out of examination rooms and given up their studies altogether. Egos have been mortally wounded. Omniscient, omnipotent, esoteric examination panelists demean and destroy candidates. Until LMS. Aware of the surveillance exacted upon the examination process by virtue of the recordings, I discovered it is possible for panelists to be polite, civil and professional when interrogating candidates.

A significant impact of the virtual classroom as the new norm is on the university's financing model. Some background will do. In the late 1990s, University of Nairobi, Kenya's premier university, pioneered a financing model targeting qualified older populations willing to upgrade and earn a university degree under the self-sponsored program. The program also benefited qualified candidates who failed to get government sponsorship. Lauded for its innovative way of supplementing operational costs of universities, the program became popular with all universities in the country. Hurriedly and without adequate research, university campuses soon mushroomed across the country.

The implausibility of reckless university expansionism began to be felt in 2016. The then Cabinet Secretary for Education, Fred Matiang'i, scandalized by the horrifying levels of exam cheating, sealed leakage loopholes and reduced qualifying candidates by 48 percent. There would be no self-sponsored students for the subsequent KCSE examinations in the years leading to 2020. The universities would continue to scramble for remnants of previously qualified students yet to join college, especially the working populations who attend evening classes, clearly disadvantaging universities in smaller towns, like Kisii, where the working population is still not as diversified. Thus, the announcement by the university regulator, Commission for University Education (CUE) that following a Quality Audit Inspection report, the School/Institution—Based/Inter—Term mode of delivery would be abolished with effect from February 17, 2017.

Meanwhile, the government had shifted attention to Technical, Industrial, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training (TIVET) to power its economy. In 2018, the government increased funding to TIVET by 30 percent of the previous budget. It also announced plans of targeting at least 70,000 students to train in TIVET and expressed its determination to establish technical institutions in all the 290 political constituencies in the country. Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) also announced it would send capitation grants for every student admitted to National Polytechnics and Technical Training Institutes. This would further reduce the number of students joining the university self-sponsored programs.

With the diminishing number of students, the proliferation of campuses, which could not sustain themselves, became a financial burden to universities. Being complacent that universities were well funded through self-sponsored programs, and having refocused energies to TIVET, the government had over the years continued to under capitate them. Kisii University was singularly affected by low capitation. Financing by the self-sponsored stream had gradually diminished. And, whatever little remaining of it depleted following the closure of the university as a consequence of COVID-19.

COVID-19 like its ancestor, the Black Death (the plague) which swept across Europe, the Middle East and Asia during the 14th century leaving millions dead in its wake, continues to ravage Kenya, like the rest of the world, destroying lives and livelihoods. Terribly scary, it has left gloom in its path. But like its ancestor, whose unintended consequence was the blossoming of the industrial revolution, COVID-19 will leave behind its own form of revolution(s) in different spaces

and in different contexts: Hygiene, social relationships, workplace ideologies, among others. At Kisii University, COVID-19 having forced the institution to successfully move 14,000 students from face-to-face learning to the virtual classroom, it has repositioned the virtual space's potential to accommodate students from satellite campuses, thus retooling the university's financing model for sustainable growth and development.