

PERSPECTIVE

Challenges and opportunities of online education in dentistry post-COVID-19

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Key points

- Identifies the main tenets of learner-centred education.
- Identifies different modes of delivering educational content.
- Considers the boundary between formal and informal learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed higher education in ways that would have taken years to achieve in 'normal' times.¹ The transformation required the massive upskilling of teachers and students in novel and collaborative ways. This resulted in distributive leadership with a more learner-centred focus.² This was necessary to ensure learner-engagement with online education, as 'generation Z' is said to have a lower attention span, though this has not been substantiated by research evidence.³

Challenges of online learning

New models of education are required for effective online learning, moving away from teacher transmission-focused to more active learner-centred education.⁴ The main tenets of learner-centred education have been summarised to include:⁵

- The reliance on active rather than passive learning
- Emphasis on deep learning and understanding
- Increased responsibility and accountability by the student
- Increased sense of autonomy in the learner
- Interdependence between teacher and learner
- Mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship
- Reflexive approach to the teaching and learning process on the part of both teacher and learner.

The emphasis on activity meant reframing and scaffolding of learning in different formats, such as discussions, quizzes, collaborative problem solving and discovery learning. This required a change in teachers' approaches, which is usually met with some resistance.⁶ Similarly, some students resisted turning on cameras or engaging while online and many teachers found this challenging.⁷ Wellbeing of our students was more difficult to monitor online.

Opportunities of online learning

As the adage states, 'necessity is the mother of invention' and indeed, we should commend the swift response by dental faculties to online teaching. During the pandemic, as students returned home, online teaching offered the opportunity to teach students in different countries and time zones, have a wider reach in student numbers and offer synchronous and asynchronous teaching, or 'anytime, anywhere' teaching.

Online consultations became a necessity so that students still had patient interactions with history taking and making provisional diagnoses.⁸ The boundaries between formal and informal learning have been blurred and both students and staff were able to engage with online continuing professional development/life-long learning and be assessed.⁹

Conclusions

The pandemic forced us to re-evaluate educational delivery, with a greater emphasis on learner-centred education. Blended education is the new reality. Further research is required to investigate the most effective methods appropriate for dental education. Online education has opened up the world to mass education but for wellbeing, some face-to-face education is required for a social species such as humans. ■

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