

A Creative Framework of Online Teaching of Public Relations Modules during the Covid-19 Pandemic: An Action Research Approach

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Abstract The education of public relations and media modules has been tied in the literature to the professionalism of these disciplines. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first paper that has used a reflective action research methodology to improve the on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules of public relations at the university-level in Bahrain during Covid-19. The instructor/researcher developed two action research cycles where she planned and implemented new teaching strategies based on the students' needs, observed, evaluated, and reflected. The paper finds that action research has been useful in creating a collaborative relationship with the students, and helped to reflect on the e-learning process of public relations modules. The paper recommends the use of action research to improve new creative strategies of teaching other media and mass communication modules at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, the researcher invites future scholars to take the results of this research further, and use action research to improve creative educational methods that would improve high education in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: Public relations/media education; action research; e-learning; Covid-19 pandemic; participatory communication

Un marco creativo para la enseñanza en línea de los módulos de relaciones públicas durante la pandemia de Covid-19: un enfoque de Investigación-Acción

Resumen La educación de relaciones públicas y medios de comunicación se ha vinculado en la literatura al profesionalismo de estas disciplinas. La contribución de este artículo radica en que es el primer artículo que utilizó una metodología de investigación-acción reflexiva para mejorar la enseñanza en línea de módulos orientados a habilidades de relaciones públicas a nivel universitario en Bahrein durante el Covid-19. La instructora/ investigadora desarrolló dos ciclos de investigación-acción donde planificó e implementó nuevas estrategias de enseñanza con base en las necesidades de los estudiantes, observadas, evaluadas y reflexionadas. El resultado del artículo es que la investigación-acción ha sido útil para crear una relación de colaboración con los estudiantes y ayudó a reflexionar sobre el proceso de aprendizaje electrónico de los módulos de relaciones públicas. El artículo recomienda el uso de la investigación-acción para mejorar nuevas estrategias creativas de enseñar a partir de otros módulos y medios de comunicación masiva a nivel universitario durante la pandemia de Covid-19. Además, la investigadora invita a futuros académicos a llevar los resultados de esta investigación más lejos y utilizar la investigación-acción para mejorar los métodos educativos creativos que podrían mejorar la educación superior en Bahrein después de la pandemia de Covid-19.

Palabras clave: Relaciones públicas/educación en medios de comunicación; investigación-acción; aprendizaje electrónico; pandemia de Covid-19; comunicación participativa.

1. Introduction

The education of public relations and media modules has been tied in the literature to the professionalism of mass communication disciplines. Thus, this study addresses the challenges and opportunities accompanied with on-line teaching of public relations modules at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bahrain. Teaching public relations includes enhancing both theoretical and practical skills. However, the rapid transfer towards distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic challenges the traditional teaching and evaluation methods. Therefore, the author recommends a strategic plan for teaching public relations modules during the pandemic that is based on using creative problem-solving approaches that focus on encouraging the active participation of the students in the e-learning process. In addition, the paper stresses the significance of ensuring a flexible learning environment, and offering sufficient learning technologies. The paper argues that e-learning offers new opportunities for creativity and thinking out of the box, and enhances the need for psychological and technical support to encounter potential challenges in the e-learning environment. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first paper that used a reflective methodology to improve the on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules of public relations at the university-level in Bahrain. The paper aims to bring new theoretical and practical insights of improving e-learning strategies of public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Literature review

Several studies have connected public relations education to public relations professionalism (Newsom, Turk & Kuruckeberg, 1999; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996). However, only a few studies have addressed teaching public relations in the Arab Gulf region (AlSaqer, 2016). Moreover, there is a lack of studies that have addressed on-line teaching of public relations and media modules at the university-level in the Arab Gulf region during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In other disciplines, various studies addressed teaching issues during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, Vlasov (2020) raised the question: "What forms of education and teaching technology can create the most effective learning environment for students?" The study focused on the legal and psychological-pedagogical aspects of distance and classroom teaching in a historical perspective. It argues that e-learning can facilitate a new level of education in the context of the computer revolution.

Alam, Changjae & Chai (2020) suggested that a systematic approach can be an alternative laboratory assessment (ALA) for Multimedia Engineering modules in the Transnational Education (TNE) program between Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and Beijing University of Post and Telecommunications (BUPT).

Won, et al. (2020) described teacher and student experiences in an upper-level communication course on virtual worlds at a large United States university. This paper argued that while lectures moved to video conferencing, field trips and guest lectures became opportunities for students and teachers to connect remotely using desktops and headsets.

Li & Li (2020) used virtual experimental environment, recorded video courseware, live broadcast, operational instruction video, classroom activities and homework as “an auxiliary to explore the teaching pattern of Autonomous Learning, Cooperation, Guidance”. They found that this approach has achieved “good learning effect and high student satisfaction, which has certain referential significance for the teaching design of online home schooling of skill-oriented courses” (Li & Li, 2020, p.743).

Ma, Bai, Dai & Wang (2020) adopted the teaching design of stages before, during and after class, and diversified teaching methods and multiple dimensional teaching evaluation through encouragement and punishment. They claimed that “this method has achieved good teaching effect in the process of teaching practice and can be extended to other online teaching courses for a long time” (Ma, Bai, Dai & Wang, 2020, p. 568).

Peng, Li & Fan (2020) analysed the characteristics of information-based teaching under the epidemic situation, and discussed the solution of integrating information techniques with teaching in combining the advantages of “Internet + Education” and traditional classroom teaching. They argued that “Affected by the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the traditional teaching mode is going to be broken, while “Internet + Education” is becoming a hot topic again” (Peng, Li & Fan, 2020, p. 340).

Kasyadi, Lapasau, & Virgana (2020) used an action research approach to enhance learning developments in Mathematics, through online learning systems using multiple cycles. The research found that there was a considerable increase in the learning outcomes, from the first cycle to the following cycles. The researchers recommended the use of the cooperative learning model of the Jigsaw type, with an additional assignment of homework to enhance online learning of mathematics. Chang & Fang (2020) summarised the responses from online instructors, and analysed the difficulties and solutions of the online learning and instructions. They outlined implications for practice and ideas for future research.

These studies have emphasised that teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic requires setting a new teaching framework that takes into consideration students’ needs, and helps the instructor to overcome the potential challenges and achieve e-learning goals. Therefore, this paper aims to study the role of action research in developing teaching during this transformation. The contribution of this paper is that it is the first study that has used action research to develop e-learning of public relations modules in the Arab-Gulf context during the Covid-19 pandemic.

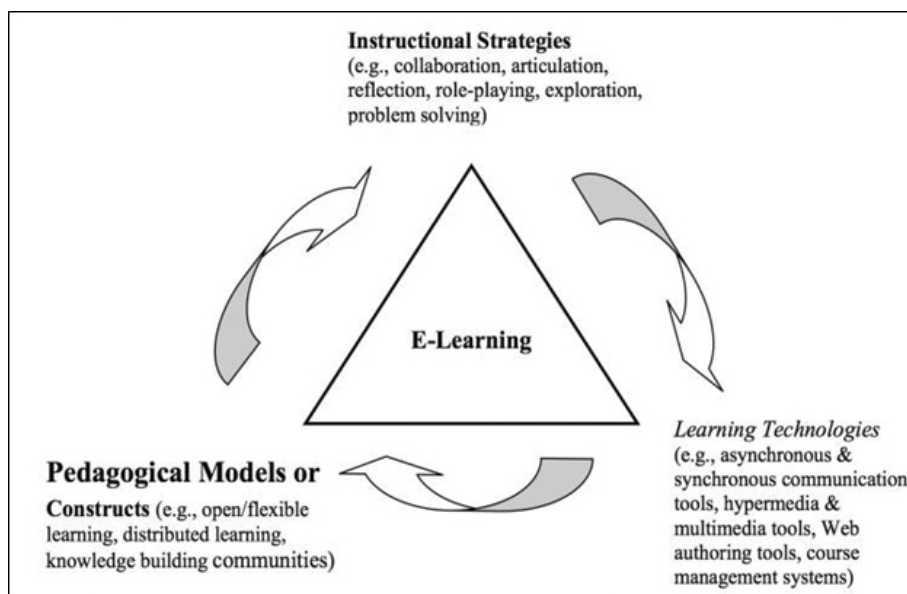
3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical model of PR e-learning and the need for reflective methodological approach

Dabbagh’s model of e-learning (2005) shows that e-learning consists of three significant combined elements: instructional strategies, pedagogical models and learning technologies

(Figure 1). Based on this model, e-learning requires that the instructor develops constant interactive and reflective strategies, ensures that every student acquires open learning environment in addition to offering sufficient technological resources. Therefore, the researcher used action research to reflect on learning strategies, through taking into consideration facilitating flexible learning environment and learning technologies. The action research started with strategic situation analysis that considers the environmental factors that would affect the reflective process of action research.

Figure 1: Theory-based e-learning framework model (Dabbagh, 2005)



3.2 The use of action research

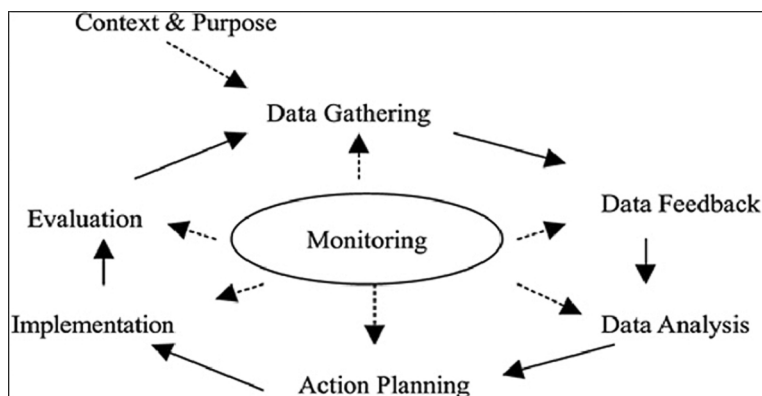
Action research was first introduced by Lewin (1946) as “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946, p. 206). In the last decades, several scholars recognised action research as a distinctive methodological process of social and education research (Bossio, Loch, Schier & Mazzolini 2014; Chigeza & Halbert 2014). Action research was considered as “a methodology that provides an effective way of delivering a conscious change in a partly controlled surrounding” (Duffield & Whitty, 2016, p. 433). Thus, the researcher used this reflective process to improve creative methods of online teaching in such a changing context from traditional learning towards distance learning.

Shani & Pasmore (1985) defined action research as “an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioural science knowledge is integrated with existing organisational knowledge and applied to solve real organisational problems”. Formentina, Ellram, Boemc & Da Re (2019, p. 182) argued that action research “involves actively participating in a change situation, often via an existing organisation, whilst simultaneously conducting research”.

Since the experience of the transfer from traditional learning towards distance learning was new for both the instructor/researcher and the students, action research was the most appropriate method to plan, act and reflect on on-line teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Action research cycles consist of specific stages, such as those specified by Coughlan and Coughlan (2002): diagnosis, planning, action, and evaluation (Figure 2). As part of the action research process, the research team engages with practitioners, and participates in the solution development and feedback process on the interim outcomes (Coughlan & Coughlan, 2002).

Figure 2: Action research cycles specified by Coughlan and Coughlan (2002)



3.3 Research questions

The paper uses an action research approach to bring better understanding of the use of e-learning in teaching public relation modules during the Covid-19 pandemic. The paper raises the following qualitative questions:

- What are the most appropriate evaluation methods to teach on-line public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- What are the creative teaching approaches that can be used to teach public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How can teachers encourage the active participation of students during distance learning?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of using distance learning in teaching skill-oriented public relations modules?

3.4 Sampling

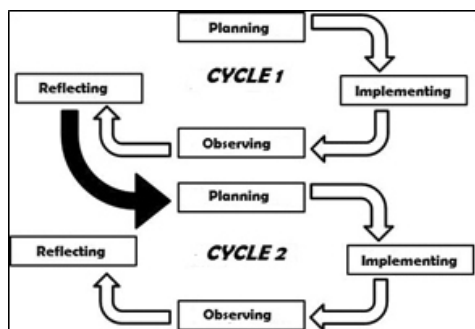
The researcher used a purposeful sample of two public relations modules at the university-level that are described in the curriculum as skill-oriented modules. Li & Li (2020) explained that what distinguishes the skill-oriented course is that it is a combination of theory and practice. The sample includes all the (52) students who are taking these two public relations modules. 82.69% of the sample are female where 17.3% of the sample are male. The researcher used two main research methods. First, the researcher used anonymous on-line

questionnaire that consists of both closed and open questions to make sure that the students express their opinions frankly. Second, the researcher used observation to observe the students' participation and involvement in live online lectures.

3.5 Action research cycles

The researcher/instructor has implemented two cycles that lasted two academic semesters (from mid-September 2020 to mid-May 2021). The researcher aims to improve the on-line teaching methods, and develop creative teaching approaches based on the Classroom Action Research (CAR) that used four steps stated in Arikunto, Suhardjono & Supardi (2010, p. 42). These steps include: (1) planning, (2) implementing, (3) observing, and (4) evaluating or reflecting. This CAR was conducted in two cycles (Figure 3). The students take an active role in all the steps in the two cycles.

Figure 3: Classroom Action Research (CAR) (Arikunto, Suhardjono & Supardi, 2010)



4. Findings

4.1 The role of action research in the process of transformation from traditional learning towards e-learning in Bahrain

The transformation from traditional learning to online learning is not an easy process. Both the instructor and the students must adapt to a new educational context that is completely new and different from what they have experienced before. The instructor must reflect constantly on this new educational context to develop new teaching and evaluation methods. In traditional teaching context, the instructor used to establish face-to-face communication where he/she can communicate directly with the students. The students can share their views and raise questions directly. Moreover, traditional teaching allows the teacher to evaluate the students' strengths and weaknesses in a better way. The continuous interaction between the instructor and the student in traditional learning provides a supportive environment to develop the learning process. Therefore, the rapid transformation to e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic raises the fears of both the instructor and the student, regarding how the learning

goals can be achieved in this new educational context. The students expressed this challenge as follow: “It was really shocking for us to transfer from our traditional classroom to virtual class where we can’t see the instructor and our colleagues face-to-face”; “It’s really disappointing for me to lose this direct connection I used to establish with my teacher and colleagues”; “For me, it is really difficult to interact and understand the lesson virtually; It’s totally a hard experience”.

Therefore, the instructor was aware that this transformation requires a cooperative reflection between the instructor and the students to develop new teaching and evaluation methods. The role of action research is significant in facilitating this change process, where the instructor aims to learn through this experience and develop her teaching and evaluation methods. Action research has helped the instructor/researcher to recognise the challenges and improve teaching in this new educational context.

4.2 Stage 1: planning of a strategic approach for e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

To establish a reflective collaborative process, the instructor started the action research first cycle. At the beginning of the semester in mid-September 2020, the instructor/researcher assigned a live discussion session that lasted one hour with the students in each class to discuss with them their concerns, problems, and goals during the pandemic. Some students explained their perspectives as follow: “It is a totally a new (sometimes scary) experience for us to transfer from traditional class to virtual class in such a short time”; “The thing I’m really worried about is the absence of face-to-face communication with the instructor which makes it difficult for me sometimes to understand the lesson and interact actively”; “I have sometimes technical problems which makes me miss some live sessions”; “It is difficult to have my own quiet space at home to study; there are a lot of distractions and interruptions... it is really difficult”; “The instructors cannot use the same approaches they used to implement in traditional teaching; they have to use creative teaching approaches”; “My biggest problem that I lose attention if I don’t see the teacher face-to-face”; “We really need motivating activities that would involve us in live sessions”; “I think the instructors have to pay more efforts to involve students during distance learning”.

After these discussion sessions, the researcher/instructor started a strategic planning approach to develop creative teaching methods of public relations modules. The strategic process started with situation analysis through developing a PEST analysis of the political, economic, social, and technological factors affecting e-learning during the pandemic. As for political factors: the government of Bahrain facilitates and supports distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. As for economic factors, the use of distance learning can save money because it decreases electricity and fees of the facilities. As for social factors, some students and instructors are still not familiar with distance learning and prefer traditional learning process. As for technological factors, the university supports the technological environment through providing technological system and technical support for students and instructors who face problems. The university has acquired a specialised e-learning centre that offers technological support and training to facilitate e-learning.

4.2.1 SWOT Analysis of PR e-learning during the pandemic

The strategic process includes developing a SWOT analysis, where the strengths and weaknesses of teaching experience were laid alongside the opportunities and threats as follow:

Strengths

- The university owns a strong technological database and system.
- The university offers training workshops for the instructors to build virtual classes.
- The university provides constant technical support by a specialised center.

Weaknesses

- There was a short period that the teachers and students acquire to move from traditional teaching to virtual teaching.
- Some instructors prefer traditional teaching methods.
- Some students faced technical problems because of the new experience.

Opportunities

- The instructor can utilise the technology to develop creative teaching methods to involve the students as active participants in the learning process.
- The flexibility of e-learning environment can facilitate learning in multiple methods.

Threats

- The psychological barrier of fear that some students and instructors face since they are used to use traditional face-to-face learning.
- The rumours that widespread about the negative effects of e-learning during the pandemic.

This strategic situation analysis enables the instructor to recognise the potential opportunities and challenges of the new e-learning environment.

4.2.2 Goals and objectives

Based on the students' perspectives, the instructor acquires a critical awareness of the problem. The instructor develops the following goals:

- Achieving the course learning objectives using new creative problem-solving interactive activities.
- Facilitating the open learning process, through offering multiple communication channels to overcome students' psychological, pedagogical, and technical challenges.
- Motivating students to be involved in the e-learning process as active participants.

4.3 Stage 2: Implementation of creative problem-solving activities

Based on the discussion sessions, the students explained their problems of e-learning, such as the lack of interaction and motivation, lack of direct communication and their difficulties to adapt with virtual classes. Thus, the instructor has developed new problem-solving and interactive activities to involve the students as active participants in the virtual classes. The instructor was aware that involving the students in the e-learning process is essential to

achieve the teaching goals. The instructor/teacher seeks to establish two-way communication and constant interaction with the students where they can express their voices and get constant feedback. Ping, Fudong & Zheng (2020) recommends a teaching model based on the idea of problem-based learning (PBL). Based on the Ripple Model of Learning presented by Race (2005), there are five factors underpinning successful learning: wanting to learn, needing to learn, learning by doing (practice, trial & repetition), learning through feedback, and making sense of things (Race, 2005). Race (2005) suggested that if the students lack the want and need to learn, the teacher can start from facilitating learning-by-doing activities, and get the students to make sense of what they have been doing.

To achieve these goals, the instructor arranged constant virtual discussion forums with the students to give them the opportunity to share their perspectives in how to develop interactive activities that would motivate them in virtual classes. The students explained their perspectives as follow: “The student should be part of e-learning classes”; “The student should be given more time to talk and reflect on virtual lectures”; “We need to exercise more live activities where we can practice what we have learnt in virtual classes and get instant feedback from the lecturer”; “We need to practice what we are learning in real-life cases in a creative way”. The students suggested a variety of involving activities such as interactive case studies, problem-solving activities, competitions, and live forums. Based on the students’ suggestions, the instructor designed a variety of creative problem-solving activities to motivate the students to play interactive role in the virtual classes (Figure 4; 5).

To encourage students to take part in these activities, the instructor has facilitated open communication with the students and allocated time to hear their feedback and suggestions. The instructor aims to empower the students to take part in the new e-learning activities as the centre of education process through various procedures such as: allocating time in the virtual classes for the students to present their opinions and discuss their thoughts, arranging constant meetings and discussion forums after the class with the students, to develop appropriate activities that would fulfill the students’ needs; giving the students practical assignments that are based on real-life cases, and providing the students with direct feedback on their assignments in the live sessions.

The students explained, “It is important for us to be involved in this new e-learning environment”; “Listening to our voices has empowered us to adapt to this new e-learning process”; “In virtual classes, we need to feel that we are real people who are interacting with each other directly through listening to our voices constantly”; “E-learning needs continuous reflection and sharing views between us and the instructor”; “It is a new challenging learning context and we should cooperate to develop new solutions and methods to overcome these challenges”. Therefore, the instructor/researcher adopts an action research methodology to establish a cooperative, reflective process. Action research has been useful in this process as it has enabled the instructor and the students to reflect on their work and to be involved in the e-learning process. Action research has been used as an empowerment tool for both the instructor and the student to adapt to the new e-learning environment and overcome their fears and challenges.

Figure 4: Transferring campaigns exhibitions that used to be held on campus to virtual campaigns



Figure 5: Examples of problem-solving activities

Problem-solving activities:

- As a PR team, you are working to develop a strategic campaign to encourage the youth to stay at home during the wide spread of Covid-19. Develop three PR creative strategies and tactics.
- Write a feature article that encourages the youth to volunteer in a Covid-19 campaign in Bahrain.
- Develop some strategic creative solutions to participate in Bahrain Campaign against Covid-19.

4.4 Stage of observation and evaluation

After conducting constant discussion forums with the students, the researcher/instructor developed problem-solving activities based on real-life cases in Bahrain to motivate the students to develop creative solutions based on what they have studied in the virtual lessons. The researcher allocated specific time in virtual lectures to provide the students with feedback on their interactive activities. The instructor observed the students' involvement in the new interactive activities. The instructor observed the followings:

- The students' participation and involvement have increased in live virtual lectures.
- The attendance to the live lectures has increased from 62% to 94%.
- The students were more involved in live discussion and debatable questions.

On the other hand, few students explained some challenges they have faced in e-learning context as follow, "I still have problems with online communication"; "Sometimes I have problems with the Internet which make me miss some lectures"; "I really like interaction in live lectures, but I still need time to get used to this new environment"; "It's good that we can share our voices, but the interactive activities should be increased". The instructor contacted the students who had problems and listened to their perspectives. The instructor was aware that she must establish open, flexible environment where all the students should take part in the new e-learning process. The instructor/researcher used different direct communication channels with the students such as direct live communication, discussion forums and emails. Besides, the instructor contacted the students who had technological problems to provide them with solutions and alternatives. Action research has been used to observe this process, reflect, and develop a supporting environment for e-learning.

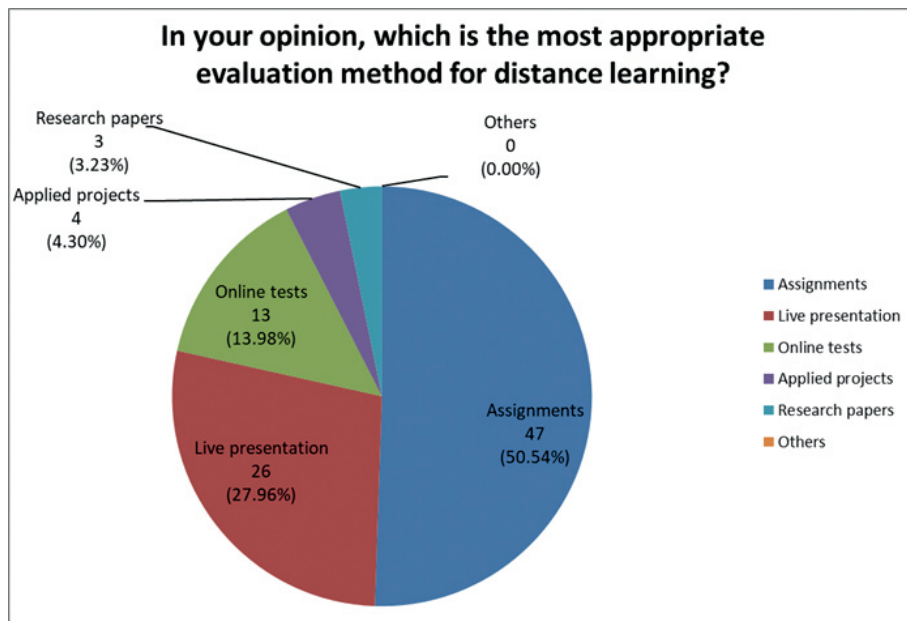
The instructor was aware that evaluating e-learning strategies constantly is essential to improve the process. Thus, the researcher/instructor used both open and closed questions to evaluate this process and improve the e-learning environment in cycle 1. Most of the students (50.54%) stated that interactive assignments are the most appropriate method for distance learning, while (27.96%) students prefer live presentation, and (13.98%) prefer online tests (Figure 6). The students explained that:

- "Interactive activities motivate us to participate, and be involved in the virtual class".
- "Interactive activities are challenging, and make us understand the lesson better".
- "Since we cannot see the instructor face-to-face, we need interactive activities to be more involved in online sessions".
- "Interactive activities and live presentation make the lecture fun and interesting".
- "These exercises make us relate theory to practice in a better way".
- "These activities motivate participation and critical thinking".

The students stated that the most appropriate evaluation method that enhanced their understanding and participation in online class is interactive assignments (43.02%) and live presentation (39.53%) (Figure 7). Some students explained,

- "I prefer problem-solving assignments, because I think tests and traditional assessment methods are not appropriate for distance learning".
- "Assignments and live presentations are the best way to encourage the students to participate in live sessions".

Figure 6: The perspectives of the students of the most appropriate evaluation method for distance learning.



- “In distance learning, live presentations give the students equal opportunity to express their opinions and to communicate actively in the class”.
 - “I think interactive assignments and presentation are effective tools in distance learning to assess the students’ understanding and participation in the virtual class”.
 - “At the beginning, I was afraid of discussion my ideas in virtual lectures, but after my first presentation I really enjoy it and find it useful to get instant feedback from the instructor”.
- Most of the students (78.85%) stated that they prefer combining live with recorded lectures to enhance their online learning; (13.46%) students prefer live lectures, and only (7.69%) students prefer recorded lectures (Figure 8).

Most of the students (82.69%) stated that they think public relations online lectures should focus on both theoretical and practical content through problem-solving exercises, while (17.31%) explained that online public relations lectures should be more practical. None of the students think that public relations lecture should be more theoretical (Figure 9). This emphasises the need for more practical interactive exercises in online public relations lectures. Several students stressed, “In distance learning, teachers have to remember that PR is a practical field; they cannot focus only on theory”; “Virtual PR classes should address both theoretical and practical skills”; “I think the best way to relate theories to practice when studying online PR modules is through problem-solving activities”.

As shown in Figure 10, most the students (40.38%) recommended allocating extra live time to communicate directly with the students online, some students (32.69%) recommended providing supportive recorded lectures, other students (19.23%) recommended the use of direct communication with the lecturer, few students (7.69%) provided other recommendations as follow,

Figure 7: The perspectives of the students of the most appropriate evaluation method that would enhance their understanding and participation in online courses.

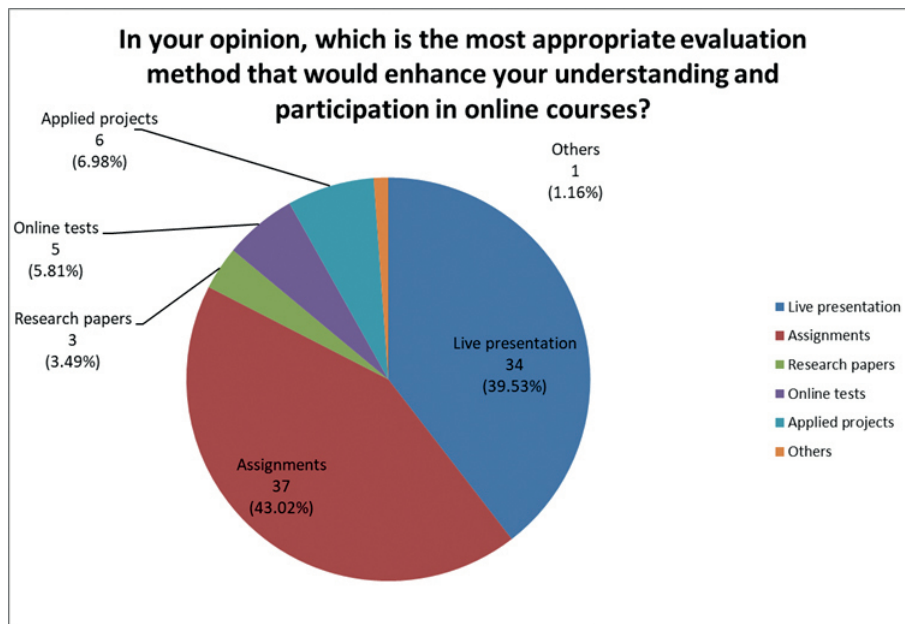


Figure 8: The perspectives of the students about live and recorded lectures during online learning.

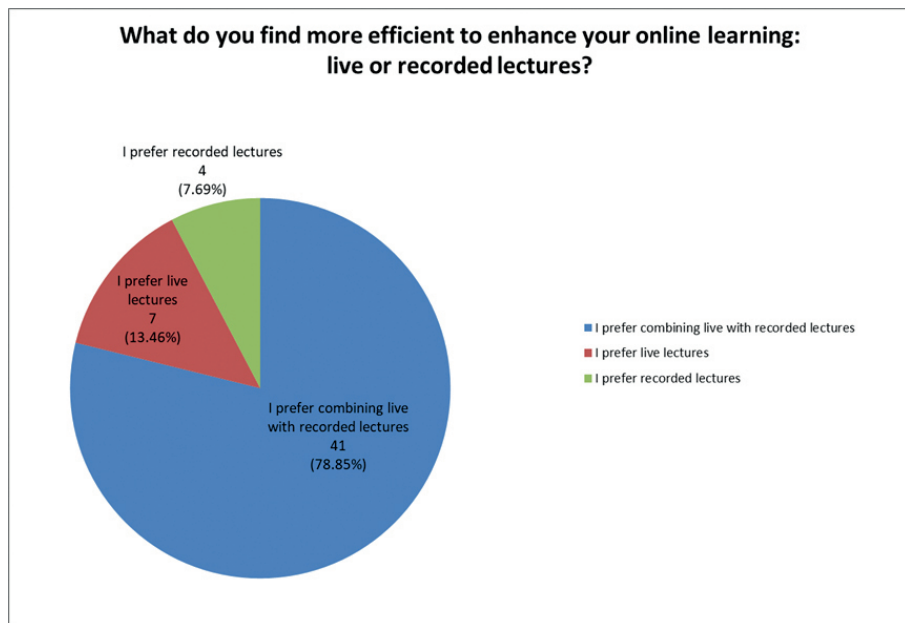


Figure 9: The perspective of PR students of the content of public relations lectures.

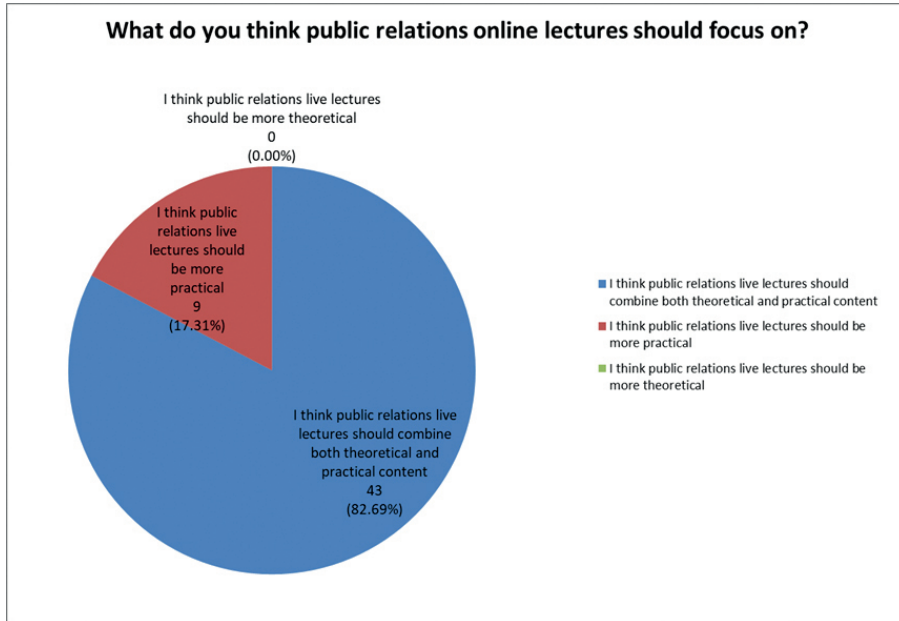
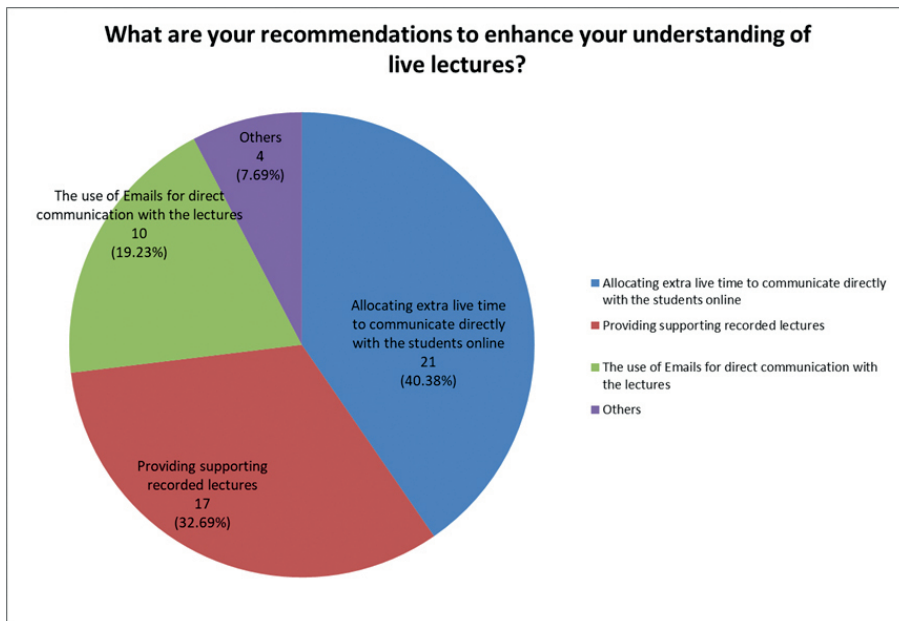


Figure 10: The students' recommendations to enhance their understanding of live lectures



- “I think increasing problem-solving activities and live presentation will be useful”.
- “It will be useful to accompany live virtual lectures with recorded lectures to ensure that all the students have access to the learning materials”.
- “In distance learning, it is useful to assign extra time after each lecture to discuss with the students and answer their questions”.
- “I think teaching online should encourage participation and thinking out of the box through encouraging students to think and debate rather than only to memorise”.
- “It is not enough that the students attend the live lectures; they should develop PR practical skills through interactive problem-solving activities and involvement in debatable presentations that would challenge their thinking and encourage them to participate actively”.

The results of the first cycle highlight the students’ perspectives and challenges and help the instructor to reflect on the instructional, pedagogical, and learning practices and improve them in the following cycle.

4.5 Cycle 2: Stage 1: Developing planning goals

The instructor/researcher considers action research as a catalyst for developing the learning process in the new virtual environment. In the first cycle, action research has helped to empower the students to participate in the e-learning process and share their opinions to improve e-learning strategies. Besides, this process enables the instructor/researcher to develop a participatory relationship with the students and reflect on the e-learning strategies. The instructor has learnt from the evaluation of the first cycle and reflected on her teaching strategies. Action research has helped the instructor to develop critical awareness of her teaching practices in e-learning environment and improve new e-learning goals and strategies. The instructor takes into consideration the students’ challenges and problems and aims to develop new goals to improve effective e-learning practices. Based on the results of the first cycle, the researcher/instructor develops the teachings goals as follow,

- To increase the students’ participation in live lectures through focusing on interactive problem-solving activities and live presentation.
- To motivate students to attend live broadcasting through making class presentation a key assessment tool.
- To enhance the students’ practical skills through making solve-problem activities a key assessment tool.
- To enhance the students’ theoretical understanding of learning materials through providing supportive recorded lectures and ensuring the availability of multiple learning technological channels.

By developing these goals, the instructor aims to overcome the e-learning challenges and improve new creative teaching tactics.

4.6 Stage 2: Implementation of new teaching tactics

Action research has been useful in such a changing environment to improve new educational and pedagogical tactics. The instructor uses the following tactics to achieve the goals based on the results of the first cycle:

- Breaking the students' psychological barrier, through constant communication through live broadcasting and emails.
- Allocating more time for students' presentation and discussion in live broadcasting, to encourage their participation.
- Allocating extra grades for live presentation and interactive activities, to motivate students to participate.
- Providing both live and recorded lectures to help students who have technical problems.
- Enhancing participating in live broadcasting, through focusing on learning-by-doing and problem-solving activities as one of the main course assessment methods.
- Encouraging students' discussion and debate in live lectures, through allocating few minutes for every student in the class to express his/her opinion and debate the others' ideas.
- Providing recorded instructions for all assignments and lectures.
- Arranging extra virtual meetings with the students who encounter problems.
- Changing and adopting some assignments and evaluation methods to be appropriate for virtual courses and to ensure the students safety during the pandemic.

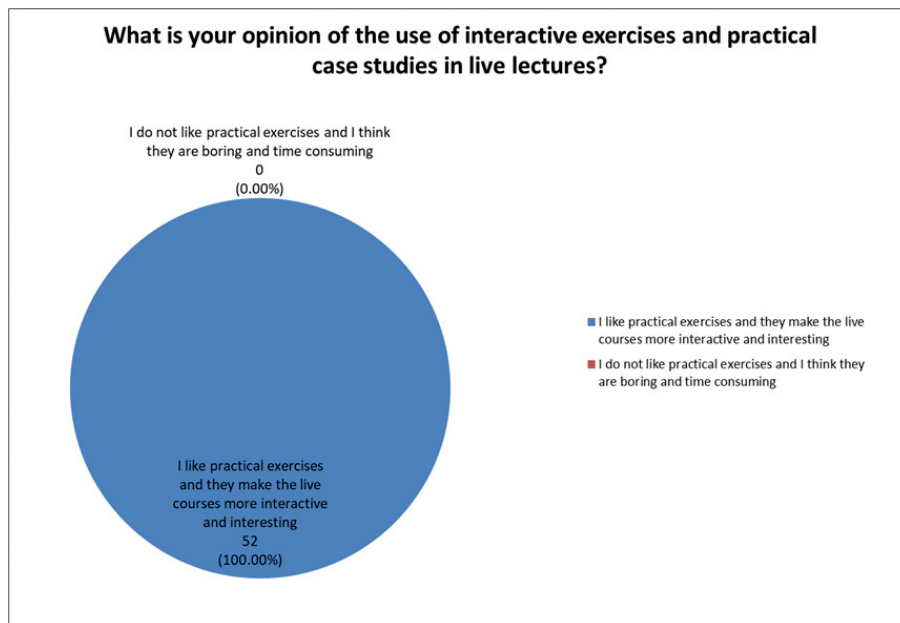
The process of improving e-learning tactics was based on a participatory process, where the instructor was flexible to adjust some of these tactics to the students' needs. Some students explained, "I feel more comfortable now in the e-learning environment as I can get direct feedback from the instructor"; "E-learning offers us with more flexible context as even when we missed a virtual class due to technological problems, we can go back to recorded lectures"; "I find some assignments difficult to implement virtually, so it is good that we can reflect on these assignments and discuss them with the instructor". Thus, constant observation has been useful to improve these tactics. Action research has been beneficial in this process as it allows continuous reflection and adjusting of e-learning tactics in a more flexible environment.

4.7 Stage 3: Observation and evaluation

The instructor observed a considerable development in students' interaction and participation in live lectures as live presentation became a basic assessment tool. The students took part in all the lectures, as the instructor has allocated a few minutes for every student in live broadcasting, to reflect on the theoretical lecture and participate in interactive activities. The instructor related all the activities to real-live situations and case studies, to involve the students in live activities. The students had to apply the theories they have studied to solve real-life problems. The instructor was aware that listening to the students' perspectives is significant to improve e-learning practices in this cycle. Some of the students explained this experience as follow, "Some of the problem-solving activities are difficult and challenging but they motivate us to learn the theories in a creative way"; "At the beginning, I was really afraid to participate in virtual classes, but now I must overcome my fears because grades are assigned for virtual presentations. Now, I get used to these activities and I find them useful to

improve our understanding and help us to listen to each other”; “Competitions and interactive exercises make the virtual classes more fun”. The students were motivated to compete to prove the best solutions in an interactive virtual environment. In the evaluation stage, all the students stated that they have enjoyed this process as the interactive exercises make the lectures more interactive and interesting (Figure 11).

Figure 11: The perspectives of students of the use of interactive exercises and practical case studies in live lectures



Most of the students (73.08%) agreed that practical exercises have enhanced their understanding of theoretical online courses, while (25%) students agreed to some extent (Figure 12). Some students explained, “The virtual session is really fun as we can discuss our ideas and understand the lesson better”; “The interactive exercises make us think and use our practical skills such as planning, writing, critical thinking rather than only memorise theoretical information”; “At first I was stressed that I have to speak up in virtual live lectures, but then I find it really a useful experience to relate theory to real case studies and situations”.

Most of the students (73.08%) agreed that practical exercises have enhanced their participation and motivation when attending theoretical online live lectures, (23.08%) students agreed to some extent, while only (3.85%) of the students disagreed (Figure 13). Some of the students stated, “The lecture now is more interesting and interactive”; “I like that I can communicate every session and discuss my ideas with my colleagues”; “I like the competitive exercises as they encourage us to think in a creative way outside the box”.

Most of the students (73.08%) agreed with increasing interactive learning-by-doing exercises to enhance participation in live online PR theoretical lectures, while (26.92%) disagreed (Figure 14).

Figure 12: The students' evaluation of the impact of practical exercises in enhancing their understanding of theoretical online courses

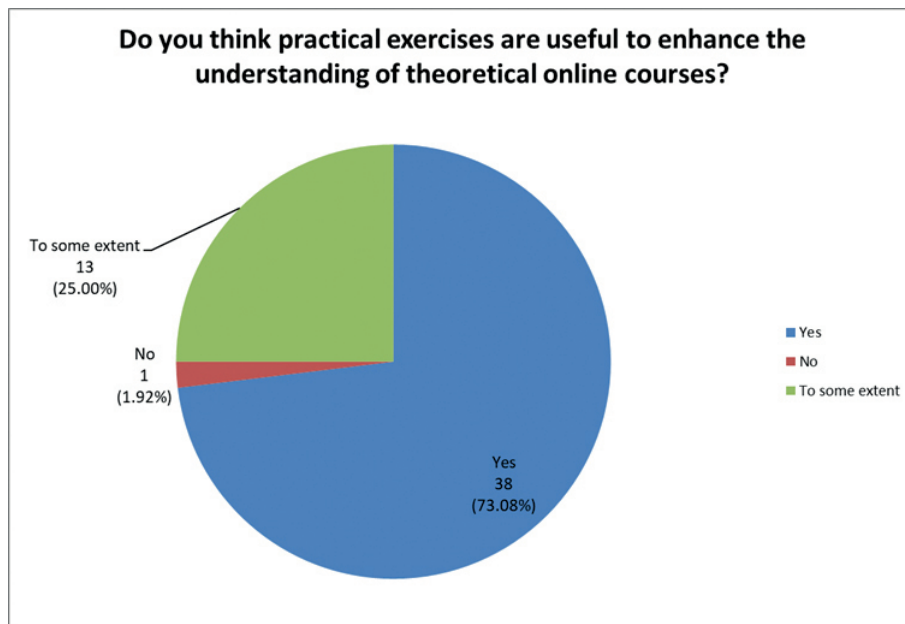


Figure 13: The students' evaluation of the impact of practical exercises in enhancing their participation and motivation when attending theoretical online live lectures

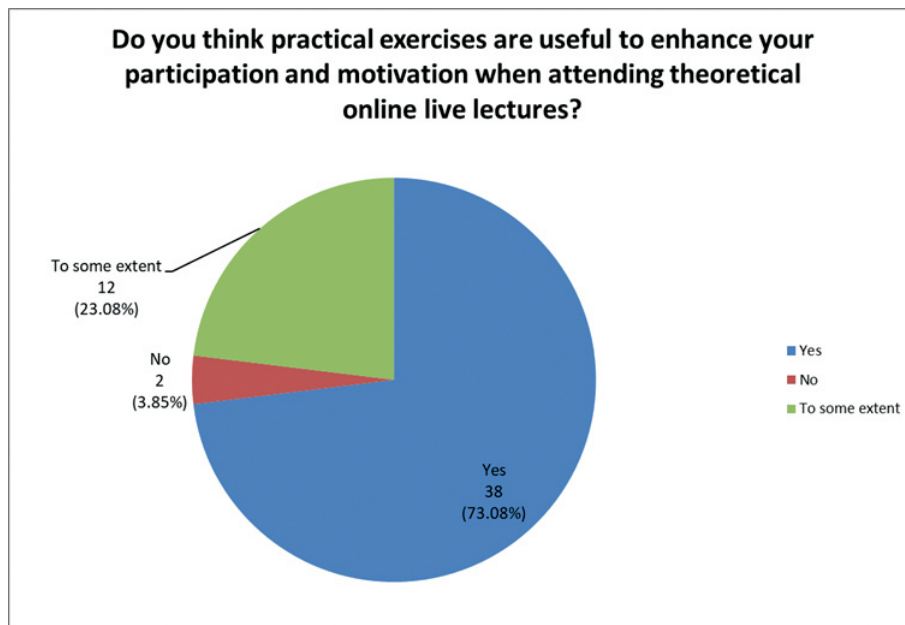


Figure 14: The opinions of the students about increasing interactive learning-by-doing exercises to enhance their participation in live online PR theoretical lectures

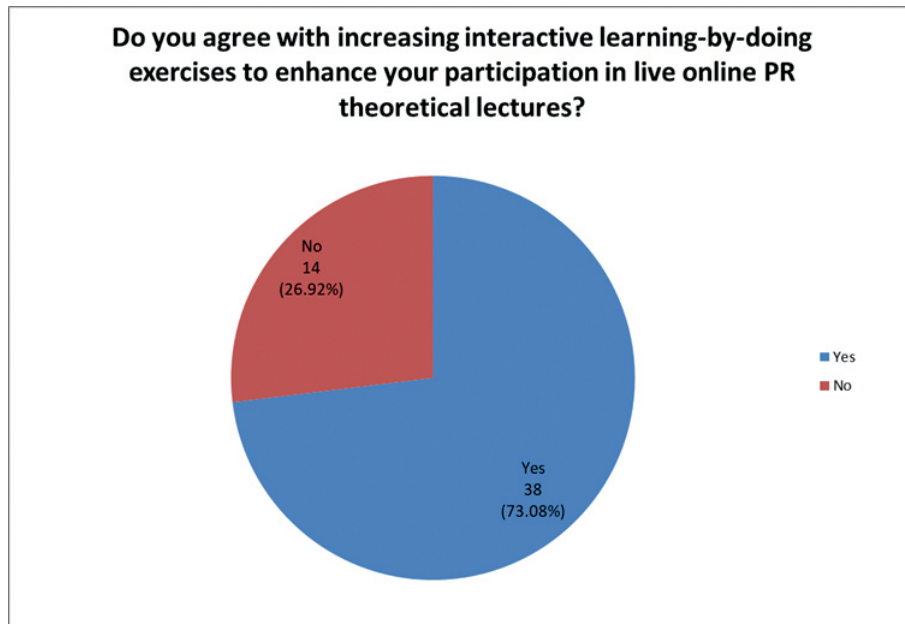
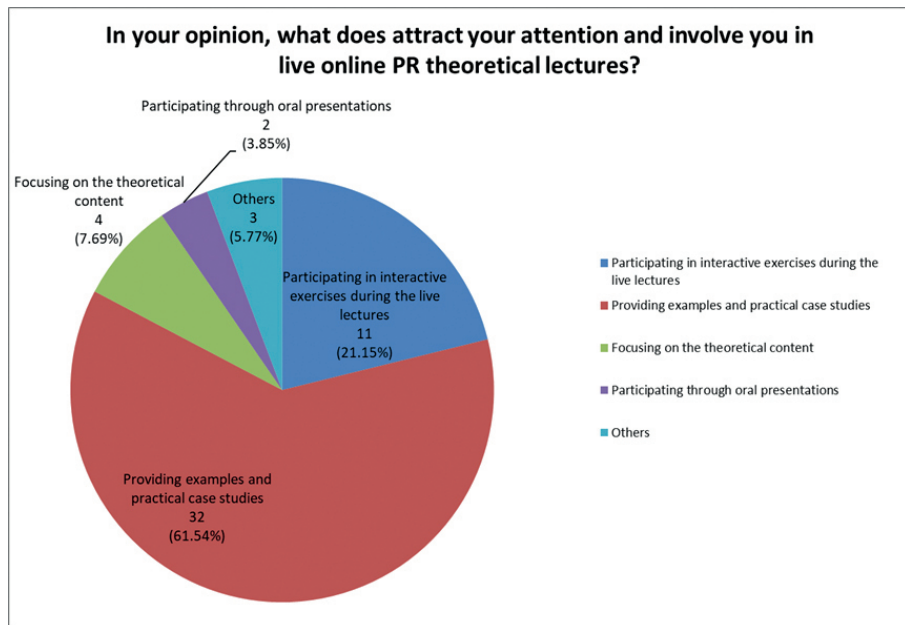


Figure 15: The perspectives of the students of the activities that involve them in live online PR lectures



In the second cycle, the students stated the most attractive activities that have involved them in live online PR lectures. Most of the students (61.54%) explained that providing examples and practical case studies attract their attention most, (21.15%) of the students preferred participating in interactive exercises during the live lectures, (7.69%) of the students preferred focusing on the theoretical content, while (3.85%) preferred participation through live presentation (Figure 15). This evaluation helps the instructor to develop a critical awareness of the new e-learning process. The instructor considers action research as a learning process, where she has learnt to listen to her students' perspectives to develop effective e-learning practices.

4.8 Opportunities and challenges of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

The paper finds that e-learning facilitates the opportunity for developing innovative strategies that would develop the students' skills in public relations. It encourages the instructor to think out of the box, and to develop creative approaches to involve students as active participants in the learning process. Virtual interactive activities can increase the students' motivation and want to learn and participate. Moreover, the flexibility of the e-learning environment allows the students to access the recorded lectures any time. To enhance these opportunities, the students recommended the following teaching strategies in the following cycle,

- Implementing more competitive activities and games in live sessions to motivate students to participate.
- Inviting professional guest lectures in the live sessions to relate the skill-oriented activities to real-life practice and opportunities for getting a job.
- Assigning some activities that the students must do outside the class, then present them in live sessions to share their experiences in the class.
- Encouraging peer assessment in the live sessions where the students could reflect on the work of each other.
- Collaborating with PR guest specialists to participate in class activities, and giving awards to the students who deliver the best solutions in real problem-solving situations.
- Awarding best presentations extra grades to motivate the students.
- Providing the students with PowerPoint recorded sessions in an attractive way.

On the other hand, the students highlighted that one of the key challenges of e-learning during the pandemic is the lack of face-to-face interaction with the instructor, which makes it difficult for some students to understand the lessons. Besides, the students explained that they varied in their achievements through e-learning as the students' adaption to new virtual approaches needs time. These challenges go along with Chiu-Lan Chang & Ming Fang's argument (2020) that "although most instructors try to prepare the contents of instructions well, however, it is still not an easy way to monitor and change the students' learning behaviors in such a short term". Furthermore, some students highlighted that the technical problems resulted from using e-learning can affect the communication between the instructor and the students. Therefore, providing constant technical support and accompanying live lectures with recorded lessons are essential requirements to improve on-line teaching of public relations modules. Besides, the students require psychological support through developing extra online office hours by

using different channels to develop communication with the students. Thus, to overcome the pedagogical and technological challenges of e-learning, the students recommended,

- Combining participation in live sessions with open-book assignments so the students who have technological problems could have flexibility to do the assignments at home.
- Recording all the live sessions and making them available to students.
- Providing supportive recorded PowerPoint lessons for students who missed the live classes because of technological problems.
- Providing flexible environment through making the class materials available through different channels.
- Communicating openly with the students through multimedia tools, phones, and video conferencing chat.

5. Discussion

The paper uses an action research methodology to bring new practical and theoretical insights of the use of e-learning in teaching public relations at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic. The instructor/researcher developed two cycles where she planned new teaching strategies based on the students' needs, implemented these strategies, observed, evaluated, and reflected on the process. The findings of the first cycle were useful to improve the second cycle of e-learning during Covid-19.

Based on Dabbagh's model (2005), e-learning consists of three significant combined elements: instructional strategies, pedagogical models and learning technologies. The researcher used action research to reflect on learning strategies taking into consideration facilitating flexible learning environment and learning technologies. The researcher/instructor finds that addressing instructional strategies of e-learning of public relations during the Covid-19 pandemic should be based on a participatory approach, through focusing on involving students in the online lessons by using problem-solving activities, live presentation, case studies and real-life examples. The research finds that interactive students-centred activities are significant to achieve the e-learning objectives.

Furthermore, the students stressed the importance of addressing pedagogical constructs through distributing the knowledge using flexible channels, and providing both recorded and live lessons to ensure that the knowledge is accessible to the students easily at any time. As for the third component of learning technologies, the students highlighted the significance of providing technological support for students who encounter technical problems. The teacher's role is to offer multiple technological communication channels with the students, using multimedia tools, phones, and face-to-face virtual chat.

The research finds that action research has been beneficial to improve e-learning of public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic. The first cycle of action research has started with a strategic situation analysis, that takes into consideration the environmental factors that would affect the reflective process of e-learning. The two cycles of action research have provided both the instructor and the student with various benefits. First, action research's cycles have helped the instructor to plan and improve her teaching strategies based on the students' needs. Second, they have created an interactive process between the instructor and

the student, where the instructor can reflect constantly on the e-learning strategies. Third, action research has empowered the students to express their fears and recommendations and improve the new experience of e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Fourth, action research has helped to create a motivating participatory environment of e-learning, where the students can take part in developing creative e-learning activities.

After implementing the two cycles, the researcher/instructor has achieved a considerable development in students' attendance and participation in virtual classes. The findings of this study have been useful not only to develop teaching of public relations modules, but also to bring significant insights of on-line teaching of skill-oriented modules during Covid-19 pandemic. The paper argues that the instructor cannot develop creative e-learning strategies without taking into consideration the pedagogical and technological aspects of e-learning. The researcher finds that implementing strategic situation analysis planning was useful to address key challenges and opportunities of e-learning during Covid-19 pandemic.

6. Implications on the use of action research in a wider context in Bahrain

The results of this study highlight the role of action research in transforming and improving educational context in the process of transfer from traditional learning towards e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the research can be taken a step further, through recommending the use of action research to improve new creative e-learning strategies of high education institutions in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic. After the change of educational context resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic, action research can be considered as an effective change tool to improve educational methods in various disciplines. It helped the instructor and the students to adapt and reflect on modern teaching methods and to find solutions for challenges and dilemmas during the pandemic. Action research can help to transform academic disciplines that are still based on traditional teaching in Bahrain to adopt more modern student-centered methods.

This study encourages high education institutions in Bahrain to adopt action research as a catalyst for improving innovative teaching methods. Action research can help high-education instructors in different disciplines in Bahrain to reflect on their e-learning experiences, and overcome the challenges. The potentiality of action research to provide solutions and involve the participants in change makes it useful in providing reflective solutions during pandemics and crisis situations. The transfer from traditional learning towards e-learning in Bahrain requires participatory cooperation between the instructor and the students. One of the significant lessons learnt from this case is that one-way communication is ineffective in e-learning, and there is an instant need for more creative methods, based on the students as the centre of the educational process. Another important lesson learnt by this paper is the significance of empowering the students to learn during the time of pandemics and crisis, through providing them with new educational and pedagogical tools that would fulfil their needs and help them overcome the challenges. Therefore, action research can play a significant role in transforming the educational strategies of not only public relations modules, but it can also transfer the educational practices of various academic disciplines in Bahrain.

The researcher argues that constant reflection, observation, and evaluation of educational processes and cycles is crucial to empower the students to adjust to the new educational context. Therefore, action research can play a significant role in developing high education in Bahrain, through improving creative strategies that would enable both the instructor and the student to develop a critical awareness of the challenges and participate in improving the educational context. It facilitates openness for modern educational approaches and pedagogical practices as it empowers the instructor and the students to explore their own practices and reflect on teaching strategies to overcome challenges. Therefore, the researcher recommends extending the use of action research in high education in Bahrain in different disciplines, as it enables the instructors to improve effective educational practices through moving from traditional teaching methods to creative strategies. Thus, action research can be looked at as a facilitator of change and transformation, from traditional educational methods to creative modern teaching methods.

Furthermore, the main contribution of this paper to action research literature is that it has addressed the role of action research in promoting change in an educational context. It is the first study that has addressed the role of action research in transforming teaching public relations modules in Bahrain during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research highlights the role of action research in changing and improving educational context in a challenging environment. The result of this research highlights the role of action research in transforming traditional teaching methods to creative e-learning methods. The researcher urges further scholars to use action research to explore new creative methods in different disciplines in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf countries. The research argues that action research can help to transform traditional learning methods, and develop creative teaching strategies in high education institutions in Bahrain. Moreover, another contribution of this paper to action research literature is that it emphasises the role of action research as a transformation and improvement instrument during pandemics and crisis. This study encourages further research to explore the use of action research to find solutions in crisis and pandemic situations. The researcher argues that the reflective nature of action research can enable the participants to create their solutions in their own contexts through developing effective practices that adapt to their needs. Thus, future research should take the results of this research further, and use action research to improve creative educational methods that would improve high education in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic.

7. Conclusion

The paper finds that action research has been useful in creating a collaborative relationship between the instructor and the student, and has helped to reflect on the e-learning process of public relations modules during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research recommends that the instructor should develop a strategic framework to develop e-learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, taking into consideration the opportunities and challenges provided by virtual teaching. The researcher suggests the use of creative problem-solving activities to motivate students to take part of the new e-learning environment and increase their participation. Besides, the paper emphasises the significance of addressing the students' psychological,

pedagogical, and technical needs to adapt to this virtual environment, through encouraging constant communication and providing both recorded and live lectures. This paper emphasises the need to develop creative strategies based on the students' needs to adhere to e-learning challenges. New cycles should be implemented in the future to develop the findings of this study. Moreover, action research can be used to improve new creative strategies of teaching other media and mass communication modules at the university-level during the Covid-19 pandemic. The nature of these skill-oriented modules requires a reflective approach, where the students take part of the process of e-learning to improve their communication and practical skills. Furthermore, action research can be considered as a revolutionary instrument that can empower both the instructor and the student in different disciplines to overcome the challenges and dilemmas. Thus, this study encourages high education institutions in Bahrain to adopt action research as a catalyst for transformation and improving innovative teaching methods. Future research should take the results of this research further and use action research to improve creative educational methods that would improve high education in Bahrain after the Covid-19 pandemic.

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