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Morocco's Webinars Ignite Global Academic Resilience in Doctoral Research

Webinar Maroko Memicu Ketahanan Akademik Global dalam Penelitian Doktoral

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Abstract

General Background: The COVID-19 pandemic triggered significant disruptions in education worldwide, compelling a shift to online learning across various contexts, including in Morocco. **Specific Background:** In response to this challenge, the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences at Mohammed V University in Rabat initiated the "Language, Culture, and Society" (LCS) webinar series. This program provided a virtual platform for doctoral students, aiming to sustain academic progress and emotional well-being during the crisis. **Knowledge Gap:** Despite the proliferation of online educational initiatives during the pandemic, there is limited research on how such programs specifically impact doctoral students' academic and psychological resilience. **Aims:** This article aims to explore the transformative role of the LCS webinar series in enhancing the academic journey and personal growth of doctoral students, particularly in alleviating challenges such as despair and reader's block. **Results:** The LCS webinars emerged as a crucial support mechanism, facilitating academic discourse, skill development, and psychological reinforcement. The program significantly contributed to restoring confidence, refining research trajectories, and fostering a culture of collaboration among an international online community. **Novelty:** This study provides a unique narrative reflection on the impact of a specific online educational program during a global crisis, emphasizing the dual academic and psychological support offered to doctoral students. **Implications:** The findings underscore the importance of online platforms in higher education, particularly in crisis contexts. The success of the LCS webinars suggests that similar initiatives could be replicated to support doctoral students globally, offering sustained academic and emotional support through accessible, high-quality online resources.

Highlights:

1. Webinar Impact: Enhanced academic progress and growth.
2. Psychological Support: Overcame despair with emotional reinforcement.
3. Global Collaboration: Fostered international scholarly connections.

Keywords: COVID-19, online learning, doctoral students, webinars, academic resilience

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Introduction

Due to the breakout of the pandemic coronavirus, known as COVID-19, the Ministry of Education suspended classroom instruction all over Morocco. Therefore, kindergartens, schools, universities, and training centres have been locked up. Conferences also have been postponed. In parallel, Moroccans have been locked down. Alongside the news reports of the high rates of contamination and mortality 'death toll' that overwhelmingly hit the headlines internationally on mass media, Moroccan authorities have resorted to prioritising the lockdown as an imperative condition to minimize the COVID-19 spread and risks, i.e., to keep the individuals safe and sound.

In light of the events accompanying this acute crisis, the supervising ministry launched remote learning on television channels and radio stations to sustain the continuity of education. Teachers, students and parents have been dissatisfied with the quality of this new mode of education since it lacked strategic planning, and was not interactive either.

Indeed, the general context of education in Morocco was full of uncertainties. The majority of university teachers and learners have expressed their worries and concerns about their studies, research progress, and assessment procedures, among other concerns. Neither teachers nor students were prepared for distance education due to the lack of facilities and training. Despite all the pandemic ramifications, one could emphasize that the cloud of coronavirus had its 'silver lining' and blessings thanks to the Doctoral Program "Language, Culture and Society" affiliated with the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Mohammed V University in Rabat which was a golden opportunity for university students and scholars to ensure connectivity, educational sustainability, interaction and sharing.

1. Aims of the CLS online doctoral program

This well-organized online training program for doctoral students, which was offered by a bunch of highly qualified university professors and experts, is a pioneer and leading online series of webinars that has gained much popularity worldwide. Such an unprecedented successful online doctoral program is the fruit of the sacrifices, contributions and expertise of a supportive and hardworking team. The main purpose of the training sessions is to support junior researchers so that they can understand the process of academic research and become aware of what it involves. Another aim of this student-centred doctoral webinar is to discover to what extent doctoral students who have attended the seminar series can reflect and narrate their experience in their own words and voices. By undergoing such experiential learning pathways, students can promote their autonomy and self-regulation (Benson, 2007; Chan, 2015; Holec, 1981; Nadif & Benattabou, 2021; Nadif & Fayzullaevna, 2024; Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Thanasoulas, 2018; Van Lier, 2017; Wang & Shannon, 2013; Zang & Shen, 2024). The online platforms that the program uses help the attendees reflect, pair and share their doctoral experiences. They can also reflect and share their takeaways and invite other researchers to do so. In addition to that, the webinar series contributes to enriching the online resources that are and will be available for future generations. Additionally, the training is an opportunity to renew the methods adopted in teaching with a review of fundamental elements of academic research such as supervision, interdisciplinary combination, international collaboration, online education and knowledge production.

2. LCS Webinars: an Opportunity for doctoral students to be on the right track

Before I enrolled in doctoral studies, I had a lot of hesitation and lack of self-confidence in my abilities to pursue postgraduate studies successfully given that I am 45, I have 3 kids to look after, a full-time table that covers 21 hours of teaching in secondary school. My wife is also a teacher in primary school. Life for all of my family members is really demanding. Hence, engaging in further activities might inevitably have some undesirable consequences. Another factor that kept discouraging me from going for doctoral studies was that I had a Master's degree in 2006, which made me lose track of research. In spite of all those circumstances, I thought well about all the challenges, and then I decided to set up this new learning journey in 2018 in order to develop academically. Now, as a second-year doctoral student, I find it hard to keep up with the pace of the doctoral research requirements since I must admit that I have become 'the biggest loser' in terms of reading habits, understanding, analyzing and synthesizing. I forgot about all the research methodologies that I learnt in my Master's. Be it as it may, I know my (SWOTs) strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

In this respect, the confinement amid the pandemic has transformed all aspects of life, including the way university professors supervise their supervisees, and the ways doctoral students plan and present their work. As a consequence, "Teach, work and confer from home" has given new dimensions to our daily routines that have considerably brought about their own particular challenges, hardships, and success stories as well. To put it differently, covid-19 pandemic has stunningly moved the traditional classroom to the digital and virtual zoom room "classzoom", seminars to webinars, face-to-face conferences to online conferences. Smartphones which have recently been forbidden are nowadays becoming the ubiquitous learning and teaching devices.

Regardless of the challenging times that teachers and students have been undergoing due to the psychological and emotional impact of the lockdown and social distancing, the doctoral program successfully managed to gather a large number of participants and attendees from May 26th 2020 to July 29th 2020. In fact, this leading program has been organized by a team of innovative and creative scholars who have deployed all their expertise to support doctoral students during the crisis via Zoom and Facebook platforms. Higher education has had the privilege to seize all the opportunities and circumstances to strengthen doctoral supervision, documentation and evidence-based research findings. Hence, the online training program had many merits: students were invited to list down their research needs before organizing the training, which means that they were involved in the planning of the webinars program, the webinars posts were shared beforehand,

participants were able to register and confirm their request for certificates, the training objectives were clearly stated before the webinars, to mention but a few.

3. The merits of the webinar series

Personally, I have learnt much from the doctoral program in the sense that I have developed a clear vision and new perspectives related to conducting research thanks to the instructive and insightful webinar series program. Undoubtedly, all the sessions were thought-provoking as the moderators kept involving the audience in the question and answer section. Similarly, the organizers of the doctoral webinar series have devoted ample time to the presentations and the discussions. Such scholarly sessions encouraged more and more students and teachers to join in the live webinars both in the Zoom room and on Facebook. Indeed, the high number of attendees reached its peak, the doctoral program webinars reached 4721 subscribers, and a high number of viewers, shares, and likes. The session duration reached an average of two hours. Hence, meeting the experts in higher education and research has been a motivational and inspiring endeavour in the research journey of so many junior researchers. The online platforms served all the attendees well in the sense that the presentations have been eye-opening, informative and interactive. In his testimony on the training assets, one of the doctoral students highlighted that "The LCS doctoral program professors have become the supervisors of doctoral students internationally".

As a novice researcher, I have been through the reader's block for months. In fact, I have not managed to make much progress due to personal, professional and academic constraints that bring about many disruptions. Sometimes, I feel anxious and disappointed and some negative thoughts demotivate me so much that I cannot advance in my research journey. Fortunately, I knew about the doctoral program held by the Department of English at the University of Mohamed V through my wife who discovered this invaluable program on Facebook live streaming and rushed to break that good piece of news to me while I was having a nap. So, I immediately stood up and joined her to follow the webinar. Indeed, the LCS online training gave rebirth and inspiration to my research prospects and encouraged me to rethink, learn, unlearn and relearn about different aspects of doctoral studies research from each and every single webinar presentation. These distant learning opportunities have positive effects on enhancing students' self-efficacy (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020; Arbaugh, 2004, Artino & Billings, 2000; Bandura, 2010; Bouih, Nadif & Benattabou, 2021, 2022; DeTure, 2004; Joo & Choi, 2000; Lim & Morris, 2006; McCoach, 2008; McLoughlin, 2002; McMahon & Oliver, 2001; Khanal, Bidari & Nadif, 2021; Nadif & Bidari, 2023). To exemplify, the session entitled "Writing a Research Proposal" which was delivered by Professor Yamina El Kirat El Allame provides a roadmap to junior researchers who are still at the initial stage of their research projects in order to adopt a step-by-step approach to conducting research, which can provide them with regular milestones throughout the stage of writing the research proposal. Equally important, I have benefited a lot from Professor Yamina El Kirat El Allame on "Writing the Review of Literature", particularly because I am still writing the literature review relevant to my research topic "The characteristics of successful language learners". Thus, this session is invaluable for me since I keep watching it continually so as to consider the critical, ethical and argumentative tips.

4. Reflections on the online presentations

Although I am still at the initial stage of research, the rest of the other presentations, such as Dr. Ahmed Chouari's session on "Writing the Methodology Chapter", Dr. Abdeslam Badre's presentation on "Writing the Results Chapter", Dr Terry Gifford's paper on "Structuring and Writing the PhD Thesis" among others are being on my radar for the upcoming stages of writing a dissertation (See the appendix (1) for the table of CLS presentations). To be honest, methodology is my weak spot; that is why, I was not able to grasp fully the presentations dealing with methodology. Nevertheless, I had many takeaways after I attended Coach Meryem Hajji Laamouri's relaxing session entitled "Dare to Act: New Skills to Feel Well" which aimed at soothing students after the previous series of webinars they had before. The coach managed to help students relieve stress and boost their wellbeing by providing beneficial tips to make them breathe deeply, concentrate, relax and reflect.

I must admit that going for doctoral studies is the most challenging experience I have ever had because it requires daily and longitudinal effort, interdisciplinary mastery and command of research methodology, analytical reading, argumentation skills, critical thinking skills, writing, and synthesis skills, among other skills. I discussed all the problems and difficulties I have with my supervisor who recommended that I do further reading with respect to my research topic as well as research methodology. In this respect, one of the positive achievements is that I validated 140 hours of attending conferences and webinars. I have also delivered four online presentations, two national and two international. Correspondingly, another worthwhile fulfilment is that I was able to write an article for publication. It took me about six months to realize that accomplishment. My supervisor has reviewed that paper. At the present time, I am doing my best to substantiate the theoretical article with evidence-based data.

One more attainment for me is developing a better understanding of the ethical issues that are an integral part of research. One must confess that the presenters provided golden tips regarding ethics throughout the webinar series. In this regard, Professor El Kirate pinpointed, "It is a matter of ethics. It is crucial to have a certificate, but what is more worthwhile is how much you have learnt and reflected upon your growth".

Moreover, although I do not belong to the Mohamed V University LCS doctoral program, I never felt like an outsider thanks to the support and inclusion of students and professors. In fact, whenever I asked Professor Ikbal Zeddari or Mr Oussama El Addouli to share the Zoom link with me, they never hesitated to do so on time. Webinar after webinar, I succeeded in integrating with this honourable community of scholars and researchers. I addressed many questions to the presenters who were willing to respond to my queries and discuss them with me. I also volunteered to do the tasks that the doctoral program assigned to its students. For instance, I filled in the evaluation and attendance form. Besides, the task that I am

undertaking now is part of the requirements of the doctoral program at Mohamed V University. It was a practical idea of the LCS team to engage students in writing the reports on all the presentations that have been delivered. Professor El Kirat called for a meeting in August on the Zoom platform in order to discuss the outline and the points to focus upon in the writing of the success stories and takeaways related to the webinars (See appendix 2 for the guiding question suggested by Professor El Kirat and the attendees). This stage attests to be student-centred since students participated actively in drafting the questions to deal with in their essays using Google Drive and Whatsapp. They also negotiated the issue of setting the deadline for the submission of their contributions on their own since their supervisor involved them in decision-making. Doctoral students were also involved in peer-reviewing their stories (See the table of peer-reviews in URL (1)). In so doing, other skills have been implemented, namely leadership skills as part of the 21st Century skills.

Furthermore, I volunteered in the transcription of Professor Vance Stevens' presentation on "Online Language Learning and Teaching", which was an engaging and motivating task for me despite the difficulties of such a challenging task, especially because the presentation covered some specific terminology relevant to the field of online education (See URL (2)). As for the transcription task, students were sent an e-mail and were asked to choose one of the online presentations and do its transcription using the Otter database (See URL (3)).

I also contributed to completing the survey administered to me by the doctoral program and forwarded my comments and recommendations in order to improve the quality of such a successful and leading online webinar series in the forthcoming versions (See URL (4)). In this manner, I am positive that I was able to overcome the repercussions and challenges associated with the COVID situation by exploiting the databases that were afforded by the doctoral program of Rabat University. The experience of LCS webinars has played a crucial role in my transformation positively. Hence, the confinement turned into a blessing and an occasion for lifelong learning for me as well as other students who attended the program

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to acknowledge the effort and thought that the LCS team is putting in order to ensure high-quality education, training and research by making these resources reach teachers and students all over the world. Certainly, such online resources are an added value to the doctoral program LCS because they are now available online for a wide international audience. It is worth noting that the LCS doctoral program team has been making much effort to provide the attendees with certificates of attendance. Certainly, along with the aforementioned added value and advantages gained thanks to the webinars, I realized that the LCS training has contributed to the development of doctoral students technically, practically, and psychologically. The LCS doctoral online training has also managed to nurture a culture of collaboration and sharing among its online community members worldwide. This way, the experience as a whole has positively changed my perceptions about research in general and my doctoral research journey in particular.

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