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Critical Perspectives on the Use of Technology with Refugees and Displaced Communities: The Case of Dadaab

COLLECTION: CONNECTED LEARNING IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Dadaab Refugee Complex hosts refugees from the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region. According to a UNHCR (2023) report, at 31 January 2023 Dadaab refugee camps were host to a total population of 233,828 registered refugees and asylum seekers, representing 41% of the total recognized forcibly displaced people in Kenya. This paper will explore Dadaab as the context for connected learning in addition to the author's first-hand accounts. The author provides a reflexive account of the perspectives of refugees in Dadaab refugee camps and Dadaab host-communities on the role of higher education for individual and social transformation, and how technology could be embraced to leverage learning despite challenges to the access and use of the internet, and computers.

In this paper, the author makes a reflexive account of the role of education in transforming refugee learners and communities, and how technology was employed, albeit with challenges, to connect Dadaab with other higher education institutions within and beyond Kenya's boundaries. The author is further concerned with how technology in higher education in crisis contexts is conceived as the agent that builds networks of scholars, generates connections for development, and promotes exchange of knowledge and ideas among students and faculty across all geographical borders.

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EDUCATION AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF REFUGEE LIVES AND HOST-COMMUNITIES

The author is informed by the communities in the Dadaab refugee camps that they view education as the light to development because decent living can be achieved by educating children. The same view is echoed by the host community within Dadaab. They point out that education is the only weapon which can eradicate poverty from society. Such a view enables them to embrace tertiary education in their area by offering the ground for Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) to operate in Dadaab under the consortia of four universities which include Kenyatta, Moi, York and British Columbia Universities. BHER is a collaborative multi-institutional project designed to bring higher education to the Dadaab Refugee Complex and since 2013 it has provided certificates, diplomas, and degrees to refugees (Dippo 2021). The author is himself a BHER graduate.

The Kenya Statistics Package (UNHCR 2024) numbers the refugee and asylum-seeker population in Kenya as 782,468 persons as of 31 July 2024, comprising 571,259 (73%) refugees and 211,209 (27%) asylum-seekers. When compared with June 2024, this represents an increase of 5,114 individuals in the total population, from 777,354 of the forcibly displaced registered persons and asylum seekers who live in Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, Kalobeyei and the urban settlements. The report further noted that by 31 July 2024, the Dadaab refugee population stood at 385,328 individuals. Under the north-western host location of Kakuma, the registered population according to UNHCR stood at 291,979 with 214,902 in Kakuma camp, 74,952 in Kalobeyei settlement and 2,125 in Eldoret. During the time of writing this piece the refugee population in urban settings that include Nairobi, Mombasa and Nakuru in Kenya, stands at 105,161 forcibly displaced persons.

Dadaab Refugee Complex in Garissa County in the north-eastern part of Kenya, comprises three refugee camps: Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera. Ifo was the first refugee camp to be established in Dadaab in 1991 to host Somalis who fled to Kenya after the fall of Mogadishu (UNA-USA 2019). Since their establishment, Dadaab refugee camps have hosted various nationalities including Somalis, Ethiopians, South Sudanese, DR Congolese, Burundians, Ugandans, Sudanese, Rwandese, Eritreans, and others. The United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2023) indicated that as of 31 January 2023 Dadaab was host to a total of 233,828 forcibly displaced persons, 41% of the total recognized forcibly displaced people in Kenya. However, the report added that only 128,548 individuals living in Dadaab refugee camps had been registered with the government of Kenya while 105,280 of the total displaced individuals were asylum seekers.

REFUGEE EDUCATION IN DADAAB CAMPS AND ACCESS TO THE KENYA NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Dadaab refugee camps from the onset did not have a formal curriculum to guide learning, therefore, refugee communities had to grapple with informal education until 1998 when the government of Kenya registered Midnimo Primary school in Ifo camp as a pilot project to determine the ability of refugee children and whether they could cope with the Kenyan curriculum Ochan (2020). At that time simple calculators, stop watches and radios were the only advanced technology used in Dadaab refugee schools.

Education in Dadaab Refugee Complex camps has been successful since 1998 when the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) recognized the existence of children with a forced displacement background and their right to education. Ochan (2020) reported that the pioneers of the Kenya National Examinations from the only registered refugee primary school in Dadaab camps were all admitted to Garissa County High School after their successful performance in the final examinations. The good results from the first and second cohort of refugee students attracted the attention of World University Service of Canada (WUSC) and it started reaching out to the qualified candidates.

As an insider within the Dadaab complex camps, the author confirms that the highest level of education within this zone before the introduction of WUSC scholarships was form four (the fourth year in secondary education). When WUSC introduced scholarships to the Dadaab refugee students, only the few candidates who excelled in their national examinations would

be sponsored to study and resettle in Canada. Plasterer (2010) in the article "Investigating Integration", asserts that the WUSC programme aims at resettling and offering higher education scholarships to young refugees globally. To support Plasterer's argument, WUSC (2020) reports that its yearly programme invites approximately 150 candidates from across the world. This number confirms that only a few candidates from Dadaab are admitted to the programme every year. However, the few slots for these scholarships to this day cannot accommodate all the qualified candidates. This is what the BHER programme, and similar programmes, were set to address.

TECHNOLOGY USE, MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES WITHIN AND BEYOND THE BHER PROGRAMME: A PARTICIPANT'S ACCOUNT

During the implementation of the BHER programme, technology was fully embraced by youth despite a lack of digital competencies and the misconception from elders that new technology had come to deviate the faith of the communities from their Deity. The author testifies that a critical challenge was evident in the operation of, and or use of, the computers and tablets for learning. Many refugee students had never typed on such devices before, because there was a scarcity of computers and related devices within Dadaab and in their past education. All they knew was handwritten assignments on paper. However, through continuous practice and peer learning, students gained experience. It is acknowledged that technology played a significant role in linking students from diversified social, political and economic backgrounds with their learning opportunities and instructors. The increasing use of technology has elevated the Dadaab Refugee Complex in Garissa County to an emerging scholars' space, as it plays a key role in connecting learning without borders through national and international networks of students and faculties to exchange knowledge and ideas for social, political and economic development. This paper discusses the impact of the relationship between technology and the Dadaab communities.

THE ROLE, MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF TECHNOLOGY AND CONNECTED EDUCATION IN DADAAB

As children are enrolled in schools, new learning demands increase each year especially when learners are promoted to the next level of learning grades. To some extent, refugee students are motivated by WUSC scholarship objectives which offer both learning opportunities in higher education and resettlement in Canada. Every student in the encampment, with a forced displacement background, struggles to successfully complete secondary education with good grades to acquire such an opportunity. Gedi, one of the refugee-led secondary schools in Ifo camp, testifies to the high demand for higher education in Dadaab camps. Its National Examinations result for the year 2023 shows that 284 boys and 94 girls, totaling 378 candidates, scored mean grades of C and B. This performance reflects what Boškić et al. (2018) noted: that there are two key issues regarding the high demand for higher education for refugees. First, there is a rapid growth in the number of people being displaced because of global political, economic and climate conflicts and second, there is a high rate at which refugee children complete secondary education. Reflecting on this narrative, both points are evident in the Dadaab education context where there is a rising demand for more learning institutions to keep every child in school or allow them to access formal education.

Education in Dadaab started growing exponentially from 2019 after the graduation of students in the Diploma and Bachelor of Arts in Education from the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) programme. As a means of self-reliance, many alumni of this project opted to establish private learning institutions to absorb those students who could not access government schools as well as employing those people who are still in the market. Before this development, relief web (Taylor and Karanja 2016) reported that the three camps of Dadaab complex had 7 secondary and 35 primary schools. This shows an increase by 1 secondary and 13 primary schools compared to the figure reported by UNCHR in the year 2010 which recorded 6 secondary and 22 primary schools back then. As the number of primary schools increases there is also demand for secondary schools to increase. Due to the limited financial

flow to support operations within the Dadaab complex, humanitarian organizations are not able to increase the number of secondary schools. Refugee-led initiatives took the opportunity positively and installed another 21 refugee secondary schools. At the time of writing this article, the author confirms that there are already 33 active secondary schools in the Dadaab refugee camps with 6 of them being led by Windle International in Kenya while 27 are refugee-led. This figure does not include the government sponsored and private secondary schools in Dadaab township.

Even though the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) designed a framework to provide education in emergencies as early as 2004, as noted by Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010), education in forced displacement or fragile areas has not always been included among humanitarian responses. The concept that education is the least essential human need has led to a delay in responding to the call for connected learning, especially within the Dadaab camps in north-eastern Kenya. In Dadaab refugee camps where the author of this article is based, there is a need for another 1,800 classrooms to take care of the 75,000-school age children who have newly arrived in Dadaab camps.

The introduction of connected education during 2013 marked an important record in the history of Dadaab education. This is the period in which technology started playing a significant role in higher education in this remote area of Dadaab. A consortium of four different Universities (York University and the University of British Columbia from Canada and the Kenyan-based learning institutions, Kenyatta and Moi Universities) collaborated and started implementing a Connected Learning in Crisis agenda in Dadaab under a project of Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER). Being members of the Connected Learning in Crisis Consortium (CLCC), BHER valued the definition of 'Connected Learning' which is available in the CLCC Quality Guidelines Playbook (CLCC 2017).

Connected learning, in the context of higher education in displacement or fragility, is conceptualized as "the development and exchange of knowledge and ideas among students and faculty through the use of information technology that enables learning not bound by geographical limitations in contexts of fragility" according to the CLCC Playbook (CLCC 2017: 2). In this context therefore, technology was the preferred medium to connect with each individual across every border, within the specific units of the courses during the lecture sessions, to meet the course timeframe and requirements. Since the course instructors were from different geographical locations and could not conduct onsite lecture sessions with their students on a weekly basis, the programme used technology to overcome this lack of co-location. According to Boškić et al. (2018), the partnership between the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Moi University aimed at delivering a Diploma in Secondary Teacher Education programme and was designed to implement learning in Dadaab campus through blended learning. During school days virtual learning was the method applied and students would meet course instructors face-to-face during the school holidays, yet assignments were submitted through computers. Additionally, the authors asserted that the programme ventured through the designed strategy to earmark appropriate technology to be employed for a successful outcome before making a final decision.

BHER introduced and implemented connected learning within Dadaab through technology, which played a significant role in facilitating the educational success of two cohorts of students who graduated with Master's degrees. The courses were blended to give room for both online and onsite classes. Instructors from the consortia of universities would either fly from their campuses to the Dadaab learning institution, or connect with students virtually via videoconferencing platforms such as Skype or Zoom to deliver online course content. The WhatsApp platform was the major medium to deliver short and urgent messages from instructors to students, the institution's management to students, students to their peers, students to course instructors or Teacher Assistants and from students to the institution's management. This communication medium supported BHER students well because the responses to the questions or chat were almost instant at the desired time.

However, Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010) have confirmed that, to some extent, the question of efficiency and effectiveness in relation to online and face-to face technological interactions remains unanswered. To enhance progress, BHER purchased enough computers and tablets to promote effective learning. As a beneficiary of the BHER project, the author confirms that learning

in displacement within the Dadaab complex with the support of technology was successful because the project graduated two cohorts of Master's degrees in Education, two cohorts of BA in Education, one cohort of BA in Geography, BSc in Community Health, Diploma in Education and Certificate in Education before the BHER fund was exhausted. The BHER programme was also helped to achieve its objectives because the funding allowed it to construct two computer rooms, equip them with computers and connect them to the internet to support students in reaching out to their course directors and learning materials and subsequently to achieve their educational dreams.

THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Even though technology has been the requirement in facilitating learning within the encampment, there are several issues which invited attention. Dryden-Peterson and Giles (2010) asserted that provision of higher education for refugees normally encounters substantive and logistical challenges that are contextually based. On such a dilemma, Charmarkeh (2012) in his concluding remarks suggests that international organizations in collaboration with the hosting governments should allow refugees and asylum seekers free access to Information Communication Technology so that they can interact with the rest of the world community to find for themselves a better place to live in. Here I must acknowledge Mason (2007) who also noted that to transform education, we should embrace Information Communication Technology. This clearly informs us that, for transformative learning to take place, technology should be one of the requirements.

In my experience from the place of writing this article, Technical and Vocational Education and Training centres (TVET) have introduced freelancing courses which link the graduates with clients outside the camps, host countries, and beyond Africa. The graduates from this course are usually contracted by their clients to transcribe information and translate the messages. This is a self-employed job which benefits the graduates and the clients especially in the event where the client learns the local language. This is a way that technology can facilitate employment.

However, we are all conscious that every good thing has another side. Therefore, with the contradictory information about technology, for example, Yanay and Battle (2021) stated that technology creates an extra burden on students during their degree courses. On the other hand, the writers confirmed that refugee learners taking part in the Global Education Movement (GEM) – a body which is committed to educating more refugees in higher education through flexible learning opportunities – were well versed in the digital learning platforms that they accessed without challenges.

Although some students of the BHER project in Dadaab encountered tough times during online assignment submissions, luckily, they successfully coped with the situation through daily practice on the computers. The experience they acquired by practising on computers taught them the best ways on how to work on computers to achieve an interest. The author himself is the beneficiary of online learning through digital technology in Dadaab during the BHER project which started in 2013 with 30 Credits in certificate courses for a year. Thereafter the author covered 120 Credits for a BA in Human Geography and graduated in 2018. His performance rewarded him with an opportunity to pursue a second degree in Education which he successfully completed in 2020.

With the use of technology as the medium of instruction, students were greatly challenged especially when their course directors wanted assignments to be submitted in soft copies on computers. The author, like other students, had no clue about computer keyboards. He would call the course instructor or anyone around to open a page on the screen so that he could type his assignments. It was a difficult learning moment at that time because one could search all around the keyboards for one letter after another to form a word. Many students, including the author, persisted in the request for handwritten assignments to no avail. But during the final examinations in undergraduate courses, all students were permitted by the course directors to handwrite their answers within the examination time limit and that marked the end of handwritten assignments until the end of the BHER programme in April 2022.

WHAT IS FAILING TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION?

Considering the importance of technology and the significant positive changes it has brought, there are several factors which contribute to the failure of technology operations and use within the schools in the Dadaab complex camps. Such factors include but are not limited to the low supply of internet connectivity that disrupts the Information Technology effectiveness in services, poor and insufficient electronic equipment with slow speeds that take a long time to open links during browsing, few people with expertise in Information Technology to educate the communities on the use of electronic devices, limited time to practice what has been learned, and teachers who are not flexible enough to allow students to explore social media.

The author wonders if WIFI gadgets are installed in the computer rooms simply for the purpose of advertising the presence of the internet, because they appear to have little value in many high schools of the Dadaab camps. Either the internet connection has low capacity or data bundles are not available. The answer seems to lie with the Information and Technology (IT) officers. When complaints are received in their office, they arm themselves with electronic tools and play with the cables, climb up the wall to open the small service boxes by unscrewing and screwing them back up, or climb up on the mast, change the positions of the cables to allow the internet signal to appear, then walk away leaving the problem of connectivity unsolved. In the author's honest opinion, IT officers can play a significant role in either promoting or sabotaging the implementation of technology-enhanced learning programmes within the learning environment. They can demoralize students from using computers by either disconnecting the internet or regulating the flow of internet data so that its consumption becomes minimal.

In the author's own experience in education, many IT officers seem reluctant to acknowledge the important learning materials found on YouTube which students can access and interact with easily. Instead of guiding students on how to access relevant resources online, they monitor the webpages students are browsing and, if the webpages are different from those the students have been instructed to browse, they restrict the access. Of course, everyone needs a rest to refresh their attention span and students can benefit from a moment to refresh their minds with an interlude to explore the digital space. Exploration is the search for more information from other networks to produce knowledge. Such exploration also connects the student to learn more new things.

During the implementation of the BHER project, the BHER director subsidized internet connectivity with the provision of money for data bundles to every student to help complete his or her assignment within the stipulated time. Had it not been so, the project would have completely failed. The successful graduation of all the registered students of this programme inspired every member of the Dadaab community to request the humanitarian donors to reconsider reopening the BHER programme which had already closed in 2022 when the funds for the programme were depleted.

In view of this, technology has largely facilitated higher education learning in Dadaab to a successful ending. To this date BHER has continued offering courses from certificates through to Master's degrees. At the time of writing this piece, the African Higher Education in Emergency Network (AHEEN), a new programme, is warming up to take over the programme of Higher Education in crisis from BHER, by taking responsibility for connected higher learning in a blended approach within Dadaab through a consortia of six African universities, comprising Nairobi University as the host and Kenyatta University, both from Kenya, Juba University in South Sudan, City University in Somalia, Hope University in Burundi and Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

With the blended learning approach, the author foresees technology playing a fundamental role in shaping the connection among students and their institution, students and their peers, students and course materials as well as linking them with their instructors. While reflecting on the messaging apps and platforms, such as WhatsApp and Zoom, which were widely used during the BHER project, the author anticipates that the same will continue to dominate the interactions between students and course instructors as well as the programme management.

Nowadays, all schools sponsored by the humanitarian regime are equipped with computer labs and an internet connection, with masts erected in Dadaab camps to boost connectivity. The installation of masts has encouraged more child enrolment in schools as children want to interact with electronic learning gadgets. It is interesting to see that most students prefer learning through technology-enhanced learning because they learn new things each day as they interact

with electronic devices. The lessons can be well understood because of the learning materials available on the computers. In conclusion, technology has significantly impacted educational opportunities in Dadaab, but challenges such as limited internet access and outdated equipment persist. This requires the improvement of infrastructure, provision of adequate training for teachers on technology-enhanced learning and ensuring sustainable funding to allow programmes such as BHER to continue and maximize the benefits of connected learning.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare aside from being graduates of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) programme.

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