

Nursing Students' Learning Engagement Experiences During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Namibia: Implications for Nursing Education

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Abstract

Introduction: Ensuring strong student engagement in both traditional and virtual learning settings was essential for achieving positive educational results during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, fostering student engagement in both the traditional (face-to-face) and virtual learning environments has been accompanied by distinct challenges. There has been a lack of research specifically addressing the issue of nursing students' engagement within a blended learning setting in Namibia.

Aim: To explore and describe nursing students' learning engagement experiences at a university campus in Namibia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: A qualitative, descriptive, phenomenological study was employed to collect data from 10 purposively selected nursing students at a university campus in Namibia. Data from in-depth, face-to-face, individual interviews were collected using a semistructured interview guide. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method.

Results: The findings of the study describe students' learning engagement experiences under four distinct themes: (a) conditions and contexts of engagement; (b) student acts of engagement: positionality of teacher- and student-facilitated engagement; (c) consequences of engagement in a blended learning environment; and (d) student engagement dispositions: students' initiatives.

Conclusion: The research findings revealed that despite mental health challenges, both teacher-facilitated and student-facilitated engagement were necessary for positive learning engagement in the blended learning environment. Student-facilitated engagement was significantly responsible for enabling students to maintain focus, adhere to guidelines, and adapt to the blended learning environment. These findings are useful in understanding the challenges faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings thus provide valuable data for future studies seeking to address challenges associated with the blended learning environment.

Keywords

COVID-19, distance, education, online learning, mental health, Namibia, nursing students, pandemics, universities, virtual learning

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Introduction

Learning engagement is an important part of quality nursing education that contributes to student advancement (Hudson et al., 2019). The concept of engagement can be characterized as active participation and the dedication exhibited by individual students through their participation in both formal and informal activities (El-Sayad et al., 2021; Redmond et al., 2018). Through learning engagement, nursing students

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can develop cognitive, technical, and intrapersonal skills, which are essential components of nursing graduates' competencies (Clynes et al., 2020). However, students' learning engagement was severely affected during the COVID-19 outbreak, which brought education to a standstill for a few months and resulted in a shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to online and blended learning (Zayabalaradjane, 2020). The sudden and unanticipated transition from traditional in-person education to online learning, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students (Khlaif et al., 2021; Mali & Lim 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Previous research suggests that investigating the experiences of students' engagement in the blended learning environment can be highly beneficial for identifying the learning strategies that students employ (Boulton et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, however, no study has yet been conducted on this important area within nursing education in Namibia.

Review of Literature

According to research in the area of engagement, student engagement is crucial in promoting ethical and participative caring for others, particularly student nurses, who are faced with several challenging problems that they must navigate in order to maintain their well-being (Hudson et al., 2019). Engagement in the learning process is widely recognized as crucial for achieving academic success (El-Sayad et al., 2021; Pöysä et al., 2019). Thus, it is vital to explore the topic of learning engagement from the viewpoint of multiple contexts, including the Namibia context, since educational contexts differ from each other (Khlaif et al., 2021).

Learning engagement is an essential component of classroom learning and plays a critical role in the success of a class (Congmin, 2016). To encourage learning engagement in higher-order thinking, nursing educators may employ teaching methods, such as group work and projects (Ghalley & Rai, 2019), which have been shown to enhance student learning engagement (Hudson & Carrasco, 2015). Creating creative learning opportunities for engagement requires nursing educators to use diverse settings and activities (Hudson & Carrasco, 2015). Ghalley and Rai (2019) found that the more students participate in activities, the less they rely on memorization and the more they engage in higher-order thinking involving interpretation, analysis, and synthesis. Noohi et al. (2013) argued that a lack of student learning engagement and an inactive university environment can lead to a decline in learning quality and educational experience.

Student engagement is influenced by several factors as has been identified in recent studies (Dube & Mlotshwa, 2018; Ghalley & Rai 2019; Munangatire & Indjamba, 2023). According to Ghalley and Rai (2019), these factors include age, gender, willingness to communicate, course level,

student preparation, and emotions such as confidence or fear. Additional factors such as socioeconomic background, the ability to adapt to a new online learning environment, and low self-efficacy can also affect nursing students' academic participation and performance (Dube & Mlotshwa, 2018; Munangatire & Indjamba, 2023). Prior studies have also suggested that successful learning engagement is influenced by course design, peer pressure, confidence, and online teachers (Koob et al., 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education, including nursing education across the globe, shifted from the traditional face-to-face mode to a blended mode of learning. The shift provided the higher education sector with opportunities to continue learning since the blended mode limited physical interactions during practical teaching (Manwaring et al., 2017). Blended learning environments, which combine synchronous and asynchronous activities and are situated on a continuum between face-to-face and online teaching and learning, are of particular interest to the field of nursing education since the literature suggests they have the potential to optimize student engagement (Heilporn et al., 2021). Thus, even in the post-COVID-19 era, establishing robust student engagement in face-to-face and technologically enhanced learning environments remains an important step in delivering an effective blended learning and teaching strategy to achieve successful educational outcomes (Chiu, 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021; Mali & Lim, 2021). Nevertheless, there exist some notable difficulties in rolling out an effective blended curriculum due to the disparity between the face-to-face and online methodologies employed to cultivate student engagement (Chiu, 2021). Additionally, evidence suggests that exploring students' learning engagement experiences can greatly assist in identifying effective learning and teaching strategies within a blended learning environment (Boulton et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2020). Yet, this area remains understudied in Namibia. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore and describe nursing students' learning engagement experiences at a university campus in Namibia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

Student Engagement in Blended Learning

The notion of student engagement in this study is described using the transactional model of students engagement adapted from Lawson and Lawson (2013). This model describes four essential elements of the engagement process, namely the conditions and context of engagement, acts of engagement, benefits/competencies, and dispositions and drivers of engagement (see Figure 1). The conditions and contexts of engagement relate to students' goals and their expectations of involvement in academic activities, academic pressure, and classroom cultures that foster students' increased engagement and learning outcomes (Lawson &

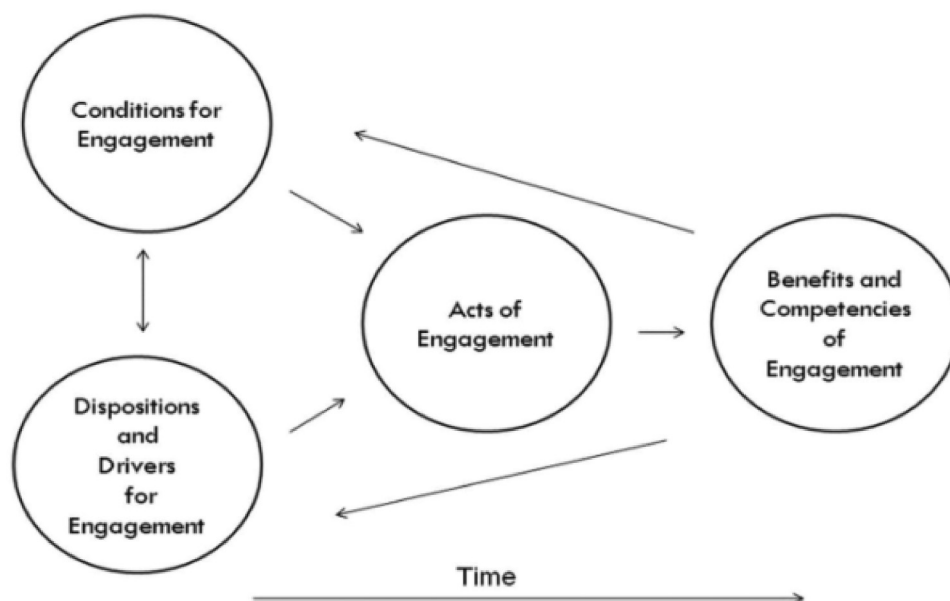


Figure 1. Transactional model of student engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

Lawson, 2013). Students' acts of engagement encompass their positionality, which denotes their thoughts, opinions, and interests during activities and actions in relation to a specific engagement activity. Additionally, student engagement involves the delineation of both teachers' and students' roles in the engagement process (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Understanding these roles from students' perspectives provides insight into students' experiences of learning engagement within teacher-led or student-led activities in a blended environment. The benefits or consequences of engagement pertain to the social, interpersonal, or place-based factors that contribute to a student's sense of belonging and connection with their teachers (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). The existence of these factors has the potential to amplify or weaken student's interest in and motivation to engage in specific activities or subjects (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Disposition includes students' long-term goals and commitment based on their expectations of success. Thus, a student's disposition plays a crucial role in driving future engagement. As students' dispositions evolve over time, it is important to obtain students' suggestions on how to improve their learning engagement in a blended learning environment.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

This study used a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to describe nursing students' learning engagement experiences at a satellite university campus in Namibia. This design was chosen as it enables exploration and

description of nursing students' learning engagement experiences (Husserl & Moran, 2012) at the selected university campus in Northeastern Namibia. The chosen campus is one of the 12 campuses of the University of Namibia, and the second largest campus, with a population of approximately 5,000 undergraduate students pursuing full-time studies in Nursing Science, Education, and Economic Management Sciences. To ensure that the students were engaged in their learning during COVID-19, the campus offered a blended learning mode in 2019, which it continues to offer to date. Given the unique educational context surrounding the nursing program, it was necessary to conduct a study that would provide a better understanding of students' experiences of learning engagement in a blended learning environment.

Population and Sampling

The study purposively selected 10 nursing students from the population of 200 undergraduate nursing students; the sampled students were in their second, third, or fourth year of study pursuing their studies at the satellite university campus in Namibia. As described by Brink et al. (2018), the participants were viewed as being knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study. The inclusion criteria were participants who were: (a) pursuing an undergraduate nursing program; (b) busy with their second, third, or fourth year of study; and (c) exposed to the blended learning environment at the selected university campus in Namibia. We excluded participants who were in isolation facilities during the data collection process as well as those unwilling to participate. Although thematic saturation was attained after the

eighth participant, we continued to gather information until the 10th participant, but no new information emerged.

Data Collection

Data for in-depth face-to-face individual interviews were collected using a semistructured interview guide (Bdair, 2021) between July and August 2021. The interview guide consisted of four central questions: (a) In your experience, what are the preclass engagement conditions in a blended learning environment? (b) Please share your experience with learning engagement in a blended learning environment? (c) What are your thoughts on the consequences of engaging in a blended learning environment? (d) What are your suggestions on how to improve student learning engagement experiences in a blended learning environment? Probes such as “please explain what you mean by that,” and “what were your negative and positive consequences” were also posed to illicit more information regarding participants’ learning engagement experiences in a blended learning environment. English was used as it is the official medium of communication at the university campus. The clarity and alignment of the questions were confirmed by three content experts in line with the objectives of the study. Additionally, the interview guide was piloted with three students and the findings from the pilot study confirmed the relevancy and appropriateness of the questions.

During the data collection phase, the third author (SLH) approached the potential participants while on the campus grounds where she explained the aim of the study, inclusion criteria, and voluntary nature of the study to potential participants. The third author (SLH) observed social distancing as per COVID-19 protocol and wore a face mask to ensure the safety of all parties involved. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the interview times were confirmed. All interviews were conducted in quiet lecture halls, audio-recorded, and field notes were taken to capture participants’ body language. Data saturation was achieved after conducting eight interviews, and the two additional interviews did not lead to the discovery of new information (Guest et al., 2020). The interviews were conducted in secure rooms and took between 45 and 50 min each.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the School of Nursing and Public Health Ethical Committee (ref no: SoNEC 68/2020). Participants’ rights to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality were maintained throughout the process (Burns et al., 2015) by collecting data in secure private venues and assigning codes to each participant. The data were stored in an encrypted folder that was only accessible to the researchers. All participants signed an informed consent form and were assured that their participation in

the study was voluntary, that is, they had the right to withdraw from the study with no punitive consequences.

Data Analysis

Researchers 1 and 2 (NT and TM) listened to the interview recordings on multiple occasions, before the third researcher (SLH) transcribed them verbatim. The transcripts underwent thorough readings and rereadings by the researchers so that they could fully immerse themselves in the data. Data analysis was performed manually using Microsoft Office. This analysis process is in line with Colaizzi’s seven-step methodology (Sundler et al., 2019; Tomas & Mandume, 2024). The authors then coded the relevant data units into themes, which related to the student nurses’ experiences of learning engagement in a blended learning environment. These themes were then validated by reaching a consensus within the research team before exhaustive descriptions were created. The second author then returned to the study participants to confirm the themes and to discuss any unclear findings. This process was a collaborative effort between the researchers; the final themes emerged from their interpretation of the data, as expressed by the participants (see Table 1). These themes were then validated by an independent coder before exhaustive descriptions of students’ experiences of learning engagement were developed. The participants’ facial expressions were added to the quotations by comparing the field notes with the audio recordings.

Trustworthiness

Data quality was ensured by credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility and dependability were ensured by using an audio recorder during data collection, and by involving two senior researchers who are experts in qualitative research. The third author (SLH), who was a novice researcher, conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews under the supervision of NT and TM. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times by the researchers. This rigorous approach guaranteed numerous interpretations of the data during the coding process. The researchers’ reflexivity was guaranteed by carefully examining individual judgments. This was accomplished by organizing the data, coding them, and labeling the themes and subthemes that emerged to prevent personal biases and assumptions from influencing the study’s findings (see Table 2). The authors’ inclusion of detailed descriptions of the research methods ensured the dependability of the study. Furthermore, member checking was completed by returning the data to the participants to confirm its accuracy.

In order to enhance confirmability, the researcher’s differing viewpoints on the themes were discussed and resolved with the assistance of the two authors with qualitative expertise. The study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research Checklist to guarantee comprehensive documentation of the methods used and outcomes attained

Table 1. Example of Participants' Interviews Analysis Schedule for Learning Engagement at the University Campus in Namibia.

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Participants quotations
Conditions and contexts of engagement	Students' understanding of engagement criteria	Prior-knowledge	Lecturers assess students' preknowledge of the specific topic to determine their understanding of students of the topic.
		Organization	Student preparation before the lesson is important.
		Suitable	The most important thing is to create or choose a quiet environment
		Require quite environment	
		Prior-preparation	

Table 2. Participants' Demographic Characteristics.

Codes	Gender	Age (in years)	Level of study	Marital status	Level of study
P1	Male	35	Second year	Single	Second year
P2	Female	19	Second year	Single	Second year
P3	Female	40	Fourth year	Single	Fourth year
P4	Male	20	Second year	Single	Second year
P5	Female	23	Fourth year	Single	Fourth year
P6	Female	24	Fourth year	Single	Fourth year
P7	Male	23	Third year	Single	Third year
P8	Female	24	Fourth year	Single	Fourth year
P9	Male	25	Third year	Single	Third year
P10	Male	22	Third year	Single	Third year

(Ashipala et al., 2023). To ensure transferability, a clear and precise depiction of the study population and research procedure has been provided, which will enable others to follow the research trajectory and key analytical determinations.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The study recruited 10 participants aged between 18 and 69 years who were willing to participate. It also involved an equal number of females (five out of 10) and males (5 out of 10). Many of the study participants (nine out of 15) were single, while six out of 15 were married. Four participants were in their fourth year of study, and three were in their second and third year, respectively. All participants were given a unique code (i.e., P1 to P10) to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality.

Research Question Findings

The analysis of the data resulted in the identification of four major themes and seven subthemes (see Figure 2). The first

theme, the preengagement phase, included a single subtheme that focused on students' comprehension of engagement standards. The second theme addressed the engagement phase and comprised two subthemes: teacher- and student-facilitated engagement strategies. The third theme explored factors that influence engagement and comprised one subtheme centered around long, exhausting lectures and emotional disconnectedness. Lastly, the fourth theme centered around the participants' suggestions of techniques that enhance engagement; it comprised three subthemes namely, investing in various academic support services, creating an engaging learning environment, and fostering a welcoming institutional culture.

Theme 1: Conditions and Contexts of Engagement

This theme reflects the participants' responses upon being asked to describe the engagement conditions in a blended learning environment. Participants highlighted that they were actively engaged throughout, as they were required to understand and meet a number of necessary conditions or criteria for engagement to occur.

Subtheme 1: Students' Understanding of Engagement Criteria.

The participants felt that for engagement to occur, several conditions must be met; for example, students had to prepare thoroughly before the sessions. Participants narrated that they had to go through the content before it was presented, attend all classes, and actively participate. In addition, some participants expressed the need for a suitable and quiet environment to allow them to focus in class. Three sample quotes follow below.

Lecturers normally assess students' pre-knowledge on the specific topic to determine the understanding of students of the topic. [P7]

Student preparation before the lesson is important, for them to have an idea on the topic being taught and enable them to respond to the lecturer's questions. [P1]

The most important thing is to create or choose a quiet environment, especially during online teaching where students and lecturers join the session from different places. [P4]

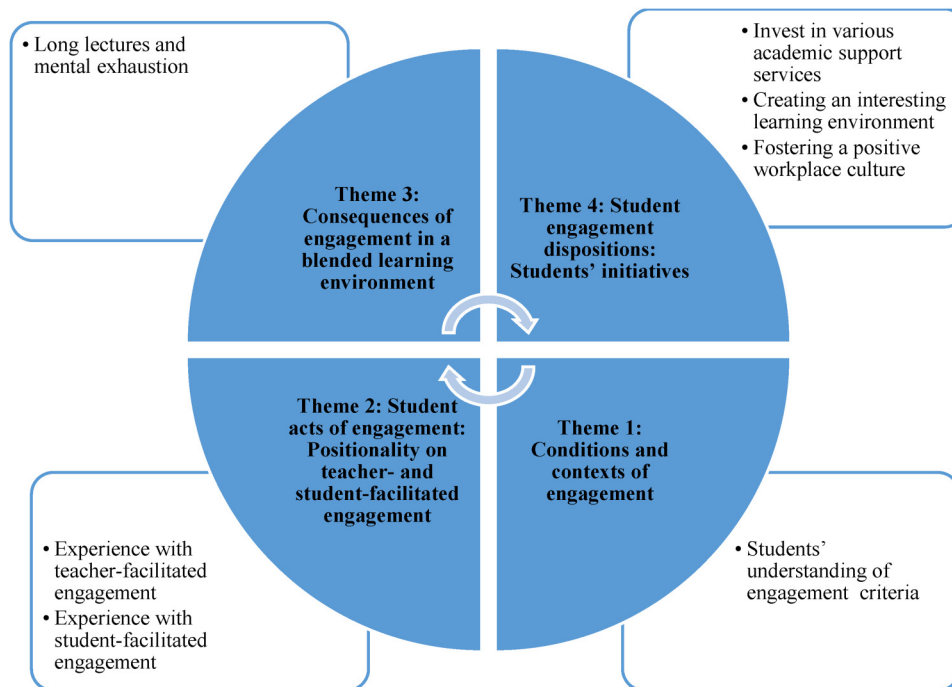


Figure 2. Themes and subthemes.

Theme 2: Student Acts of Engagement: Positionality on Teacher- and Student-Facilitated Engagement

Participants narrated their experiences regarding how they engaged in a blended learning environment. Participants' responses were grouped under two main themes: teacher-facilitated and student-facilitated engagement.

Subtheme 1: Experience with Teacher-Facilitated Engagement.

The participants highlighted how teacher-facilitated learning engagement was achieved through questioning. Some participants revealed that their teacher also used class activities to stimulate discussion and interaction with peers. Some participants recalled certain teachers dividing the class into small of five to 10 students using the online Learning Management System, Moodle, to allow for both synchronized or nonsynchronized group discussions and debates. However, some participants described that a lack of feedback and enthusiasm from some teachers was unacceptable.

During teacher-led engagement my lecturers normally ask questions to see if we're following the presentation, but when some lecturers are asked questions they do not provide elaborated responses...saying consult your books. This was really bad particularly during online class where we could not visit the library due to COVID-19. [P5]

I was astonished by how some lecturers made use of technology to break us into groups during the session and use chat

discussions to engage with us. I learned a lot from others as the lecturers were controlling the discussion. [P8]

Subtheme 2: Experience With Student-Facilitated Engagement.

In terms of student engagement experiences, several participants expressed that blended learning allowed them to be independent self-regulated learners. Such learning strategies motivated them to make their own notes as they engaged in self-study by reading published articles on Google Scholar and listening to YouTube videos in order to engage with content they did not understand during a class.

I always carry my notebook to note down important information that I find from the research articles or online articles or videos, especially when studying for a test or exam. [P6]

Self-studies helped me a lot, I had to read several published articles on the content I needed to understand. [P10]

Theme 3: Consequences of Engagement in a Blended Learning Environment

This theme reflects on the consequence of emotions and teacher-student relationships on learning engagement. Participants narrated their experiences under one major theme, which related to the impact of long lectures and mental exhaustion.

Subtheme 1: Long Lectures and Mental Exhaustion. The participants stated that long online lectures with no breaks led to

mental exhaustion and a loss of concentration. Two participants, in particular, were not happy that they had to be in front of a laptop for longer than two hours.

Usually our lectures are very long; you find some lecturers who do not give breaks in between and it is exhausting, leading to loss of concentration in class. [P3]

My concentration span is short. Our lecture sessions sometimes take longer than two hours and this is exhausting. [P1]

Theme 4: Student Engagement Dispositions: Students' Initiatives

This theme emerged when participants were asked about what initiatives they took to improve their learning engagement in a blended learning environment. The three sub-themes that emerged were: investing in various academic support services, creating an interesting learning environment, and fostering a positive workplace culture.

Subtheme 1: Investing in Academic Support Services. The participants suggested that the university strengthen its support of students who need to engage with online learning by conducting online orientations and providing internet facilities to students.

I strongly believe the university must put more emphasis on orientation programs for both face-to-face and online learning and the roles of both the teachers and students, rather than having higher expectations of the students. [P9]

I wish our university can provide students with high speed broadband internet devices and make all the prescribed books available online. [P8]

Subtheme 2: Creating an Interesting Learning Environment. The participants suggested that challenging assessment tasks may keep students engaged in both face-to-face and online teaching.

I would suggest for challenging online quizzes/tests, that would force us to study and understand the content...not those straight forward and easy questions they often give us. Equally, I would like to be given challenging tasks that require reflections such as case studies or problem-based studies for face-to-face tasks. [P5]

At times I needed not to study or engage with my lecturer or colleagues because the assessment tasks are too easy...the lecturers can do better by compiling assessment task that require deep thinking. [P2]

Subtheme 3: Fostering a Positive Workplace Culture. Many participants revealed that fostering a positive workplace culture among academics would promote students' engagement with their learning since it may lead to lecturers being more enthusiastic and nonjudgmental toward students.

I so wish lecturers [were] more friendly with students. Some lecturers discourage students from interacting with them by displaying egoistic behaviours such refusing to help students or even using bad words toward them. This needs to be changed seriously. [P5]

Lecturers need to be nonjudgmental, the institution need to create a welcoming culture where students are welcomed and respected. I feel like students are sometimes seen as less important with no voice. [P3]

Discussion

This study explored and described nursing students' learning engagement experiences at a selected university campus in Namibia. Participants revealed that for engagement to occur, some important conditions need to be met. These include sufficient preclass learning preparation, class attendance, and students' active participation. These results suggest that successful learning engagement in a blended learning environment requires preclass preparation activities that enable students to actively interact with their teachers and content. The efficacy of utilizing blended learning hinges on the extent to which preclass learning takes place. Indeed, preclass engagement holds greater importance than what is typically emphasized in the existing literature (Yang, 2020). Nevertheless, this notion is contradicted by the prevalent tendency of students to disregard preclass learning. This often results in their unpreparedness and inability to actively participate in collaborative activities during in-class sessions. Additionally, successful blended learning can result in teachers producing more desirable learning results (Green et al., 2018; Serrano et al., 2019). Our findings contradict those of Hsia and Hwang (2020), who argue that students in blended learning settings suffer from insufficient preclass preparation, leading to decreased engagement during in-class activities. These differences could be attributed to differing students' expectations regarding their involvement in academic activities and classroom cultures (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). A recent study by Bowden et al. (2021) has established that the expectations and active participation of students play a crucial role in influencing the three core aspects of engagement, namely cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Our findings reveal that students have demonstrated proficiency across these three tiers of engagement to exhibit a strong ability to maintain focus, adhere to guidelines, and readily adapt to blended learning (Halverson & Graham, 2019; Redmond et al., 2018). We

argue that these students have the requisite abilities to proficiently employ digital technology within an educational context and understand the importance of incorporating asynchronous and synchronous modalities in blended learning environments in line with the literature (Heilporn et al., 2021).

The study highlights that student-facilitated engagement was found to be highly valued by the participants as it enhanced self-regulated learning among many students in the nursing program. These findings are in line with the literature, which reports students' preferences for social media platforms such as YouTube and Google Scholar for engagement with educational content (Leigh et al., 2020; Mahasneh et al., 2021; Sutherland et al., 2018). The findings of this research show that blended learning resulted in positive discoveries about student engagement that included strategies such as carrying out tasks, following rules, and readily adapting to blended learning. This is a significant finding given that much literature suggests that most students possess poor self-regulation and learning strategies (Cleary et al., 2021; Viberg et al., 2020). Self-regulated learning is a skill that is closely linked to academic achievement and has the potential to shape learners' trajectories in both their educational pursuits and professional endeavors (Carter et al., 2020; Viberg et al., 2020). Interestingly, the findings suggest that the participants possessed the three critical elements of self-regulated learning, namely strategy utilization, motivation, and metacognition. These elements play a significant role in enhancing students' learning experience, in effectively regulating their thoughts, behaviors, emotions, and learning environments, and in gaining awareness of and control over their cognitive processes throughout the learning journey (Cleary et al., 2021).

However, participants also narrated how teacher-facilitated learning engagement strategies helped them to engage with their learning. Aligning with Bryson and Andres' (2020) study, we found that participants reported that teachers played a critical role in promoting class interactions for students to learn in a blended learning environment. Song et al. (2019) and Dost et al. (2020) acknowledge how important teacher-student interactions are for an effective learning experience. In contrast to the findings of Coleman and Davis (2020), some participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with some of the teachers who were deemed judgmental or who failed to provide constructive feedback. The absence of feedback and the presence of judgmental attitudes can have detrimental effects on students' engagement and retention, ultimately impacting the overall educational outcomes (Bock et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2019).

This study also found some worrisome consequences of learning in a blended learning environment. Participants expressed their frustrations with lengthy lectures that resulted in a decreased ability to concentrate and mental exhaustion. This is supported by previous research which

reports that professors taught for longer periods in the online environment than they would normally do in a face-to-face environment (Galimova et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021). Additionally, Kelly et al. (2021) suggest that students get frustrated when in the blended learning environment due to adaptability issues with the online learning component. It can thus be deduced that teachers have a responsibility to consider incorporating breaks into their lectures, ensuring that the content is interesting, and introducing energizers and icebreaker games during sessions (Bustard, 2018).

The theme on student engagement dispositions (students' initiatives) highlighted participants suggested several strategies to improve nursing students' learning engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. They suggested that a welcoming university culture, the provision of proper orientations to online learning, and providing internet access to all students would create a positive learning engagement experience for students. These findings concur with Fatehboroujeni et al. (2019) who argue that additional investment in academic support services, is a priority in higher education. Indeed, many researchers recommend that universities support students in using e-libraries for blended learning (Okyere-Kwakye & Nor, 2020). Some participants suggested that teachers develop challenging assessment tasks that would demand that students engage cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally with their learning. In line with the literature, the participants further suggested the need to embrace positive workplace behavior (Peters et al., 2019) by creating a student-friendly space, and involving students in decision-making (Carey, 2018). Similarly, Roberts (2018) established that positive work behavior among university staff is fundamental not only to students' engagement and academic success, but also to addressing student attrition issues. An institutional ethos of friendliness, nonjudgmentality (Delly, 2021; Grant, 2021), and nondiscrimination, when combined with enthusiastic lecturers (Miller & Mills, 2019) are linked to high levels of learning engagement and student success.

The research findings indicate that engagement in the learning process requires the involvement of both teachers and students. We argue that a thorough understanding of the necessary conditions for engagement, as well as a preference for student-facilitated engagement, greatly influences self-regulated learning. This, in turn, enables students to effectively maintain focus, adhere to guidelines, and adapt to blended learning. Our findings have important implications for understanding the mental hurdles that students encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic at a university campus in Namibia. Furthermore, these findings offer valuable insights for educators and students alike, helping them comprehend the challenges that may arise in a blended learning environment. The study also serves as valuable data for future studies aiming to address the difficulties associated with blended learning.

Strength and Limitations

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive set of initial data on learning engagement in a blended learning environment. These results are vital for nurse educators in their planning and selection of appropriate teaching approaches in a blended learning environment. However, despite this study's generation of valuable findings, there are some limitations. Firstly, due to the strict safety measures during COVID-19, it was difficult to clearly observe the facial expressions of participants owing to the use of face masks. Secondly, as the interviews were conducted in class during lunch, it may be suggested that those who were present were more engaged than those who were not present. However, prolonged engagement and the creation of good rapport between the researcher and the participants ensured the credibility of the data. The issues raised by this study are significant and warrant further research. Future studies employing larger samples are recommended so that the effects of blended learning on academic outcomes can be better established.

Implications for Nursing Education

This study provide a valuable database on learning engagement in a blended learning environment at a selected university campus in Namibia. The study significantly contributes to the body of literature on student engagement and will greatly assist in the identification of additional learning strategies in a blended learning environment (Boulton et al., 2019). The findings from this study are significant for planning teaching and learning in a blended learning environment. The findings could provide useful guidance for nursing institutions and educators on the importance of student support services. It can also provide insight into how institutions can address the emotional challenges faced by students during blended learning. The study has also revealed that blended learning may also have some negative implications on students' mental health. Hence, it is essential for nursing schools and nurse educators to focus on students' best interests (Koob et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The research findings show that both teacher-facilitated and student-facilitated engagement were necessary for learning engagement more broadly in a blended learning environment. We contend that understanding engagement conditions is key to teaching and learning in a blended learning environment and that employing student-facilitated engagement is necessary for enhancing students' ability to maintain focus, adhere to guidelines, and readily adapt to a blended learning environment. The findings of the study also touched on students' mental health challenges resulting from having to learn in a blended learning context. These findings are

significant to both students and lecturers in understanding the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and can provide valuable data for future studies seeking to address such challenges. These findings call for teachers to create an interesting learning environment and encourage students to invest in their own learning to improve their chances of academic success.

Author Contributions

NT and TM supervised HSL from the protocol conceptualization, study design, and data collection. NT and TM were responsible for validation, data curation, critical reviewing, formal analysis and drafting of the manuscript, and reviewing and editing. Both authors contributed to the manuscript revision, and read and approved the submitted version.

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Data Availability

Data is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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