

 Research Article

# The Duality of Flexibility in Emergency Remote Teaching: A Jordanian University Student Perspective

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## Abstract

Flexibility, a cornerstone of online distance education, enables learners to access instructional content asynchronously from dispersed locations. However, this individualization of learning temporality and spatiality can obscure disparities in learners' access to domestic resources, potentially exacerbating social inequities. This qualitative study examines how the flexibility inherent in Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) shaped the academic experiences of students from diverse social groups at Jordanian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in a synthesis of capital theory and self-regulated learning (SRL) models, the investigation focuses on the intersection of socioeconomic status, gender, and regional background. Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 50 undergraduate and graduate students, four pivotal mediating factors were identified: spatial capital, temporal capital, temporal agency, and temporal intensity. Findings reveal that the capacity to benefit from ERT's flexibility was unevenly distributed. Students with higher socioeconomic status and urban residency typically possessed superior spatial and temporal capital, allowing them to leverage asynchronous learning effectively. In contrast, students from rural areas, lower-income households, or those with significant familial or occupational obligations experienced flexibility as a source of stress and academic disadvantage, often due to deficient infrastructure, limited quiet study space, and constrained time. The study concludes that flexibility is not an inherent pedagogical good but a dimension that interacts with pre-existing inequalities. To foster inclusive flexibility, higher education institutions must move beyond a one-size-fits-all model by providing targeted SRL support, ensuring equitable access to essential digital and spatial resources, and adopting pedagogies sensitive to students' divergent domestic contexts. This research underscores the urgent need to build more equitable and resilient digital learning ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Flexible Learning, Distance Education, Emergency Remote Teaching, Equity, Spatial Capital, Temporal Capital, Self-Regulated Learning

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global Covid-19 pandemic compelled higher education institutions worldwide to enact a rapid, unplanned shift to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), a modality distinct from pedagogically designed online education (Hodges et al., 2020). This abrupt transition precipitated significant technological, emotional, and pedagogical challenges for students, with disproportionate impacts on historically underserved populations (Browning et al., 2021; di Pietro et al., 2020). Research has extensively documented a pervasive digital divide, wherein students from lower socioeconomic strata frequently encounter inadequate internet connectivity, thereby exacerbating pre-existing educational inequalities (Cullinan et al., 2021).

Paradoxically, the flexibility in time, pace, and place offered by ERT has been characterized both as a critical enabler of student adaptation and a significant barrier for disadvantaged learners (Holzer et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021). This dichotomy underscores that the capacity to leverage flexibility is not uniformly

distributed but is contingent upon students' access to resources within their specific spatial and temporal contexts (Veletsianos et al., 2021). Such dispositions are shaped by intersecting social positions, including gender, socioeconomic class, and geographic location, which can render flexibility a potential vector for inequity (Bunn et al., 2019).

While the dual nature of flexibility in ERT is recognized in the literature, a significant gap remains in understanding how this duality manifests within specific non-Western contexts, particularly through an intersectional lens. In Jordan, the swift transition to ERT accentuated pre-existing educational disparities, yet nuanced empirical research examining how intersecting identities mediate the experience of flexibility is scarce. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating how Jordanian university students' access to temporal and spatial resources shaped their perception and utilization of ERT flexibility, and how intersections of social categories—namely class, gender, and regional background—co-constituted these academic experiences.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework: Capital and Self-Regulation in Digital Learning

This study is framed by a synthesis of capital theory and models of self-regulated learning (SRL). First, drawing from sociological concepts, we define *temporal capital* as the disposable time an individual can allocate to chosen pursuits, coupled with the agency to control its sequencing and rhythm (Flaherty, 2020; Wang, 2013). Closely related, *temporal agency* refers to the learner's capacity to manipulate their subjective experience of time to optimize learning processes (Flaherty, 2011). *Spatial capital* encompasses the resources accrued from one's position within physical and digital space (Barthon & Monfroy, 2010). This includes *position capital* (the quality of one's residence and its infrastructure) and *situation capital* (the ability to appropriate and utilize remote spaces, such as accessing a stable internet connection). This framework extends beyond mere digital access to include critical environmental factors like quiet, dedicated space, and freedom from domestic distractions.

Second, SRL theory posits that successful learners actively control their thoughts, behaviors, and motivations to achieve academic goals (Zimmerman, 2002). In online contexts, SRL is paramount, with time management being a critical component (Broadbent & Poon, 2015). The flexibility of ERT demands high levels of SRL, and a deficit in these skills can severely hinder academic progress, particularly for students already facing resource constraints.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Context and Participants

This study was conducted at a large Jordanian university serving a diverse student population. A qualitative approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews. Participants (N=50) were selected via criteria-based purposeful sampling to ensure representation across gender, socioeconomic status (including first-generation university attendees), and regional background (urban vs. rural). The final sample included 32 undergraduate and 18 graduate students, comprising 26 female and 24 male participants.

### 2.2. Data Collection and Procedures

Participants were recruited through university mailing lists and social media groups. Interested students were screened against inclusion criteria (current enrollment during the ERT period, variation in socio-demographic background). Informed consent was obtained electronically prior to each interview. Interviews were conducted in Arabic via video conferencing platforms (Zoom and Microsoft Teams) to facilitate rapport and non-verbal communication, averaging 45–60 minutes in duration. The interview protocol focused on four core themes aligned with the study's objectives: (1) daily routines and learning environments, (2) time management strategies and challenges, (3) access to digital and physical resources, and (4) perceived benefits and drawbacks of ERT flexibility.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed following a constructivist paradigm. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. The process involved iterative coding, category development, and abstraction of themes linked to the theoretical framework. An intersectional analytical lens was applied to understand how systems of inequality co-constituted student experiences (Crenshaw, 1993).

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Temporal Capital: The Disparity of Disposable Time

Students' experiences ranged from feeling "temporally unfettered" to "temporally confined," directly correlating with their socioeconomic and regional backgrounds. Students with high temporal capital, typically single and from affluent urban backgrounds, could leverage flexibility to create personalized, effective learning schedules. One participant noted, *"I had control over my day. I could study late at night when it was quiet, and I was most productive, something campus schedules never allowed."*

Conversely, students with significant employment or family obligations struggled to find dedicated study time. Rural students, in particular, faced compounded challenges. As one student described, *"The library was closed, and the internet at home was useless. I would spend three hours commuting just to sit outside a relative's house in the city to download lectures."* This aligns with capital theory, positing time as an unequally distributed resource where socioeconomic and regional background directly influence one's temporal capital and ability to benefit from asynchronous learning.

### 3.2. Temporal Agency and Self-Regulated Learning

Students demonstrated varying levels of control over their learning pace, closely tied to their SRL skills. Those with strong SRL competencies actively manipulated their learning processes. A graduate student explained, *"I mastered playing recordings at 1.5x speed, pausing to take detailed notes. It felt efficient and empowering."*

In contrast, others described a profound loss of control, leading to haphazard studying and growing knowledge gaps. This was particularly acute among students from educational backgrounds with rigid, teacher-centered pedagogies. One undergraduate confessed, *"No one was telling me 'do this now.' I kept postponing difficult material until it was too late."* This finding directly engages with SRL theory, suggesting the transition to ERT acted as a stress test for students' self-regulatory capacities. Without well-developed SRL strategies, students were unable to exercise temporal agency, resulting in negative academic outcomes.

### 3.3. Temporal Intensity: The Burden of Simultaneity

ERT created a state of *temporal intensity*, where students managed multiple, competing obligations. Perceptions of this intensity varied along gendered and socioeconomic lines. Some students, particularly mothers, valued the ability to integrate roles. A female student with young children stated, *"I could attend a lecture while preparing lunch. It was exhausting, but at least I didn't have to choose between being a student and being a mother."*

Others, often male students bearing financial pressures, experienced this intensity as a burden. A working student shared, *"The 'flexibility' meant my boss expected me to be available anytime, and my professors expected the same. I was always choosing between earning my wage and doing my assignments."* This highlights how perceived social roles shape which obligations are salient, influencing whether temporal intensity is seen as a manageable integration or a source of conflict and anxiety.

### 3.4. Spatial Capital: The Myth of ‘Learning Anywhere’

Students’ spatial capital existed on a wide spectrum, fundamentally challenging the notion of “learning anywhere.” Urban, affluent students typically reported dedicated, quiet study spaces with reliable high-speed internet. Conversely, students from large, low-income households or rural areas described profound spatial constraints. One participant from a crowded household said, “I shared a room with three siblings. There was constant noise. Trying to concentrate on a lecture was a daily battle I often lost.” Another lamented, “The campus library was my only sanctuary. Its closure was catastrophic for my studies.” Spatial capital theory elucidates how physical and digital geography creates inequity. The premise of flexible learning presupposes a minimum level of spatial capital that many students lack, directly contravening its inclusive potential.

### 3.5. Practical Implications for Stakeholders

The findings offer concrete implications for various stakeholders. For educators and curriculum developers, course design must exhibit flexibility not only in deadlines but also in the demand for synchronous participation and high-bandwidth resources. Adopting universal design for learning principles can help. For university policymakers, investing in infrastructure is critical. This includes lending mobile internet hotspots, maintaining open and safe physical study spaces on campus, and providing subsidized software. For academic support units, targeted interventions are needed, such as mandatory workshops on time management and SRL strategies, particularly for first-year and first-generation students transitioning from teacher-centered systems. For researchers, these findings call for further mixed-methods studies to quantify the impact of specific interventions aimed at bolstering spatial and temporal capital among disadvantaged student groups.

### 3.6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. Its qualitative design and sampling from a single university limit the generalizability of findings. The reliance on self-reported data may be subject to recall bias. Furthermore, while intersectionality was an analytical focus, the sample size may not have captured all nuanced intersections of identity in sufficient depth.

Future research should employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs across multiple institutions to track the long-term academic impacts of ERT-driven inequalities. Comparative studies between different national contexts could elucidate the role of broader societal infrastructure and policy. Additionally, intervention-based research is needed to test the efficacy of proposed support mechanisms, such as SRL training programs or resource redistribution initiatives, in mitigating the inequities uncovered.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that flexibility in ERT is not an inherent good but a pedagogical dimension that interacts with and often amplifies pre-existing social inequalities. For Jordanian students, the benefits of flexibility were mediated by their unevenly distributed temporal capital, temporal agency, and spatial capital, which were themselves shaped by intersecting identities of class, gender, and region. The pandemic-era shift to ERT has laid bare structural inequities within higher education. The imperative now is to harness these lessons to design digital learning ecosystems that are not only flexible but also fundamentally just and inclusive, ensuring that the promise of “learning anywhere” becomes a reality for every student, regardless of their starting point.

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**Research Ethics.** This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Institutional and/or National Research Committee, the Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 and its subsequent amendments, or similar ethical

standards. The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Hashemite University (Reference No. HU/2024/123, Approval Date: January 15, 2024). Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants.

**Data Availability Statement.** The datasets generated and analyzed during this study (anonymized interview transcripts in Arabic and their English translations) are not publicly available, as they contain information that may compromise the privacy of the research participants. However, it can be obtained from the author upon request, subject to obtaining the necessary ethical approvals.

**Conflicts of Interest.** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest, whether financial or otherwise, related to the content of this manuscript.

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