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20. The year of COVID-19: Personal reflections on how traditional pedagogy can be informed by online teaching methods (aka how I changed my mind about online teaching)

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For many terms now (since the SARS crisis occurred in 2006), SMU had been preparing for what it called “emergency preparedness for teaching & learning”. Mainly, it required faculty to practice teaching a few hours a year through online methods. Most of us did it in a rather half-hearted manner, never dreaming that we would actually have to teach this way. Then, of course, came COVID-19 and the almost overnight transition to home-based learning and online teaching.

My experiences in this respect were not the best, to say the least. With the transition being done half-way through the term, I did not have the time (or mental bandwidth) to actually “transform” my classes into online teaching mode. The best I could do was conduct class as I would in a face-to-face mode, with whatever adaptations I could make for an online mode of teaching. That went about as well as could be expected: meaning not particularly well.

There were the usual technical issues, both the expected and the unexpected. I shall draw a merciful veil over the vicissitudes of people’s varying bandwidth capabilities, the (rather outdated) web-conferencing software we had to rely on, as well as everyone’s general inability to remember to “mute” and “unmute” themselves as necessary. Even worse: the changes interrupted my preferred mode of pedagogy, which is a high level of personal interaction with each student and/or small groups of students.

Yet once term was finally over and I had time to breathe, I realized that online teaching had made me rethink some of my teaching practices. Indeed, I found certain strengths in online teaching that traditional face-to-face formats lacked. I started considering if we could learn from online teaching practices to improve our current modes of teaching, such as using online tools to improve interactivity and reduce bias in interacting with students. Most importantly, I started reconsidering whether our traditional classroom structures were indeed the best way to teach. In this regard, I speak purely from my personal experiences in teaching law courses, but I believe that these points are also applicable to teaching in other disciplines.

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Connectivity

In the main, in online teaching I had to get used to teaching without any real-time feedback. I was largely unable to see the students' faces⁵⁴³ or body language. As such, I was unable to tell whether they were following the material, or even paying attention.⁵⁴⁴

In addition, the classroom energy was simply not the same. In a face-to-face classroom, the students and I would "feed off" each other's energy, making classroom discussions far livelier and more involved. This atmosphere was much harder to replicate online. Even my favoured breakout small group discussions did not appear to have the same focus or energy online. It was also hard to tell, popping from one online group to another, whether the discussions were going in the direction I had planned, or whether the students were even discussing the material during the times I was not "visiting" them.

Luckily, I managed to encourage connectivity through other means. In place of the real-time verbal back-and-forth discussions, I had the students type their responses and comments onto a shared Google Docs document. The students *loved* this function, as they had a record of class discussions to which they could refer at any point. This turned out especially helpful for their exam revisions. One student even started jotting down my responses to their comments, labelling them "Prof's notes".⁵⁴⁵

Students also liked the chat function of web-conferencing technology. Wonderfully, those who had been fairly quiet during traditional class-time would happily type out their questions and comments. (This also worked out well for the hearing-impaired student in my class.)

In this respect, there were thankfully many other programs which could increase interactivity online: mechanisms for quizzes, polls, brainstorming, and other online class response systems. These helped overcome, in part, the distancing effect of online learning, as well as encouraged students to remain engaged during class-time.

Indeed, I believe that such tools could be helpful even in a face-to-face classroom: to gauge student responses, check their understanding of the material, and also just liven up class for the drier topics. Moreover, the technology makes it easy to analyze student responses; it can even grade answers to multiple-choice and short questions. As such, I will continue using these tools even when we move back to face-to-face teaching.

⁵⁴³ When I tried to get everyone to turn on their webcams during the first class, it resulted in some spectacular software crashes.

⁵⁴⁴ Some students later admitted to tuning into class from their beds. We were all young once.

⁵⁴⁵ This had the added benefit of demonstrating some aspects of altruism, a boon in an Ethics class.

Reducing bias

In place of verbal questions, I had the students type in their questions on the web-conferencing chat function, to which I would respond at the appropriate time. This, as stated above, helped the quieter students. However, I realized that this method of response was also helpful for reducing instructor bias in the classroom.

There is naturally some bias in calling on students in a face-to-face context: prior acquaintance (or even general affinity) with certain students, as well as unconscious bias with regard to race and gender, to name two. This is especially since it is sometimes hard to discern who first raised their hands, in a forest of waving hands. With web-conferencing chat functions, however, it is easy to discern which student first typed a question or “raised their hand” online. This helps to take away any unconscious bias I might have in calling on students for responses.

In this respect, classroom technology also makes it easier to keep track of the quieter students, enabling the instructor to encourage them to respond. It also allows the instructor to call on specific groups which are generally under-represented in the classroom discourse.⁵⁴⁶ Certainly, you can do all of this without technology, but it is much more explicit (and easier to track) with technology.

Optimizing use of actual classroom time

Perhaps the most startling realization I had was that our traditional classroom teaching methods, i.e. sitting in a classroom for a fixed number of hours for students to imbibe learning, were actually rather inefficient. This was especially so for classes relying on the lecture system: “The reality is that the lecture is a poor means to engage students with the content, even when presented in an entertaining manner ... There is little connection or interaction for the students with peers or the professor. Students endure the experience to get the credit, and faculty long for release time so they can have more time for their research – the primary activity that is recognized and rewarded.”⁵⁴⁷

Even in seminar-style teaching systems like SMU’s, a not-insignificant amount of material will likely have to be taught through lectures, particularly for the more complex topics.

⁵⁴⁶ This can also increase inclusiveness in the classroom setting. See e.g. Kevin Gannon, ‘The Case for Inclusive Teaching’ (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 February 2018) <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Case-for-Inclusive/242636>>.

⁵⁴⁷ D. Randy Garrison and Norman D. Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education: Framework, Principles, and Guidelines* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2011) at pp 75-76.

However, in online teaching it is well-accepted that there will be both synchronous (or simultaneous) and asynchronous (non-simultaneous) learning mechanisms.⁵⁴⁸ Asynchronous learning components, particularly lectures, are conducted on the students' own time, with the synchronous sessions reserved for actual interaction and feedback between instructor and students.

Consider, for instance, this example of a redesign of a third-year philosophy course, consisting of approximately 30 students. Aside from re-engineering the assignments and methods of classroom delivery and discussion: "[t]he single weekly class period [reduced from the initial two ninety-minute seminar sessions per week] was now used as an opportunity for the professor to discuss misconceptions in writing she had observed within the electronic portfolio system and for the students to share, debrief, and plan their individual and collaborative writing assignments."⁵⁴⁹

This asynchronous/synchronous model of learning could be helpful for many classes, especially skills and/or discussion-focused classes, and even the more traditional doctrinal classes. Materials which are more appropriate for the traditional lecture style could be delivered through pre-recorded lectures, which the students can absorb at their own time and pace. The asynchronous material could also incorporate other modes of asynchronous learning, such as multimedia clips, brief simulations, and online discussion boards where the students raise questions and concerns.

Valuable face-to-face class-time (i.e. the synchronous learning components) could then be reserved for productive discussions and feedback. Indeed, face-to-face classroom-time need not be limited to class-wide discussions: it could also be used for small-group discussions and/or one-on-one sessions, depending on the needs of the curriculum.

During actual class-time, the instructor could focus on being a facilitator for classroom discussion and debate (whether class-wide, in small groups, or one-on-one). The instructor could also use that time to provide more personalized feedback – for the general classroom as well as for individual students.⁵⁵⁰ The increased personalized interaction with faculty, as well as other

⁵⁴⁸ See e.g. Garrison and Vaughan (n 547) at p 6.

⁵⁴⁹ Garrison and Vaughan (n 547) at pp 74-75. Indeed,

“[t]he student evaluations and comments from the professor indicate that the goal of creating deeper connections between the course’s major topic areas was realized. The professor indicated that the quality and connectedness of the students’ papers increased dramatically and that the reduction in the number of assignments combined with the use of assessment rubrics significantly decreased the amount of time she had to spend on grading. Students stated that the use of the electronic portfolio system and the introduction of the group assignment facilitated a greater sense of meaningful engagement with the course material and their peers ‘inside and outside of the classroom.’”

⁵⁵⁰ While faculty do often have one-on-one student sessions outside of class-time with students, in the form of office hours and consultations, these sessions are often limited due to time constraints. To have these incorporated as part of mandated classroom time would give the students the assurance of such feedback, and allow faculty more time and leeway in planning such consultations.

students, could also help reduce concerns about students being shortchanged with reduced classroom time.⁵⁵¹

Legal skills classes, for instance, would be significantly improved if students could have a mix of the above types of sessions: the class-wide discussions would be helpful for discussing overarching concepts and questions, while the small group and one-on-one sessions could be devoted to individualized feedback. Even doctrinal classes could benefit from this approach, as students would likely be more willing to speak up and clarify their concerns in small-group (rather than class-wide) settings.

Using class-time in this way would also be beneficial for encouraging project-based work. Using the asynchronous materials provided as a basis for learning, the students could then focus their efforts on the required projects, and use actual class-time for peer consultation, obtaining in-person feedback on their projects, and fine-tuning their work.

This, of course, is not a new idea. Indeed, proponents of blended learning⁵⁵² have long advocated a pedagogical approach that harnesses and merges the relative strengths of face-to-face and online modes of learning, to create and sustain vital communities of inquiry.⁵⁵³ And certainly this has been happening in some respects.⁵⁵⁴

However, such approaches appear to be the exception rather than the rule. The experiences of last term have shown that there is much work to be done in encouraging the adoption of such an approach in higher education.

⁵⁵¹ Greta Anderson, 'Feeling Shortchanged' (*Inside Higher Ed*, 13 April 2020) <<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/13/students-say-online-classes-arent-what-they-paid>> accessed 12 July 2020; Bob Van Voris and Janet Lorin, 'Angry Undergrads Are Suing Colleges for Billions in Refunds' (*Bloomberg*, 1 May 2020) <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-01/angry-undergrads-studying-online-sue-for-billions-in-refunds>> accessed 12 July 2020; Jeffrey R. Young, 'Why Students Want Tuition Refunds Over Shift to Online Teaching' (*EdSurge*, 12 May 2020) <<https://www.edsurge.com/news/2020-05-12-why-students-want-tuition-refunds-over-shift-to-online-teaching>> accessed 12 July 2020. However, it should be noted that many of these complaints are not just about classroom instruction methods but also about missing out on the overall residential college experience, which is a different discussion altogether.

⁵⁵² Blended learning has also been referred to as "hybrid learning," "mixed-mode instruction," "differentiated instruction," and "technology-mediated instruction", among other similar terms. See e.g. Krasulia A, 'Blended Learning: Advantages and Disadvantages in the EFL Classroom' (*Sumy State University*, 2017) <https://essuir.sumdu.edu.ua/bitstream-download/123456789/67256/1/Krasulia_Blended_Learning.pdf>.

⁵⁵³ Garrison and Vaughan (n 547).

⁵⁵⁴ See, e.g. Calvin Yang, 'Universities adopting 'flipped classroom' learning' (*The Straits Times*, 13 July 2015) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/universities-adopting-flipped-classroom-learning>> accessed 6 July 2020. SMU also has a number of blended learning courses, SMU Centre for Teaching Excellence, 'Blended Learning' <<https://cte.smu.edu.sg/blended-learning-1>>, as well as the project-based SMU-X courses, 'What is SMU-X?' <<https://x.smu.edu.sg/about/what-is-smu-x>> both accessed 6 July 2020.

Challenges

Adopting such changes will require adjustments in traditional pedagogical thinking. For one, we will have to trust students to prepare for class on their own time, so that classroom time can be effectively used in the abovementioned methods. And certainly, there is no assurance (but has there ever been any?) that students will do the required work beforehand.

However, mechanisms can be put in place to give students incentives to do the work, or more accurately, disincentives to not do the work. For instance, students could be required to respond to short quizzes before class, which test them briefly on specific course materials. They could also be required to post short reflection pieces on specific materials, and participate in online discussion forums outside of classroom time.⁵⁵⁵

The drawback, of course, is that adopting such changes would mean more work, for both faculty and students. For faculty, the time saved from being physically in the classroom would be taken up by the time required for class preparation, including but not limited to: recording lectures and creating other material for students' learning outside of the classroom, establishing effective online discussion forums, creating (and reviewing the results of) appropriate quizzes, short assignments and other material for testing the students' understanding of the class materials, and providing personalized feedback for each student.⁵⁵⁶

However, one benefit is that preparing most of these materials (aside from the personalized feedback) would be largely one-off activities. For instance, a video, once recorded, can be reused for other sections of the same course. Additionally, materials that are not time-sensitive (such as certain basic legal concepts) would not need to be changed; at most they would need to be updated once or twice a year to account for recent developments. "Learning" quizzes and other short assignments have the same advantage.

For students, they would have to be far more pro-active in their learning. They would have to schedule time not only to do the usual readings, but also to watch and understand the lecture videos and other materials; complete the multiple pre-assigned quizzes and other "learning" assignments, as well as participate in other activities such as online discussion forums. There are

⁵⁵⁵ In fact, technology affords us greater ability to track whether students have done the required readings, watched the required videos, or taken the required online assignments.

⁵⁵⁶ See e.g. McKenzie, B., Mims, N., Bennett, E., & Waugh, M. "Needs, concerns and practices of online instructors" (2000) 3(3) Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration <<https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdl/fall33/mckenzie33.html>>; Clair Howell Major, "Do Virtual Professors Dream of Electric Students? University Faculty Experiences with Online Distance Education" (2010) 112 (8) Teachers College Record, at pp 2154–2208.

also more fundamental concerns about students' differential access to technological resources, or even conducive home learning environments.⁵⁵⁷

Nonetheless, if such methods go towards allowing students more flexibility in their learning and increasing efficiency of learning in the classroom, it would be worthwhile to further engage the benefits of combining both online and face-to-face learning.

Conclusion

Current evidence seems to indicate that the world will not revert to pre-COVID-19 norms. In particular, work from home looks to become the new normal.⁵⁵⁸ Despite numerous articles having come out in support of face-to-face teaching,⁵⁵⁹ online learning has also gained new traction in the education system.⁵⁶⁰ While I remain convinced that the best education is largely a social process and that the best learning happens when students are able to exchange views, debate, argue their point of view and collaborate with others in real-world projects,⁵⁶¹ that learning does not have to be confined to the boundaries of the physical classroom during set periods of time.

⁵⁵⁷ See e.g. Lim Sun Sun, 'Commentary: The joys and frustrations of home-based learning' (*Channel News Asia*, 8 April 2020) <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/home-based-learning-COVID-19-coronavirus-singapore-tips-parents-12618236>> accessed 20 July 2020; The Learning Network, 'What Students Are Saying About Remote Learning' (*The New York Times*, 9 April 2020) <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/learning/what-students-are-saying-about-remote-learning.html>> accessed 20 July 2020.

⁵⁵⁸ See, e.g. Laurel Farrer, 'The New Normal Isn't Remote Work. It's Better' (*Forbes*, 12 May 2020) <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurelfarrer/2020/05/12/the-new-normal-isnt-remote-work-its-better/>> accessed 12 July 2020; 'Employers must adjust mindsets, embrace working from home as new normal: Lawrence Wong' (*Channel News Asia*, 23 May 2020) <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/employers-working-from-home-COVID-19-new-normal-lawrence-wong-12763298>> accessed 12 July 2020; Justin Harper, 'Coronavirus: Flexible working will be a new normal after virus' (*BBC*, 22 May 2020) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52765165>>; Rob McLean, 'These companies plan to make working from home the new normal. As in forever' (*CNN Business*, 25 June 2020) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/22/tech/work-from-home-companies/index.html>> accessed 12 July 2020.

⁵⁵⁹ John Ross, 'Pandemic 'confirms face-to-face teaching is here to stay'' (*Times Higher Education*, 4 June 2020) <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/pandemic-confirms-face-face-teaching-here-stay>> accessed 28 June 2020.

⁵⁶⁰ See also Ang Hwee Min, 'MOE to review how to 'blend' classroom and digital online learning as schools reopen after COVID-19 circuit breaker' (*Channel News Asia*, 2 June 2020) <<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/COVID-19-schools-classroom-digital-online-home-based-learning-12795720>> accessed 12 July 2020 ('We totally understand home-based learning and digital online learning cannot substitute classroom learning. But having forced ourselves to do this for a whole month, we also learned how to do it better, and that there are certain strengths in online learning that actually, classroom learning does not have.');

Anita Lie, 'The new normal in education' (*The Jakarta Post*, 20 June 2020) <<https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/06/20/the-new-normal-in-education.html>> accessed 12 July 2020.

⁵⁶¹ Sandra Davie, 'How the pandemic will change universities' (*The Straits Times*, 22 June 2020) <<https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/how-the-pandemic-will-change-universities>> accessed 28 June 2020.

If indeed the world will never be the same again, we should seriously consider how we can best remake our educational systems, to produce better learning outcomes for our students. And one way to do this is to consider how we can improve our traditional modes of teaching through incorporating online teaching norms and modes.