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FROM CLASSROOM TO ONLINE: EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Introduction

The almost overnight switch to remote teaching and learning has revealed numerous challenges for both teachers and students alike. Advances in technology have without a doubt been shaping education over the past several years, specifically teaching and learning. The complexity of online tools and digital pedagogy has accelerated in a brief period. Distance learning, online learning and teaching and online classes seem to have come to stay and will play a significant role in education politics in many countries for years to come.

This article looks at what happened during the pandemic lockdown, when most courses, if not all, were recommended to be held online. It presents the writer's experiences and thoughts as a facilitator in online teaching along with students' experiences. Remote teaching and learning are not new phenomena. However, the global lockdown, which enforced social distancing and forbade gatherings of more than 50 people at the beginning of the pandemic, and later 10 people, reshaped and confirmed remote education as an important feature of teaching and learning in the future. The seriousness and the devastating effect of the COVID19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, enforcing the move to online teaching and learning aka. online classes through various platforms offered by technological giants.

Defining the concepts

A review of the definitions of the various forms of learning that incorporate technologically enhanced learning, namely distance education, blended learning, and online education, will start the discussion. Distance education used to be defined as a studying method where lectures are either broadcast, or lessons are conducted by correspondence. This form of education has been around for decades (Spector, Merrill, Merrienboer & Driscoll 2008). However, current educational trends have seen their transformation with technology.

Currently, distance education has taken several forms as a result of the constant use of technology. The design of courses might take into consideration the use of technology, learning environment be it physical or virtual. The learning materials and activities are otherwise shared by technological means. When it requires students to participate either virtually or physically in traditional brick-and-mortar campuses it is known as blended or hybrid courses. (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Terence., Ahern, Shana, Shaw, & Liu 2006.) It is also called distance learning, e-learning, and online learning (O'Dowd 2012). These forms include the physical separation of teachers and learners / students during instruction, and the use of various technologies to facilitate learning, and to mediate communication among students, and between students and teachers. (See figure 1 below). Distance learning may be synchronous or asynchronous.

	Asynchronous	Synchronous
Real-world learning environment	e.g., library TUNI Moodle Distance learning	e.g., school classroom with a teacher e-learning, online learning
Virtual learning	DigiCampus, TUNI Moodle, e-learning	Online learning e.g., TEAMS, Zoom breakout room,

FIGURE 1. Online or Distance ped-matrix

The synchronous online course creates direct and instant interaction between teachers and students. On the other hand, asynchronous online courses allow the student to complete the course at his/her own pace within a period. (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw & Liu 2006.) While these learning and teaching concepts have several elements in common, one may misconstrue the differences to be similarities.

According to Zemsky & Massy 2004 (in Tallent-Runnels, et al. 2006) any form of learning and teaching that uses technology as a medium may be described as E-learning. Online learning, also known as eLearning, can take place in a traditional classroom environment where the learner and the teacher work together in the same space, using digital materials designed to promote learning, via the Moodle online learning platform. Distance learning also allows students to work online at their various locations, while the teacher assigns tasks, monitors learners' progress, and gives feedback to learners, using the Moodle platform as the means of communication. Online classes, however, is the direct transformation of traditional classroom teaching and learning into virtual classrooms with the help of Zoom and Teams.

Background

Courses taught during autumn 2020 are the main source of analytical information for this article. The courses range from speaking-dominated courses, "The Art of Public speaking," to writing-dominated courses like academic and scientific writing courses. Each of these courses was originally designed to be implemented in a traditional classroom environment. The total number of students enrolled in The Art of Public Speaking course was 17-degree students from different study fields at Tampere Universities. The background of these students was culturally diverse. It was a multi-national

group with students from 14 different countries, namely, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Russia (3), Brazil (2), Albania, Nigeria, Japan, China, India, Finland, Hungary, Tunisia, Austria, Italy, and Lithuania. All but 5 students were in their home countries of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria, Albania, Tunisia, and Lithuania. Furthermore, the group comprised both regular degree students and exchange students enrolled at each of the three major campuses, studying in different fields.

Similarly, Academic English, Academic Communication, and Basics of Report have similar demographics, making them very multinational and culturally diverse. The students have varying experiences of online teaching and learning. Class sizes varied from course to course, which seems to have had a significant impact on class management and student experiences.

There were two main platforms recommended by TAMK for synchronous teaching, i.e, online classes, namely Zoom and Teams, while TUNI-Moodle was used for asynchronous communication, for sharing information and study materials. Zoom was chosen for synchronous communication because of its flexibility and user-friendly features. The use of breakout rooms, for example, facilitates and enhances group discussion, allowing each group member to engage in activities that promote oral interaction and learning. The Moodle platform was used traditionally – to share information and course materials and for students to submit course assignments.

Schedule, methods, activities

The timetable stretched from 8.00–17.00 and students who joined from distant geographical locations were affected by different time zones. A two-hour lesson was divided into smaller sessions: Introduction to the subject -> activity or discussion in breakout rooms -> feedback session. If the class size was 20 or fewer, students were encouraged

to turn on their cameras to improve participation. During breakout room sessions, most group members used their cameras. Active participation, peer and self-evaluation were encouraged to increase student motivation.

A collaborative learning approach was employed to achieve the learning outcomes of the courses. Peer-learning communities were created and facilitated by breakout room activities. Student engagement during the breakout sessions depended on how interesting the topic was and whether students understood what they needed to do. Clear instructions maximized student engagement, allowing every participant to contribute to the lesson by sharing their knowledge on specific topics and giving feedback to their peers.

Breakout rooms also enable teacher-student interactions. Some students felt more relaxed and comfortable in smaller groups, with an accompanying boost to their self-confidence which led them to interact more. This approach defined the role of the teacher as a facilitator (Hootstein 2002). Students received instant feedback (IPF) from their peers, and also from the teacher whenever necessary. It became apparent that students enjoyed using the breakout rooms when instructions were understood in both written and oral forms. This also encouraged more interaction with each other and felt their opinions counted.

The activities for the breakout rooms must be designed and instructed accordingly to have a positive impact on learning. Activities included short individual presentations, brainstorming activities, group assignments etc. These activities promote interaction and engagement. Instant Peer Feedback (IPF) is mandatory in some breakout room activities. IPF encourages students to practice both oral and written feedback. Although, in some instances where a student is not fluent in English, writing IPF in a language other than English improves giving IPF.

Reflection

Reflecting on the overall experience of having run an entire course as an online-only implementation, I have come to realise that online classes cannot be equated to physical classroom teaching. The role of the teacher in facilitating online learning is crucial. The teacher's role, however, transcends beyond being a teacher or a learning facilitator. An essential part of the job is deemed to be an IT (Information Technology) expert, who ensures all the technical problems are solved simultaneously with pedagogical ones (Hootstein 2002). Compton (2009, 77) shares the view that the teacher's role online is to promote community-building skills and foster a collaborative learning environment. These roles played out seamlessly during online sessions and contributed immensely to achieving the learning outcomes.

Constant challenging situations emerge several times during the online classes. Likely, even the most experienced teacher, with substantial experience in online pedagogy may face some level of challenges, on both legal and pedagogical fronts. On the legal front, a teacher may have to deal with GDPR issues. For example, demanding and enforcing the use of video cameras during online classes has been facing constant opposition from a minority of students in every group, knowing that using cameras forces participants to pay attention to the lesson. It also helps the teacher to observe the non-verbal communication of students to assess their understanding of the subject being discussed – just like in a traditional classroom.

Written instruction for breakout activities has proven to be more effective in online classes to purport students who remember by reading. Lessons should be planned. Improvisation in online teaching can in many cases reduce the effectiveness of the teaching activity. Where non-verbal communication is out of the question, providing clear written instructions is the key to success. Oral instructions

are not enough to ensure understanding for all students. The use of video cameras to show the faces of the teacher and participants increases non-verbal communication and is thus likely to improve students' understanding of the ongoing class activity. This in turn may contribute to overcoming frustration on the part of the student and may facilitate online class management. The use of video cameras in breakout room sessions demonstrably improved the effectiveness of the group activity.

The importance of student experience during these online classes cannot be overemphasized, bearing in mind that the groups are heterogeneous, with different learning styles and attitudes, making their experiences of online learning varied. Most of the students had expressed sincere firsthand experience with synchronous learning with an all-through live video feed that gave the feeling of being in a physical classroom, which seems to be fading away gradually in subsequent online classes.

Although e-learning, distance learning, or online learning is not a new phenomenon, the mass deployment of online teaching and learning created a new learning environment. Homes have not been designed primarily as learning environments; however, the current situation makes them so. The positive side is that home is a familiar environment that feels relaxing and safe for the learner. This description is not entirely applicable to all learners.

While some learners had set up study places or rooms in their homes and prepared themselves for the online synchronous Zoom meetings by dressing smartly and setting up their computers on desks ready for a lesson, others prepared for the lesson in a more casual, relaxed manner. The classroom is the kitchen table, the living room sofa, or sometimes the bedroom, where the bed is the desk. In some cases, students join Zoom meetings by phone while driving to or from work, while walking, or jogging in the park. For these students, dressing

up is out of the question and therefore they are not prepared to show their faces in a video. In another scenario, children might be running around, or the spouse might be engaging in household chores etc. Thus, the home as a learning environment takes a wide variety of forms.

A frequent task for online teachers is helping students to solve their connectivity problems. Connectivity issues start with getting the right link to the platform to getting the microphone and video camera to work. Such problems always arise during the very first online session but are not limited to the first meeting. It is usually not a time-consuming problem if the size of the group is not more than 20 students. After using the platform for a while, teachers become adept at solving problems with the audio and video tools so long as students have network connectivity. However, issues during the lesson itself more often relate to background noise due to unmuted mics. By default, the teacher can mute students and activate their mics when oral interaction is called for. Experienced students can take control of their mics without interrupting the lesson.

The ultimate effectiveness of a lesson and the course depends on the initial rules set at the beginning of the course to promote a conducive online presence that supports student engagement both at the preparation stage and during the lesson itself. How well the learning outcomes of a lesson are achieved depends on several factors, ranging from course planning to lesson implementation, the role the teacher plays to the part the student plays in their learning process.

Teachers, too, have varied experiences of online education. The pressure to create an effective learning environment with tools available weighs down on all. Teachers with some form of online teaching experience approach online teaching with a unique perspective than others. For online novices and experienced online

teachers alike, ensuring decent quality video/ audio transmission is a high priority, to make sure that the lesson is understood correctly by students. This is a pre-requisite to defining engagement in online classes

Student-teacher engagement during the lesson is key to a successful lesson. Student interaction takes place in different forms in online sessions. While audio is the default means of engagement some tend to interact via chat rather than engaging orally. This communication tool is not the most effective as the messages typed in chat boxes are easily overlooked when people are speaking. This is because the teacher performs several duties simultaneously and can only attend the chat later during the lesson. On the other hand, using the chat allows multiple students to ask at the same time.

Take home

The experience from the past year leads to several unanswered questions about the new norm of holding and participating in online lessons. Some teachers and students are looking forward to returning to the traditional physical learning environment, while others are optimistic about being able to continue learning and teaching online. Irrespective of which side you are on, we are all looking for an answer to this question: what will teaching and learning look like after the pandemic? Is this transformation of the traditional physical classroom into a virtual classroom going to be permanent? Are the several extra hours spent on Zoom daily becoming normal? What about the struggle over GDPR? – Does using cameras infringe privacy rights or should it be enforced? How do we ensure inclusiveness, to satisfy all types of learners? The list goes on and on. Answers to these questions are varied with no shared consensus. One thing is certain, online classes have come to stay. There is a fervent need to engage in active dialogue to share experiences and best practices that will facilitate online teaching and learning in the years to come.

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