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Lessons learned from the covid-19 pandemic: a teacher's experience at TAMK

Online teaching and learning have been seen by many as the future of Higher Education, as digitalisation has accelerated simultaneously with online pedagogy. However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 put these predictions and assumptions to a severe test. Were teachers prepared for the accelerated effect of the pandemic on online teaching? Were students ready to have entire courses run online, with no opportunity for face-to-face contact with teachers or peers? These questions could probably have multiple answers depending on different teachers' personal experiences. This article draws on my own experience as a teacher, and the lessons I have personally learned from preparing and executing lesson plans in online mode throughout the period when classroom teaching was restricted by official measures intended to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has consumed the world since it began in December 2019, with no end in sight at the time of writing. In an attempt to contain the virus, unprecedented social distancing measures have been imposed all over the world, resulting in mass teleworking, including online teaching and learning for Higher Education Institutions (HEI). These measures have impacted the learning of over 1.6 billion people worldwide, as most face-to-face classes have been subject to restrictions or total bans. (UNESCO 2020.) Such dramatic changes have intimidated many teachers, who had already planned their lessons for in-person teaching, and were unprepared for the new demands placed on them (Petzold 2020). Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for HEI worldwide (Salmela-Aro, Upadyaya, Vinni-Laakso & Hietajärvi 2021).

The effect of the pandemic on education has been widely discussed in published articles, newspapers and on social media platforms. Students, parents, teachers and administrators have openly discussed their feelings and shared personal experiences with online groups in WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat etc. Meanwhile, academics and researchers are also actively researching and writing articles about the ongoing pandemic. In the first wave of publications, the effects of the lockdown measures were deemed positive, as the studies focused on their success in curtailing the spread of the virus. However, with the prolongation of the pandemic, longer-term effects are emerging. As Jandrić (2020) argues, “... academics have a unique opportunity, and a moral duty, to immediately start conducting in-depth studies of current events.”

It is fair to say that there is adequate information about the effects of the pandemic on teaching and learning. This article, however, does not directly address the effects of the pandemic on HEI, but rather it focuses on lessons learned from it from a teacher’s viewpoint, taking into account experiences shared by close colleagues and students, and supported by existing research. While this is not a strictly scientific approach, it accurately presents teachers’ experiences of converting in-person teaching to online teaching. The writer’s experiences and those of close colleagues in adapting face-to-face teaching plans for online-only delivery, and thereafter managing the online classes provide the basis for this article. Some input has also been provided by feedback from students. The purpose of writing is to activate dialogue on the subject.

Current situation

Adequate research has been done on how the actions taken to mitigate the spread of the Covid-19 virus have impacted learners. Different studies have focused on indicators such as learners’ stress levels, anxiety, and mental health, among other issues (UNESCO 2020). The pandemic has affected all sectors of HE and has created confusion and stress for teachers and learners alike. Governmental and institutional level guidelines have governed and guided teaching and learning activities throughout the pandemic to date. The confusion stems from the fact that these guidelines change periodically. Throughout the pandemic, the guidelines have changed every X weeks, depending on the current number of infections,

the rate of infection, and the overall severity of reported symptoms. At TAMK, restrictions have ranged from a total ban on classroom teaching and face-to-face meetings to full online teaching. The guidelines are updated periodically in line with national COVID-19 restrictions. (TUNI Intra 2022.)

While some courses are by their nature easier to move online than others, all online teaching requires the teacher to have special digital and pedagogical skills. All things being equal, IT and telecommunication systems in Finland provide very generous connectivity, making online teaching and learning a possibility for all. However, there are other challenges that teachers face. These challenges include knowledge of and familiarity with digital tools, higher levels of digital competency, and proficiency in recreating teaching plans for delivery via an online teaching platform (Gillett-Swan 2017).

The current COVID-19 teaching and learning guidelines (January 2022) allow teaching to be delivered remotely except for essential in-person classes. These guidelines will remain in force until the end of February 2022, when the authorities will reassess the situation and possibly update the rules. (TAMK Intra 2022.) If the severity of the pandemic eases to some extent, hybrid and blended learning modes may be recommended in place of online-only delivery. As Graham (2005) asserts, blended learning allows faculty to integrate the better features of both distance and in-person teaching.

Lesson learned

There are several ways one can present the lessons learned from experiencing the pandemic as a teacher. First, being familiar with the tools and having the skill to design online lessons have not on their own solved all the problems that many teachers are facing today. Digital meeting platforms such as ZOOM and TEAMS have provided conducive environments for online teaching, in addition to other collaborative online tools that facilitate delivery and learning.

While teachers have learned to use some of the available digital tools, there are still concerns about the impact online teaching is having on students in the long term, with some evidence suggesting that pre-existing

learning difficulties may be exacerbated for some students. A report on the pandemic by the OECD (2020) reveals that marginalised students have been disproportionately affected by online teaching, as they are prone to face additional barriers as a result of COVID-related restrictions. Even at TAMK, some students do not have access to a computer or a fast internet connection.

The use of digital tools has increased among teachers during the past two years. In research conducted by Research for Action (2020) about teachers' use of digital tools, the results were overwhelming; almost all the teachers who took part in the survey reported using online tools in spring 2020 to carry out various parts of their course implementation. (RFA 2020.) It is essential to note that these tools also play an important role in in-person teaching as well. Common online tools include Google Docs for collaborative writing, TEAMS and ZOOM for synchronous learning among many others. While some teachers started to develop online teaching skills from scratch, others are building on their existing experience with common digital tools to improve the implementation of their online courses. Digital tools are also enabling new online teaching methods. For example in teaching languages, video presentations and podcasts have been used for practising oral skills. New online tools are becoming available. For instance, students can brainstorm ideas for group projects using Trello, Slack, MindMeister, Google Meet, and Flinga.

In addition to technological and pedagogical issues, mundane practicalities also affect the successful roll-out of online education. For many people, working from home was a desirable situation long before the pandemic. For teachers with sufficiently spacious homes and a room they can use as a study, it has been very convenient to teach from home. But the situation is not the same for everyone as there are significant differences in living conditions for different people. Some of our colleagues live in a flat with spouses and children who are all competing for the same space for their meetings, school work, phone calls etc. Such inconveniences cannot be over-emphasised as all teachers need to have a suitable environment for their lessons. Not every teacher has transferred successfully to teaching from home; in many cases, domestic circumstances are not conducive to effective online teaching due to congestion and background noise.

How do we differentiate between work-time and down-time when all activities take place in the same space? There is no significant difference between work and home nowadays. The home environment has now been transformed into a classroom and office. Families with children compete for space, and so the kitchen table, the sofa, the bedrooms have all become multi-functional areas, which family members have to share as co-operatively as possible. These realities are evident in testimonies provided by friends and colleagues. In an article by Petar Jandrić on 7 August 2020, he paraded a collection of testimonies consisting of 81 textual testimonies and 80 workspace photographs submitted by 84 authors from 19 countries that document the experiences of teachers around the world living under Covid-19 restrictions. (Jandrić 2020.) Given that the living space available to many teachers does not allow for comfortable home-working, one can assume that the situation for students is somewhat worse.

Online technologies have developed rapidly to accommodate the increasing online presence of people during the pandemic. Tools specifically for online teaching have also improved, The usage of platforms such as ZOOM and TEAMS have dominated HEI activities as demand for synchronous tools for online sessions has increased. Within a short period, the breakout room feature in ZOOM and TEAMS has become a valuable option to facilitate interaction among students, which can approximate face-to-face small-group work. At the same time, teachers have taken determined steps to develop their proficiency in online pedagogy. How does this translate to effective remote teaching and learning? The answer to this varies. In places with a well developed and reliable technical infrastructure, it is easy to forget that worldwide, this is an exceptional situation. Teachers in economically deprived areas, or geographically remote locations with poor connectivity, face the problem of not having access to a continuous uninterrupted internet connection through mobile subscriptions.

How have the teachers coped? At the beginning of the pandemic, online meeting points were created for teachers to gather to share their experiences and frustrations. Crash courses were organised to train them in designing online courses, which supported the transformation to online teaching. In these forums, good practices were shared, together with new ideas and experiences with useful digital tools.

Could it be right to say that it requires conscious efforts and guidelines to achieve the full benefits of virtual teaching and learning?

Traditional education in a physical classroom enables interactions among students and facilitates student-teacher engagements. Teacher-to-students, student-teacher, and student-student interactions are all possible via online teaching platforms, too. However, in face-to-face sessions, body language and hidden cues help teachers to spot students who exhibit signs of uncertainty and enable them to administer immediate solutions to the situation. This option is largely missing from online scenarios. Instead of people, the online classroom is usually made up of boxes on a screen showing either photos/avatars or simply the participant's name. Rarely does an online lesson take place as a full video conference, with all the participants visible to the teacher and each other. Typically, video and audio quality start to suffer when a large number of participants have their cameras and microphones on. This means that the full audio-video experience that is normal in the traditional classroom is only possible online when there are only a few participants.

What does student feedback reveal about the success of the Covid-19-induced leap towards online education? Feedback collected from environmental engineering students at TAMK reveals that not all students are having a great experience with online learning. Some students reported being fed up with ZOOM lessons, and that conversations are harder in an online setting than in person. It was also apparent that students are less motivated to participate in breakout room discussions than in face-to-face settings. Their participation depends on the level of motivation and group composition on the one hand, and the relevance of the task on the other. Even when digital teaching tools enable the use of similar methods as in face-to-face teaching, similar outcomes are not always achieved in online lessons. Online education is no one-size-fits-all solution, as its success depends on a wide range of technological and pedagogical factors, as well as the content being taught (Orlando & Arttard 2015, 119).

Planning online lessons to replicate in-person teaching is not always easy because the circumstances are not the same. The use of breakout rooms for small group interaction among students requires taking into consideration

the size and composition of the group; whether it is a single-nationality group or a heterogeneous multi-national one; whether the students are all from the same discipline or a range of different ones; whether the participants are all from the same age-group or not.

Tips for using breakout rooms:

- Plan the lesson to include both oral and written instructions that the students can access instantly.
- Plan the breakout room activities to include warm-up sessions which give the group adequate time to get into the mood, bearing in mind the objectives of the activity and the level of difficulty. This allows the students to refresh their knowledge of the group composition and also prepare themselves to engage.
- If possible, encourage students to keep their cameras on in breakout rooms. Seeing each other in real-time video facilitates interaction and engagement.

Conclusion

The lessons learned from the pandemic from a teacher's viewpoint vary considerably, as different teachers have variable access to enabling technology and online teaching tools, various levels of proficiency and experience in online pedagogy, and very uneven facilities for working online from home. However, most teachers have learned to use online technology and digital tools, which can also be used to improve learning in in-person teaching. Finding suitable working space during the pandemic has been a huge challenge for many teachers, as for all kinds of workers who have been required by Covid-19 restrictions to stay away from their workplaces. Emotional and mental support is also needed for teachers to cope with the complexities of the situation. Further work is needed. It would be highly desirable for TAMK teaching staff to document their own experiences and the lessons they have learned to create a body of testimony for post-pandemic colleagues to draw on.

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