Shortening the Learning Curve for Learners and Educators: Solutions in the Times of COVID-19

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Out of chaos, new life emerges.
The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

1 The Context and the Solutions

I teach General Education Studies courses at a medium-sized university in Canada. Prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, all campus programs there already used Moodle as a platform for the online portion of their face-to-face campus courses. Resources, instructions, assignments, and the syllabus are housed in the online Moodle course site for access between weekly face-to-face class sessions. When the COVID-19 shutdown moved our classes fully online in March 2020, both the instructors and students had already been using Moodle to use these online resources between classes. It was, therefore, a relatively smooth transition to full online with remote synchronous delivery (RSD) via Zoom video conferencing class sessions.

Professors like me also introduced extra online applications to engage students more effectively and to improve their attendance. Zoom was used as a video conferencing platform to continue weekly face-to-face sessions with students. MS Teams was implemented to enhance communications with students and group work, and Kahoot! and other apps were used for quizzes to check and review learning.

As we began the transition, faculty participated in professional development workshops before the start of the new semester in April 2020 to prepare for the new methods of delivery. The start of new classes after the COVID-19 shutdown in

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March was delayed by 1 week until April 13 to give the faculty time to adapt their delivery methods and activities. During that period, constant communications and sharing among faculty took place. That feeling of support eased the stress levels that everybody experienced at the time.

However, there were adaptations to be made as we moved to our online virtual classrooms. By using Zoom for classes via video conferencing, the students were able to interact with their professor and classmates face-to-face online – to give presentations, to have discussions and debates, and to practice skills in breakout room small group activities. The breakout room feature is highly effective for learner-centered activities in the virtual classroom. The professor divides the class into small groups of three to five students. Each group works together in a breakout room to complete an activity or task for a given time and then return to the main room to discuss their findings and questions. The professor can visit each "breakout room" to observe and assist the group's interaction. Groups can then share and discuss their PowerPoint slides or documents while presenting to the whole class. Adding visual presentations is a very important element in better understanding the material. Videos and Ted Talks related to the discussion and topics are also shared in the virtual class.

The virtual classroom also has a whiteboard where students can write comments and brainstorm while working together. These sessions can also be recorded and posted in the online portion of the course in Moodle for students that have missed important items. Professors that have used both face-to-face virtual sessions in Zoom combined with the asynchronous learning activities online in Moodle have found that the students were more informed and participated more.

Another frequently used addition to our virtual classes was the use of MS Teams, which helps students to engage in online discussions, schedule group meetings, and share files for their group projects.

Kahoot!, another fun online application, helps instructors design their own quizzes or use an existing database and choose questions for review from it. Students engage in the game-like format of the Kahoot! quiz via their mobile phones. The quiz is timed and competitive but tests the understanding of the material and has a reporting system that shows the most difficult questions that each student is not able to answer. It is a valuable feedback tool for both the instructor and the students.

Before the COVID-19 closures, students in on-campus courses were encouraged to participate actively during class through doing research and critical thinking and discussion, presenting individually or in groups, explaining in their own words, and providing examples using PowerPoint slides for visual presentations. Now with the online synchronous sessions via Zoom, it was even more important than before to engage students as active participants in their own learning experience.

I find that the use of visuals in presentations is very important for both on-campus and online sessions as this generation is used to social media and visual stimulation. Both instructors and students are moving away from the traditional style of teacher-delivered lectures and getting students more involved. To set up the virtual sessions in a more positive and engaging tone, instructors like me also use warm-up activities or icebreakers for the first few minutes of class while attendance is being taken and students are joining.

The following are a few examples of warm-up activities that my students enjoyed:

- *The Scavenger Hunt:* I use this activity during the first week of the term. It consists of ten questions to be answered within 15 minutes. The questions are geared toward exploring and finding answers related to the course material and tools available in the asynchronous portion of the course online in Moodle. If it is during the Zoom class session, I send students to the breakout rooms, and they work together in groups of four to five students. After 15 minutes, they return and share their answers about their explorations of online activities and resources. If it is to be done asynchronously in the online course, I post the scavenger hunt activity in the online forums, and each student posts their answers replying to the main post.
- *Creative Warm-Up Activity:* This is an activity that everybody enjoys. Many of my past students still do this activity whenever they feel stressed out or have an upcoming exam or major assignment. The purpose is to balance left and right brain thinking and to empower focus and creativity. The activity is in three parts. Three pieces of paper plus two colored pens, pencils, or crayons or markers are needed. I usually show students a YouTube video demonstrating how to do each part. The video is paused after each part, giving them a chance to practice it. After they finish the three parts, they share their reflections on how they felt before and after the activity. Each student posts their drawings from the three parts in their class forums online. Once they practice the activity with paper and pens, they can do the activity anywhere and at any time by doing the tracing with their fingers on any surface. This has the same effect. It is basically calibrating and unifying the right and left brain through dual-handed drawing or tracing. Here is the YouTube video: https://youtu.be/y7ETuec0n4Y (The Joy Spring, n.d.)
- *Riddles and Problem-Solving:* The students always enjoy solving riddles and problems. Here is an example of one from TED-Ed: https://youtu.be/3viZhIumUNo (Gendler, 2018)

Another point worth noting is that in challenging times like these, the well-being of both faculty and students is very important. Our university runs workshops for both on a regular basis. I have presented and facilitated well-received wellness workshops for faculty, staff, and students – "Are You Living a Well-Balanced Life?" https://youtu.be/hc8qGleyvGo (El-Tobgy, 2020).

2 Discussion

2.1 Disadvantages of Using Technology (Gorenko, 2020)

We experienced many of the typical disadvantages of being confined to delivery via technology – the availability of suitable equipment such as laptops and iPads with working video cameras, microphones, speakers, and reliable and affordable Wi-Fi service. As well, students can easily get distracted by "home activities" that are

going in the same room or nearby during their online sessions. Instructors also need to spend more time preparing extra material and activities for online sessions to encourage more participation (Gorenko, 2020).

2.2 Advantages of Using Technology

At the same time, students and instructors alike benefit from the advantages of technology-enhanced learning (TEL). The use of the latest progressive educational tools for delivery engages students and encourages them to actively participate in their learning experience. As well, students can access classes regardless of their physical locations. They can continue their studies without delay and spend less time in commuting and more time in research and study. Conducting online research is more feasible. Collaborating with classmates in group projects, discussions, and debates is easy. Online quizzes and exams seem to reduce the opportunities for cheating (Gorenko, 2020).

2.3 Experiences at Other Educational Institutions

In contrast to our university, Mohmmed (2020) describes the difficulties that another postsecondary institution has experienced in transitioning to online delivery during these critical times. They noted:

> The abrupt migration to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has created an extreme disruption for the students, educators, and managing staff. This disruption emerged and extended to their normal lives outside the academic institutions and university. Therefore, the entire shifting process to the ERT must be conducted with consideration that this move toward continuity of education might not be a priority to the involved stakeholders. Asynchronous activities are more rational than synchronous as it provides an ancillary opportunity to the students who failed to attend the immediate sessions. Furthermore, it facilitates flexibility for assignments due dates within modules and department policies. (Mohmmed, 2020, p. 10)

Another contrast to our university experience was in Brunei where some instructors found themselves struggling to learn about and adapt to online teaching at the same time as they were trying to help their students. Dr. Malai Zeiti Sheikh Abdul Hamid, an assistant professor at UTB, noted that the lack of engagement and face-to-face emotional support, which hampered motivation, as well as the lack of practical activities, were challenging (Noorashid, 2020).

On the other hand, like our university in Canada, a case analysis of Peking University's online education (Bao, 2020) focuses on solutions that made their transition from on-campus to online delivery effective. The paper published by Wei Bao, who is an associate professor there, explained that they came up with these five

principles of high-impact teaching practice to effectively deliver large-scale online education (Bao, 2020):

1) First, the principle of appropriate relevance. The quantity, difficulty, and length of teaching content should match with the academic readiness and online learning behavior characteristics of students.

2) Second, the principle of effective delivery. Due to student characteristics of low concentration in online learning, it is essential to adjust the teaching speed to ensure the effective delivery of teaching information.

3) Third, the principle of sufficient support. Faculty and teaching assistants need to provide students with timely feedback, including online video tutoring and email guidance after class.

4) Fourth, the principle of high-quality participation. It is necessary to adopt some measures to improve the degree and depth of students' class participation.

5) Last, the principle of contingency plan preparation. In view of the extraordinarily large scale of online education, it is necessary to make contingency plans for addressing possible problems such as the traffic overload issue of the online education platform.

6) Furthermore, since this online teaching "migration" was implemented quickly during the outbreak of COVID-19, students' anxiety needs to be relieved in various ways to ensure that they can actively and effectively engage in online learning (Bao, 2020, p. 115)

At our university in Canada, like Peking University, we were able to go through a smoother transition than other educational institutions because courses were already partly based on an online model – principles one and five. An online course site in Moodle was already used as the standard platform of delivery for the use of an online syllabus, resources, assignments, and grades and feedback. Both instructors and students were already partly familiar with technology use. To support and engage students, we did have to learn to use extra tools and the virtual classroom (Zoom), as well as developing and adapting teaching activities implemented to enhance the online learning experience – principles 1, 2, 3, and 4. We also recognized the need to support student, faculty, and staff emotional needs and provided wellness activities and support – principle 6. Therefore, we had a shorter learning curve than other learning organizations because of our previous online experience, preparation and early adaptation of teaching/learning activities and technologies, and support of student and faculty emotional needs. These were the educational advantages that shortened our learning curve.

2.4   Experiences of Our Students

As for our students, these are some of their experiences and feedback taken (with their permission) from their course writings during the COVID-19 lockdown. They, too, express the positives and negatives of these times. They also reflect many of the factors that I have already discussed in relation to the adoption of technology and adaptations in teaching and learning that have shortened our learning curve during this time:

COVID has been a whirlwind of emotions throughout 2020. My household is no different. The negative impacts being that my kids lost the ability to be able to socialize with their friends after school. Both my kids much like myself are very social beings. Thank-fully this

pandemic has helped teach my children how to better communicate in our home and better ways to do things as a family besides movie nights. We play board games and discuss our day in much more detail. With how COVID-19 has affected our mental health we have also started "name two positive things about your day" evenings as well. I felt his would be good so my kids could try to focus on the good more than the bad. – Student A

As a coin has two faces, so is COVID-19. Throughout the pandemic I have gone through good and bad experiences. The good thing that I have experienced is that nature got a chance to renew itself. During the pandemic time pollution has been reduced and road accidents have also been reduced. I also learned a lot of things to do during this time like value of hygiene, cooking, overcoming my weak points. Normally my family does not have enough time to spend together because of jobs at different time frame, but during pandemic we spend a lot of quality time together. On the other side I also have experienced a lot of negative things. I lost my job due to this pandemic. At that time, I suffered financially. I went through depression and frustration when the man living next to me was found corona positive. I was too scared at that time. – Student B

I would like to describe my experience of Covid 19. I have experienced, some positive and negative things during this pandemic. If we talk about the positive side, earlier I used to work for a security company for which I got paid 14 dollars per hour but due to this pandemic I am working under essential services for 6-7 months and now my pay is almost 20-22 dollars per hour which is a really good as I can pay my tuition fee, my rent and other expenses, which I used to find difficult to pay earlier. Another thing that I find positive, is that rather than going to school I can attend my classes while sitting at home. On the other hand, if we talk about the negative stuff, I can say that I had plans to go back home to spend my vacations this month after the semester but due to Covid19 I cannot go back home until everything gets back to normal. – Student C

This pandemic has affected everyone's life to a great extent and has changed many things in everybody's life. For me, this pandemic brought many positive and negative changes. In so many years of my life I never have spent such a long time with my loved ones. I developed a great habit of regular prayer and regular exercise which proved very beneficial to my soul and body. I learnt a very good skill of cooking which is very advantageous as I will be settling in a new country and cooking is a must skill required. Daily life had stopped, and everything came to a standstill. This resulted in a stop of my further studies, my coming to Canada was delayed, I could not enjoy the second year of my college. I could not meet people and go to any place due to restrictions. – Student D

Every crisis has many positive and negative aspects. The Corona crisis, despite its negative effects, also created many positive points in the world. I had a lot of experience during the COVID-19 period. I got it early in the outbreak and went through a difficult time, especially when I was away from my children for a long time. Thank God I recovered. My wife was forced to work because of the illness and losing my job. We decided to stay at our house for a long-time quarantine. Positive experience: I bought a 3500-piece Eiffel Tower puzzle and started making the puzzle with my boys, it took 15 days to finish it with my boys. it was a very good and experience for us, we spent hours together to make the puzzle and away from the COVID-19 problems. I enjoyed being with my sons and experienced their happiness. – Student E

This covid-19 pandemic impacted me in many ways. The education system has changed totally from on-campus to online, as a student I am saving my travel time and I can spend this time to learn new things, and better prepare for my assignments. I was not a health-

conscious person before, but now my entire life changed practicing better hygiene, and eating healthy. It also affects me in negative ways, as I cannot enjoy going out with my friends. I am getting bored staying home which resulted in increased stress. It is becoming more difficult to get new ideas and meeting new people. Most seriously, it disturbed the celebration of cultural, religious, and festive events. – Student F

The current situation put the world on pause, but this pause gave me time to reflect on troubling matters. During this time, I want to encourage us to see this case as a unique time to explore how social distance can impact the mental health of people over a long period of time and with drastic results because of the severity of the current problem. One parallel that can be made between our present constraints and mental illness reminds me of the culture of hikikomori. Hikikomori is not a psychiatric illness, but a symptom of a disorder that may occur. People engaged in hikikomori remain confined for a prolonged period, often for several years, in their homes and often in their quarters. A severe form of withdrawal from community and self-isolation is this behavior of voluntary confinement. Maybe the world needed a time-out to remember how to appreciate what it had but forgot to experience. Life is to be lived through experience, not to be used as a pastime to observe and compare oneself with others. I'll leave you with a simple reminder: never forget to take care and love more because in a world where life is often unpredictable and ever changing, one cannot risk taking time or loved ones for granted. With that, like all else, this too shall pass, now go live your best life! – Student G

3 Conclusion

Throughout history when major events have taken place – either natural disasters or wars or revolutions or financial crisis or pandemics – new global political, economic, and societal changes have occurred. New inventions and new industries evolved after such global chaos. "Out of chaos, new life emerges" (ancient-origins, 2019). We have found that it is important to accept and embrace global change as a learning opportunity. This is the Phoenix myth of continual change and renewal. The Phoenix represents the idea that the end is only the beginning. Much like this powerful myth, the symbol of the Phoenix will be reborn repeatedly in human learning, just as our learning experiences during COVID-19 have been spurred on and renewed by early adoption and adaptation of technology and online teaching and learning during these critical times.

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