

## **Shift to Online vs Classroom Instruction**

As teachers we have become accustomed to the classroom environment where the teacher is in front of a classroom of students. This was the norm for hundreds of years and had established itself as “the way it is done”. We have seen a sudden departure from this normal way of doing things in the last two years because of COVID-19.

Normally when there is a shift in the established way of working there is a gradual change in processes and methods allowing for adjustments and corrections along the way. Not so this time. The paradigm shift was shoved upon us with little time to adapt and overcome. In this article I will discuss some of my observations on how we, as instructors, were impacted.

### **Facing the challenge**

First, the change in the way we worked was something that had been discussed for years as the way teaching may “someday” become. Everyone had seen in science fiction stories the shift to teaching via computers and students only interacting with their teachers through the screen. But the shift did not take decades as most thought it would, but occurred in a period of weeks and months. This rapid change did not allow for some of the things that would make the transition easier, like training and material acquisition and, possibly most important, mental readjustment.

We found ourselves suddenly required to remain at home and still provide classes to the students. We were told to use the resources we had if possible and provided with instructions on how to access the online instruction programs, both Blackboard and Panopto. These programs were used at the university in the classroom, but not to the extent we were now being asked to use them. We hurriedly reacquainted ourselves with the way these programs worked in the hope we could use them successfully.

Many of us found ourselves using what to some was a new concept, VPN (Virtual Private Network) and setting it up on our personal computers for the first time. It took me a few phone calls to the service desk, but finally worked it out. Once I had Blackboard and Panopto running and had everything set up with the VPN, I felt I was ready to conquer the new learning environment. I had a plan.

Dwight D. Eisenhower and Winston Churchill both had ideas about plans. Churchill said, “Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential,” while Eisenhower said, “Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” And I found both of these great leaders to be right.

### **Planning for the challenge**

We all participated in practice sessions with other instructors to test the programs and our ability to use them. This ‘workshopping’ helped us to iron out many of the wrinkles in the system and helped to boost our confidence in what we would be attempting. After all, it was a new way of doing things and we were very nervous about working in a new way.

During these practice sessions with my coworkers, I found that my laptop that had seen me through a few years of lesson planning, test preparation, research and normal social networking may be lacking the horsepower to perform well in the face of the networking requirements of Blackboard and Panopto. It was time for an upgrade to my system. So, I shopped around and obtained a new system that had all

the power I felt I needed to do what needed to be done and provide my students with a good learning environment. I went through setting up the software on the new computer and prepared for the day of the first lesson to be given.

### **Dealing with the challenge**

All the instructors in my department were in contact with each other and we were all looking forward to that first lesson with trepidation. Many of us were confident that our planning would be sufficient, but a small voice in the back of our heads kept whispering “are you really ready for this?”.

The day of the first on-line lessons arrived and my fellow teachers had lessons before I did, and I started to hear feedback that made me start to doubt. There were unexplained lack of connections, sound and video problems, programs kicking students and teachers alike out of the classroom and some teachers not being able to log on at all. This just elevated my own jitters about what I would soon be facing.

I was at my computer 15 minutes before my first class was to start and started all the required programs and logged on to the class. Then I waited. And I waited. Then my first student logged in, and then a second. Soon I had several students waiting. And they waited. Although I had been speaking, they could not hear me. I had encountered my first on-line problem and it was only my first lesson. That lesson was taught using keyboard input only from me. Not ideal.

After a lot of troubleshooting and working with computer support at the school it was determined that although I had a good computer, somewhere the microphone and the operating system were having a disconnect. Some on-line research and testing brought me to the conclusion that I might not want to use the system microphone, but acquire a separate microphone input. So, I did and that is what I continue to use to this date.

This little story just illustrates that although the whole transition to on-line teaching was rushed and haphazard, we were able to overcome the problem areas and provide the students with a quality education. The learning process has enabled us to adjust our teaching styles and processes and now we approach the on-line classroom with a lot less fear.

### **Students' Experience**

Our students also faced the challenge of adjusting to the on-line teaching concept. I personally feel that it was not as traumatic for them as it was for some of us teachers, because the students of today grew up with technology and take for granted the ability to connect digitally with their peers. The addition of the classroom took something they did for fun with friends and made it into a formal environment where they were expected to follow the rules. Yes, even though they were learning in the comfort of their homes, they still had to follow the rules that had to be imposed to allow for a fair, equitable learning environment.

I have noted a major difference in the motivation of students. I provide instruction to Turkish students in the English language and teach Turkish to our students from other countries. Both classes displayed an eagerness to tackle the new technology and learning environment. However, I noted that the students in my Turkish language classes participate more and seem to have a higher attendance rate. I can only speculate as to the root cause, but get the feeling that the foreign students have a desire to learn and have an immediate, practical use for the skills they learn in the classroom in the society they deal with daily outside of school. Shopping, socializing or even using transportation systems are facilitated with what they pick up in the lessons. Whereas the Turkish students learning English see no immediate use for

the language in their daily lives outside of school. They associate the acquisition of the language as only of use at the school and don't have a great deal of practice or use outside of school. It is not needed for them to function in the Turkish society.

### **Our new tools**

Over the last year and a half of teaching we have seen changes in the way we use the on-line instruction tools. We still use Blackboard and Panopto, but have incorporated other programs and delved deeper into the capabilities of Blackboard to improve and enhance our teaching.

When it came time to give some of the first exams, we were exposed for the first time to another program called Zoom. Most of us had never heard of this ground-breaking software before but found out that it was being embraced by industry and education alike. It allowed for meetings and classrooms to be held with group interaction and visual contact. Again, there was a learning curve and we soon found ourselves using previously unknown terms like "breakout rooms".

We took this new addition to our digital teaching toolbox in stride and soon became proficient in assigning students and invigilators to breakout rooms while also checking ID's and moving from room to room.

We now spend many hours a week in the digital classroom and now consider it the norm. But we still notice and miss some of the benefits of the physical classroom. In a physical classroom we are able to receive instant feedback from the students in the form of body language. When teaching in front of a room full of students you can easily see when you are losing them through confusion or distraction. This allowed you to adjust your teaching as you were going along to keep the learning process going. With digital instruction every student is in their own environment with their own, individual distractions. That is a challenge we face daily now and should look to find a way to overcome.

### **How we have changed**

I have found that I have adjusted my teaching style to fit the new environment and the constraints it puts on the teacher and students. I found that my students were reluctant to speak during the class hour and I attribute this to a less social environment because they are alone in a room instead of in a classroom with the other students. To encourage more student speech, I have reduced the amount that I, as the teacher speak and solicit active feedback from the students more. I have also noted that I have to provide more inflection to my own voice since there is no longer the body language and movement to maintain the student focus and attention on the teacher.

Throughout the past 18 or so months, we have seen vast improvement in all aspects of the on-line teaching experience. We are able to easily set up and conduct classes, sometimes with little or no notice. We are able to adjust to the unexpected. I experienced a power outage in the middle of teaching one time and continued the class with a very short break by quickly switching to using a hotspot on my cellular phone instead of the modem and using a laptop with battery always helps.

There have also been improvements in the way the classes and exams are conducted. We can use our digital resources to reduce the possibility of cheating. Blackboard has incorporated its own method of detecting copying on the part of students and the use of Rubrics in the grading of tests ensures a consistent and equitable grading for the students. This not only makes it easier for the instructor, but is a much fairer system for the students.

### **What we have accomplished**

We have achieved much in the past year and a half. We have taken a hypothetical concept (on-line instruction) to the mainstream as the norm. Although it had been practiced as the exception, on-line teaching was not considered the normal way of doing things and now it is. We were able to accomplish this in a period of months and not years as is the case in most major shifts in work practices. This required the active and willing participation of support staff, academicians and, of course, the students.

Overall, I think that the education world being forced to switch to an on-line teaching paradigm was a good thing. It allowed us to increase the tools we have available for teaching and gives the option to use the on-line system as needed. But I do not think the on-line instruction will replace the classroom anytime in the near future. There will have to be major improvements made to the way students and teachers interact in the on-line world to allow for the freer flow of the verbal and non-verbal communications.

I do think one of the lessons that we as teachers have learned is that we must maintain a certain amount of a positive attitude. This is what allows us to succeed in the transition to new ideas and ways of working. If we had approached this challenge with a negative attitude, we would have surely failed instead of overcoming. The love we all have for teaching and helping our students is what gives us the strength to do this.

I would like to thank my mentor and friend Anita for her help and guidance over the past year. Without her it would have been much more difficult if not impossible.