TEACHING IN PANDEMIC CONDITIONS: A NARRATIVE ABOUT WHAT CHANGES AND WHAT STAYS

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Abstract
The effect of COVID -19 pandemic brought small and large changes in teaching and learning across the globe. In this qualitative narrative study, a reflection has been made on the teaching of a graduate level educational research course, which moved from face-to-face classroom, to a remote synchronous online format due to the pandemic distancing requirements. The instructor reflected via weekly logs about the progress of the course across a semester. To triangulate data online forums, course assessments, and email communications were also looked at. Finally, a comparison was made to past semesters when the same course was offered in both: face-to-face, and online asynchronous format. Comparisons and reflections resulted in commonalities and differences, and also needs for change, which are listed along with educational implications.

Keywords: distance education; online teaching and learning; assessment

Introduction

The year of 2020 will go down in history as a changing year in education (and most likely in all areas of work force). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic situations the entire global education system has moved either into a hybrid format or completely remote online. At all levels of education, from kindergarten to doctoral studies everyone has experienced some sort of disruption, and students and teachers at all levels have used one or more models of teaching and learning

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online. Teachers learn early in their teacher education programs about the importance of knowing your students and creating good rapport with students, which in turn will lead to developing a community of learners (Banks, 2014; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2013; Ormrod & Jones, 2018). When a teacher has succeeded to build a community of learners this will improve the effectiveness of learning, while improving also the results on assessments which were mapped on the student learning outcomes (Brookhart & Nitko, 2014; Howard, 2016; Szabo, 2017). A strong rapport in building a community of learners stands at forefront even more so in online education where the teacher and students can see each other only remotely and often times, on a small screen a small square with a face of the class members.

Instructional decision making is based on the content that is taught, standards that are aimed at, student learning outcomes set forth, and collected assessment data that the instructor can take into account in the instructional decision-making process (Brookhart & Nitko, 2014). However, the context of teaching and learning is also a factor, and is a very important one especially in online instruction. Integration of technology is more than taking a course taught in face-to-face format, in a classroom, and delivering it online (Bitner, & Bitner, 2002; Jefferson & Arnold, 2009; Birgit, Norström, Lena, & Inga-Britt, 2020). Many teachers and their students have experienced in this year of COVID pandemic that online teaching and learning is more than just using Zoom, Google Classroom, or any other learning management system (LMS) as a platform to teach a class. Teachers and their students had to learn and adapt to the new situations, to the context of teaching and learning, and while the time did not allow for much professional development and reading the literature, they were to come up with creative ideas and manage the process in a "hit the ground running" sort of way. Current research literature based on pandemic conditions of this year shows that instructors had to come up with creative ideas to simulate field experiences, and change course in the middle of semester to adapt to the required restrictions, and most of all to learn from experienced technology teachers' teaching practices (Birgit, Norström, Lena, & Inga-Britt, 2020; Schwartz, Szabo, & Mahiko, 2020; Vigil, Marian, & Szabo, 2020). Instructors have experienced in this pandemic turmoil the importance to know well their own skills and limitations, to recognize their online teaching style, and to look at the logical way to use classroom assessment, when they were not sharing anymore the same physical space with their students (Green, 2019; Szabo, 2019; Venter, 2019). Many also experienced

that online teaching cannot be learned overnight, and even experienced online instructors realized that the type of students they have in a face-to-face classroom is different than online learning students, and expectations for a particular context of learning will have a strong effect on the process of online teaching (Vigil, Marian, & Szabo, 2020).

Looking at changes in the online instruction, this qualitative narrative self-study was conducted with the broad research question: What changes and what stays the same in the course materials and process, when a face-to-face course is delivered in a synchronous online distance learning model?

Methods and data analysis

The present qualitative research is a self-narrative study which took place in the fall semester of 2020 pandemic year, and has as focus an educational research graduate level course. This course was taught previously in two separate formats: classroom face-to-face, and fully online in asynchronous format. The same textbook and materials were used in the past in both delivery formats, same course assessments, and for class discussions was used (in both formats) the iLearn learning platform as LMS.

Due to pandemic distancing restrictions in the Fall 2020 semester the course was offered as online synchronous course. Instructor and students were to login virtually in Zoom once per week on Thursday evenings for their two hours and 30 minutes class session, which in past took place in a real classroom. While in the planning I took into account that some activities that were done in a regular classroom will not pertain to Zoom meetings because we would run out of time, I added the weekly forum discussions component (which usually was used for the asynchronous online course). The same assessment methods were used: three short assignments, article critique, and a larger final project proposal completed in teams, which were used as in past semesters (Szabo, 2015b). While in the classroom I used group activities and discussions, I chose in the synchronous format to move the group activities as forum discussions (as I used for the asynchronous format). Quickly I discovered that the new synchronous format seems to be in fact a hybrid between synchronous and asynchronous online teaching, which is a total new way of offering this course. The face-to-face meetings were replaced by virtual Zoom meetings, and classroom activities were transferred to forum discussions. Because this synchronous online format will be

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taught again in the Spring 2021 semester, the need to conduct a self-study was imminent to find out what to keep and what to change when I teach again the synchronous format.

To triangulate the data gathering I kept a weekly log of instructional methods that were working, and what I needed and where I needed to change either in the delivery, or in the assessment process. I compared also discussion forums between the three formats of course delivery: face-to-face, asynchronous, and synchronous. Another comparison was between the quality of assessment performance in the three course formats. Data consisting in course related emails were analyzed as well. In the process of data analysis I compared the quality of discussions, the quality of assessments, the content of communication via emails, and looked for similarities, differences, and patterns in the data that overlap with notes in my weekly logs.

Results and discussions

Discussion forums were used for individual and team forum postings, and students were asked each week to post examples of the research design studied that particular week. This method was used successfully in the asynchronous online course delivery (Szabo, 2015a; Szabo & Schwartz, 2017). Comparison between the use of discussion forums show that in the synchronous format the discussion forums were almost one more addition to the weekly class load. In the asynchronous format discussion forums replaced the class face-to-face meetings. The synchronous format had virtual meetings, of the same length as a regular campus class meeting, but across the week students were supposed also to complete forum discussions. This became an extra burden for students to complete class work across each week. The results were confirmed when looking at the email communication from students. They asked often in the beginning of the semester for deadline extensions. This was reinforced also by notes in my weekly logs confirming that in our virtual meetings students asked for the move of due days to weekend time, or even into the following week Tuesday to allow more time to complete course requirements. Extensions became the rule by mid semester, and then all deadlines were modified to fit the new pattern.

One important note to keep in mind for online teaching instructors is to avoid using the discussion forums as an addition to the virtual weekly meetings, or if they are used, then the forums should be used as platform for group discussions

(similar as we would use a flip chart in the face-to-face class), and the time considered to work on the forums should be counted in the time of the weekly class meetings, to not overburden the students. In this case the virtual weekly meetings should be shortened with the respective time considered as necessary to complete the discussions. In consequence, forums discussions will stay, but time to work on them will be counted as actual virtual class time, not in addition to it.

Comparisons of quality of assessments across the three instructional formats show that students from the synchronous model of instruction, needed more guidance, more time, and a larger number of opportunities for revisions of the research assignments, compared to those in face-to-face and asynchronous formats. This observation correlates to my weekly logs from which results that students were expecting to have weekly lectures and rarely completed the assigned readings before the virtual Zoom meeting. This was an interesting result since even for the face-to-face format, the readings were required to be completed before the class meeting. These results may be particular to this group of students, or may be particular to the situation created by the stress of pandemic where students often were very stressed, overworked, and anxious. As literature shows, the time of assessment and exams are periods of increased stress themselves (Szabo & Marian, 2017), one more reason for requesting deadline extensions. From the email communication with students the most often requests aside of deadline extensions were the emails asking for examples of particular research designs, and examples of the three graded assignments. In consequence, I plan to keep all assignments as they are, but to add particular examples for each studied design, this way students can see a good example of how they should develop the research design example which must be posted to the weekly forums, and in their assignments. Another change, that will be introduced to insure that readings are done before the class meeting, is to use take home quizzes that students need to complete as they do the weekly readings. This will help students to understand better the design which is presented and examples they need to use to create the particular research design which needs to be posted to the weekly forum.

The final project proposal was a team experience where students were asked to develop a mixed-methods project proposal, as if they would write a grant proposal for their school. They were asked to submit three drafts starting early on in the semester. This insured that the final project process was consistent and substantially worked on across the semester, and teams had multiple opportunities to receive feedback from peers and instructor on their proposals. This in turn

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insured good quality final exam projects. Students mentioned in our last virtual meeting how much they appreciate that they had the opportunity to work on their projects, compared to other courses where the exams time was overloaded with final exam work and stressful. In consequence, the team work process on the final projects will stay as planned since it has been working perfectly in all three course delivery formats. Assessments were well planned, they should all stay.

Conclusions

As it was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, pandemic situation of year 2020 created changes (more of less fortunate) in the education system, course delivery, and student learning process. While some might think that there is not too much of a big difference between a face-to-face and a synchronous online course delivery, it turns out there are quite some adjustments that need to be taken into consideration.

Just because we are seeing our students' faces virtually in real time, as we would in a face-to-face classroom encounter, there are some class activities that cannot be moved totally online and if activities become adapted for online teaching, we must take into account the class time to complete them, and include this time as a virtual class time (seat time), and not as an addition to the class meeting length.

Online meetings despite that they offer the opportunity to virtually seeing each other, they may give the impression to students that they do not have the same responsibilities as when they come in a classroom face-to-face with their instructor. If readings must be done before class time, then it is advised to use some formative assessment measures to insure the readings have been completed.

When an instructional method works in any format (*e.g.*, early work on drafts of the final project proposal), then that method is a keeper!

As a final conclusion, I would add among educational implications, that even a small change in the course delivery (all other things being considered equal), may bring changes that need to be dealt with. Online teaching instructors should be reflective and flexible, always looking at their own practice, keeping or tossing instructional practice pieces, and brining improvements for a next time around course offering.

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