Seeking Effective Pedagogy for Online Learning

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Abstract

Based on the experience of delivering a module on-line to students at a Chinese partner institution during the pandemic lockdown period, this reflection shares the success and lessons of the virtual teaching experience through the lens of a two-week intensive course. It also reflects the feedback received on a conference presentation which provided opportunities for sharing experience and seeking ways to enhance the effectiveness of distance learning. When universities are fast adapting to blended learning, it calls for new pedagogies on effective online teaching practice to be created and generalised to increase the strength of the UKPSF for HE.

Key words: Online learning, active learning, pedagogical design**,** TNE programme

Introduction

This is a reflection on a presentation made on the Business Faculty of University of Greenwich's Teaching and Learning Conference. The presentation was based on a virtual delivery of a module to one of the university's partner universities in China due to the disruption of the Covid-19. Previously this module has been a classroom-based course at partner university in China.

In recent years many universities in the UK have offered online learning in addition to classroom-based learning to provide access to students who require greater flexibility in learning space and time. Academics have played an active role in the design of online courses, but their role to teach and to engage students in these courses is less active (Smith and Smith, 2014). When online teaching is becoming a norm in fighting Covid-19, the passive role of educators in online learning is no longer sustainable and effective pedagogy for online learning need to be developed to ensure the quality of teaching is up to the standards of UK quality code and UKPSF for HE.

This case reveals the process of the design, delivery and evaluation of a two-week block teaching course delivered virtually to a group of 43 students physically located in China. The discussion reflects the success of the practice underpinned by a student-centred and active learning approach (Jones, 2020) as well as the lessons learnt from the new way of teaching triggered by the disruption caused by the Covid-19.

Approach

Although teaching a course entirely online offers opportunities to grow new competence in teaching, it is also very challenging, particularly for TNE programmes where the technology support is outside the loop of what is available within two universities. At the preparation stage, two aspects had been focused on ensure the online delivery would be viable. First, to seek suitable technology for making the lecture recordings and to ensure they are accessible by students in China. Second, to seek effective pedagogy for online learning to ensure engagement between the lecturer and the student group. Whist technology is a much-appreciated tool for teaching and learning, it is not a replacement for teaching. Therefore,

activities to stimulate students' deep learning including peer-led and collaborative learning (Gao, 2020) should be embedded in the online design.

Given that Panopto is only accessible for university's registered students, the students on the module who are studying on a 3+1 programme which jointly provided by the University and Chinese partner university, are yet to be registered at Greenwich. An alternative of using voice over PowerPoint slides has been adopted to record lectures. Later, lectures are recorded via Zoom after the lecturer has been subscribed an account by university.

A few flatforms have been evaluated and Tencent platform was identified as a suitable platform to store teaching materials and facilitate interactions between the lecturer and the students. Zoom has also been used in the later stage of the course in communicating with students.

A three-step principle has been applied in the delivery of the course which consist of pre-class activities, in-class and post-class activities. Before the delivery of each unit, activities/tasks were developed and released on the flatform while uploading the lecture recordings. Pre-class preparedness is critical to students' in-class learning and the overall success in the distance learning (Sun and Xie, 2020), therefore pre-class task aimed to help the students who learn the knowledge in second language to have a better understand of what would be delivered in-class. Peer and group discussions were adopted during in-class teaching. Although Chinese students are commonly characterised as silent learner in classroom learning, the group activities of this course have been very successful given that the course was conducted at the time when China was in lockdown and the students have been away a long time from their university and their classmates. The group activities have provided a good opportunity for them to reunite while learning online. Even though the students were studying other modules with their local lecturers during the same period, there is usually no student interaction required in Chinese classes. Post-class activities were assigned at the end of each class to allow students to check their understanding of knowledge and also allow the lecturer to reflect on the effectiveness of teaching for that unit and to provide additional explanations or make pedagogical adjustment in the following session when necessary.

Outcomes

This course has been successful as demonstrated by the level of student engagement and their end-of-module academic performance. There also has been significant benefits for the lecturer to gain technology-enhanced teaching skills in an entirely virtual environment. There were a few factors that contributed to the success of the online delivery. First, pre-recording and pre-class activities have been effective components in virtual learning as providing opportunities for learner to learn as many times as they wish until they fully understand the knowledge provided in a different language. Second, synchronized interactions via the chosen platform has been effective in ensuring a high quality of teaching and student experience. Third, applying purposefully designed activities has been effective in facilitating learners' cognitive process.

There are also some lessons that have been learnt from this online practice. Student attendance has been monitored by checking their submissions for all activities, however the online submission may not represent the true engagement. To mitigate this problem, organising students into small groups and directing questions to each individual student

have been applied. Furthermore, some students used smartphones for learning, and it was difficult for them to follow some of the more complicated explanations in spreadsheet. Screenshots of excel pages were then uploaded to the platform in order to offset the adverse impact on learning. Finally, one student was found not able to connect internet for live teaching due to the weak connection at home. Learning only from the contents uploaded on the platform would affect the student's learning experience as it lacks engagement with the lecturer and fellow students.

At the end of the module, students were asked about their experience of the online learning. The majority of the students were positive about the course, the feedback included that they enjoyed the group discussion, intensive interactions between lecturer and other students, and that the lecturer helped them to learn by providing immediate feedback. One student said he preferred classroom-based to online learning because there were too many submissions required in online learning.

Reflection on Conference Presentation

Two key points have been discussed following the presentation on faculty's teaching and learning conference. One is the challenge on how to assess students effectively in a virtual environment. Some conference participants pointed out that whilst both formative and summative assessments are approved to be effective in classroom-based learning, however it is difficult to observe students' response to informal participatory assessment in online learning. In a research conducted by Kearns (2012) based on design of 24 modules and interview with eight online module instructors, five categories of assessments emerged including written assignment, online discussion, fieldwork, quizzes and exams, and presentations. Nevertheless, there was a concern about the effective assessment of learners in the online environment.

Another key point raised is about how to build affective relationship with learners in online learning without face-to-face interactions. Affective relationship refers to emotional-based relationships which aims to promote students' motivation, persistence and valuing for learning. Research suggests that a close student and instructor relationship is positively associated with students' academic achievement. According to Baker (2004), prosocial behaviors, such as nonverbal and verbal immediacy, have been able to promote affective and cognitive learning in a virtual environment. One participant also quite rightly pointed out that letting student feel you care about their learning and progress would help to build a positive relationship for learning.

Conclusion

This reflection is based on an online module delivered to a group of Chinese students who were physically located in China. The discussions have been focused on how to achieve effectiveness of online learning. The success and lessons on the design, execute and evaluation of the online module have been shared and suggestions for further improvement have been discussed. Teaching online is new to most university academics. it is a challenge but also an opportunity to gain technological competence via teaching. Undoubtedly, online teaching depends on technology, but technology itself does not mean teaching. New pedagogical design for online teaching needs to be developed to ensure a high quality of teaching and student learning experience.

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