

The Best of Both: Adaptations of Classroom Practices and Lesson Design in the Transition from an Online to an On-Campus Classroom Environment

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the changes I have made to classroom practices and lesson design as I transition from a fully online classroom environment utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic to an on-campus classroom environment. I find that there are several beneficial technologies, particularly online teaching tools, which could be carried over from one learning environment to the other. These elements include the use of the Zoom platform within the classroom, the Blackboard learning management service, and multimedia lesson components. While the use of these tools has sometimes meant changes to my previously established classroom practices, I find that these tools help make my classes more immediately interactive, overcome some practical limitations of a physical classroom, provide additional learning opportunities, and, in some cases, help facilitate measures that might help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Keywords: technology in the classroom, classroom practices, lesson design

Introduction

The role of technology in the classroom has been extensively explored in both academic and popular literature, particularly over the past two decades. The fact that technology is becoming increasingly prevalent both inside and outside of the classroom is undeniable. In particular, the use of Zoom and other similar platforms has proliferated widely over the past year and a half during the global COVID-19 pandemic. As more and more educational institutions transition back to face-to-face classes in the wake of the pandemic, questions emerge regarding what might be adapted from online lessons to benefit face-to-face lessons. In other words, how might the best parts of the virtual learning environment be carried over into the classroom?

I teach at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan in the department of Foreign Language Education and Research. All my classes were online during the 2020 academic year. In 2021, most of the spring semester was online. The classes taught during this period, English discussion, debate, and presentation,¹ were all taught using a combination of Zoom as a classroom environment, e-mail for communication outside of class or virtual office hours,² and Blackboard³ to deliver documents, announcements, and assignment instructions, as well as for students to turn in completed assignments and receive written feedback.

Now, in the fall 2021 academic term, as my university largely returns to face-to-face lessons, and

1 My debate and presentation courses are conducted in English and have the dual purpose of teaching skills relevant to presentation and debate and improving English language proficiency.

2 Conducted on Zoom.

3 Blackboard is an online teaching tool, often referred to as a learning management system, which incorporates many elements. These include the ability to conduct quizzes or tests online; provide announcements, homework assignments, and other documents to students; receive assignment submissions from students and provide the teacher with a means to give feedback on those submissions; and provide grade management tools, among several other features.

as I teach presentation and debate courses, I am reflecting on my attempts to integrate the beneficial components of the online classes, particularly the technologies used during online lessons, with my on-campus lessons. Chief among my concerns in this process has been that the adaptations will benefit the students in clear, definable ways. In short, I have attempted to enhance my existing on-campus lesson designs with technologies that each offer some specific and immediate benefits.

In this study, I shall focus on on-campus integration of the main technologies used to facilitate my online lessons during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, Zoom and Blackboard, as well as multimedia lesson components. As I have discussed previously⁴, the objectives of, and in large part, the basic methodology for, planning and conducting an online class are in close alignment with those of on-campus classes. The primary difference, in the case of online lessons, is the use of technology to overcome the limitations imposed by the literal distance between the students and their teacher and classmates, yet the physical classroom is not perfect; it has its limitations as well. Presently I wish to explore the use of technology, on one hand, to enhance and improve a given class, while on the other, to overcome various limitations of the physical classroom setting.

Discussion

During the first couple of weeks of the Fall 2021 semester, as most courses at the university returned to face-to-face lessons, I taught my classes largely as I had prior to the pandemic. I used the textbooks and whiteboard or chalkboard as my primary in-class teaching tools. This was not ineffective. However, having used a wider variety of technology during online lessons in the pandemic, I had the feeling that something was missing. Many of my colleagues indicated that they were continuing to use the online tools that they had integrated into their classes over the previous few semesters. Even though, in hindsight, this idea was rather straightforward, I had not fully considered the possibility of carrying over a significant portion of class design and methodology from the online lessons.

Now, my on-campus classes mirror my recent online classes in several ways. When my students enter the classroom, I ask that they sign in to Zoom. The students do not turn on their cameras or microphones, but even by simply signing in to zoom, attendance recordkeeping is made easier. This is a not insignificant help in an environment where all students must wear masks and sit well apart from one another in a large classroom. Problems of teachers and students not seeing or hearing one another clearly during attendance check may be averted. Still a greater benefit is to be had through sharing information with the students using the Zoom platform.

If a given activity has comparatively complex instructions, rather than simply writing the instructions on the whiteboard or chalkboard or displaying them on a single screen as I explain them, I can put the instructions directly in front of each student through the chat feature. This obviates difficulty for the students in seeing instructions clearly in a large, socially distanced classroom. I can also send useful online links or other information to students using the class chat function, enhancing their note-taking ability without drawing their attention away from the device whereon they keep their notes. Rather than having the students wait for me to write something on the board, I can give students information much more quickly as I can quickly type or copy and paste information directly into the chat.

Yet another benefit of having this chat feature available during class is that students can ask

4 Tyner, A. (2021) Finding Time: Reflections on English Discussion Lesson and Activity Timing in the Shift to Online Lessons During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of Multilingual Pedagogy and Practice* 1, 16-22.

questions during activities and receive answers. Certainly, students are always welcome to ask questions aloud, but this method is helpful for students who are shy or embarrassed to ask a question. Further, questions and answers exchanged this way do not disturb students who are actively participating in an activity.

Khan and Iqbal (2020) note that taking feedback from students regularly is one means to “ensure quality of the [class] sessions” (p. 1) when using online classroom tools. Regarding this, students are able to not only ask questions but also give immediate feedback to me using Zoom chat. If something is difficult to understand or if more examples are required—in short, there is something a student wishes to express about the immediate circumstances of their learning—they can offer this using the Zoom chat function quickly and unobtrusively. Even something as simple as asking for the meaning of a word, requesting to hear something again, or seeking further examples, can make the difference between understanding and not understanding.

Zoom, as I have already mentioned, helps to facilitate the use of multimedia lesson components. Though the use of video and audio in the classroom is long established, generally, in any given class, my use of audio and video is limited. The main reason for this limited use of multimedia is to give the students more time to speak and use the skills being learned. However, a further consideration has been that, in the past, the use of video or audio often meant some break in the flow of the lesson, a slow-down, or attention transitioned from notebooks and textbooks to a screen or audio device and back.

Now, with concerns about the spread of COVID-19, there are further difficulties. I have mentioned some already. Students are spaced apart from one another in large classrooms, for instance. This makes the use of a single screen difficult, logistically. Additionally, classroom doors and windows are kept open to provide ventilation. This often causes sound disturbances. Playing a video or audio segment loudly enough for students at the back of the room to hear clearly necessarily means disturbing neighboring classes. In addition, the various sources of noise one encounters with open doors and windows means that even relatively loud audio may be suddenly drowned out by the siren of an emergency vehicle or some such other random sound. These concerns must be weighed against the potential benefits of multimedia use.

When considering the benefits of multimedia use in the classroom, first there is the informational content of a given video or audio segment, and then, of notable importance in the language classroom, there is the potential for video and audio segments to provide high-quality examples in real-world or realistic scenarios. Multimedia has the capacity to offer something beyond the immediate classroom experience. Khan & Iqbal (2020) note that a video is, itself, a potential source of student engagement (p. 1). Hall & Dougherty Stahl highlight the “Dual Coding Theory” which holds that “our brains process and remember more effectively when we are actively taking information in through both our verbal and nonverbal channels” (p. 404).

There are numerous reasons to integrate multimedia components into on-campus classes. Indeed, teachers around the world have done this for years. The difference of note in the present situation is that in carrying over the use of Zoom from online classes, the integration of multimedia components can now be almost seamless. Now, short video or audio examples can be used at virtually any point in the lesson with minimal disturbance to lesson flow or to student concentration. PowerPoint presentations as well as video and audio segments that might have been difficult to see or hear for students in the back of a large room are now directly in front of each student on their

preferred screen⁵. Students can also use earphones for greater audio clarity when using Zoom on their Internet-enabled device, which is of particular importance in a language classroom. Students, spaced widely apart from one another as a means of social distancing, need not move close to the front of the room to see or hear clearly.

If the benefits of using Zoom in the classroom are evident, are there any drawbacks? One potential drawback is the much discussed ‘Zoom fatigue.’ While I am in no way an expert on the physical and psychological effects of technology use, literature on the topic of Zoom fatigue seems to suggest that it may not be likely under the circumstances of my classes as I have described them. McWhirter (2020) notes regarding Zoom fatigue, “The constant eye contact with numerous individuals at once compounded by the awareness of one’s own facial expressions can be exhausting in itself... Additionally, fatigue comes from nonstop hours at the computer” (p. 41). Regarding the former concern, the students do not use their cameras while signed-on to Zoom in the classroom. As for the latter, while the students do use internet capable devices, whether a computer, tablet, or smartphone, they do not use these devices constantly throughout the class. Rather, students complete a wide variety of tasks, many of which require them to look away from their screens. Hence, while Zoom fatigue is a serious concern in the realm of online classes, with Zoom integrated as I have described, it seems Zoom fatigue might be unlikely.

One of the other major technologies I am currently using for my classes is Blackboard. While Blackboard is a long-established tool for instructors, I had not, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, used it extensively. I do not wish to explain how the use of Blackboard streamlines many of the processes related to instruction. Rather, I wish to consider how the use of Blackboard has altered my classroom practices⁶.

One measure suggested by the university as a COVID-19 prevention measure is not to distribute or collect physical copies of documents. As sensible as this measure is, in classes that involve a fair amount of writing or research, such as presentations or debates in my case, it does make things somewhat difficult. One solution is the use of Blackboard by students to turn in homework assignments and for me to provide feedback and supplementary materials to students.

Prior to the pandemic, most homework was turned in to me either on paper or by email. This was, logistically, difficult to manage. I had to physically manage the documents, keep them safe, write feedback by hand on each one (at least in the case of assignments turned in on paper) even if some elements were repeated, and promptly return the assignments to the students.

Paperless assignments on Blackboard are much easier to manage. For one thing, the student does not run the risk of either losing the instructions for an assignment or misplacing the assignment once it is completed. Another advantage of digitally submitted homework assignments, particularly writing assignments, is that either the student or the instructor can access them at any time. This is particularly helpful to students in cases such that reference to one assignment may help in the preparation of another assignment. Still another advantage is that feedback can be given to students in writing at any time and subsequently referred to by either the instructor or student. Concerning the

5 Students are allowed to use laptop computers, tablets, or smartphones. It should also be noted that the university allows students to borrow laptops should they need to do so. Thus, the potential problem of the unavailability of technology for students is sidestepped.

6 I should note that both presentation and debate, as presently delivered, are being taught in-person at Rikkyo University for the first time in the Fall 2021 semester. When I refer to differences between my current and former practices, I refer to either my former practices in various courses at Rikkyo and other institutions or between my planned and actual practices.

submission of assignments through a learning management system, Amirul Islam (2017) notes, “Students will...feel more comfortable to write to their teacher as it can be only one to one communication” (p. 82). While students may work in-class with the words ideas they have submitted electronically, they know that the first person to see the writing will be their instructor. If there is some major problem, they will be informed. It takes away some of the pressure, and possibly some of the feeling of vulnerability that comes with sharing one’s writing with classmates.

Additionally, accountability is clear when assignment submission is managed electronically. A student can be immediately aware of their past work, and may be cognizant of their overall performance, at least in terms of homework writing, at little more than a glance. This allows students to visualize what is expected of them and how they have responded to those expectations, to be both responsible and responsive when it comes to homework assignments and, as Khan and Iqbal (2020) note, “Responsiveness is the crux of learning” (p. 1).

Conclusion

Technology has a useful role to play in the classroom. My primary concern, as noted in the introduction, was that any technology integrated into the classroom should be of actual, concrete benefit to the students. The technologies I have integrated thus far certainly meet that criterion.

The transition from online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic to face-to-face classes presents both challenges and opportunities. Many of the same online tools used during the pandemic can continue to perform largely the same function in face-to-face lessons. Going paper-free, for instance, potentially allows a measure of safety⁷ while also offering the benefits of easy submission of assignments at any time and a means to provide written feedback to students quickly and simply. The use of Zoom or similar platforms in the classroom can allow students to interact with class materials and their instructors more easily. Further, the integration of multimedia elements through Zoom or similar platforms might allow students to engage in different modes of learning than might otherwise be possible, given the typical limitations of the physical classroom and the specific restrictions connected to the prevention of the spread of COVID-19.

In researching the technologies discussed in this paper, I find that one area of future interest to instructors as they integrate online technologies into their classroom practices might be the further development of learning management systems, such as Blackboard. As these systems develop, the potential that the integration of AI and deep learning systems might be able to further tailor these systems to suit the needs of teachers and students. While such AI and deep learning systems are still being developed, Dias et al. (2020) note that in such a system, “knowledge can be extracted concerning the student’s preferred learning patterns while interacting with leaning resources, and/or while collaborating in groups” (p. 2). Such feedback would provide the instructor with additional information with which to tailor their lessons to best suit their students. Beyond this, Dias et al. (2020) note the potential of such a system “to provide behavioral information in terms of learning and attention deficits” (p. 2). If such a system were available, it could start to bridge the gap between the treatment of learning difficulties and actual classroom instruction, which is an encouraging thought.

The fact that technology of potential benefit to the classroom will continue to emerge and develop is virtually undeniable. It seems the way forward is to find a balance between both online and in-class tools available to the instructor to best benefit the students. For my part, I will continue to evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of online technologies as they become available. I am certain that my classroom will continue to evolve.

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