17 | Lessons in Online Teaching During a Global Pandemic

Nudrat Kamal

INTRODUCTION

In the last week of February 2020, in what would be our last in-person class in my academic writing course, my students and I discussed, of all things, global pandemics in world history. We talked about the Black Plague of the 14th century, the Zika virus, and watched an animated video on the biological process through which viruses spread from body to body. We were hearing rumblings of a new virus in China making its way closer to Pakistan, but there wasn't enough information known about it to include it in my lesson plan. My students and I joked about this virus as we would about any threat that seems too distant to be real – a student who had requested a week of absences to visit Iran on a family pilgrimage trip grumbled that her plan would probably be canceled, and her class fellows good-naturedly laughed at her disappointment. The next day, the Pakistani government declared all educational institutions to stop in-person classes as a precaution against the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic.

When students and teachers were first asked to go online for their classes back then, it seemed like an exploring unchartered territory – frightening but also exhilarating. The collective feelings of shock and anxiety at the alarming spread of this virus around the world were somewhat mitigated by an exciting curiosity, at least in myself and the teachers around me, to explore ways of shifting our pedagogical styles and strategies to an online setting. Zoom meetings amongst colleagues and friends were held to exchange ideas, and we started drawing on existing scholarship on online pedagogy to adapt their course objectives to an online model. There were discussions on international media talk shows about how online education was the future anyway, and we had just been nudged toward that future a bit sooner than expected by the pandemic. It soon became clear, however, that while teaching online in Pakistan offered valuable insights into pedagogy in general, it would come with a unique set of challenges. Now, approximately nine months into the pandemic – the majority of which has been spent

N. Kamal
Department of Social Sciences & Liberal Arts, Institute of Business Administration
Karachi, Pakistan

Z. Mustafa (ed.), *Reforming School Education in Pakistan & The Language Dilemma*
ISBN: 978-969-210-234-6

in online classes, with sporadic and unsuccessful returns to in-person classes in the middle – the early sentiment of exhilaration with regards to online classes has given way to a sense of exhaustion in both students and my fellow teachers, but also a greater sense of what works and what doesn't work in terms of online teaching.

LESSON ONE: FLEXIBILITY IS KEY

Between my courses, which are a mixture of undergraduate-level literature courses and academic writing courses, and the courses taught by my colleagues which are both A level courses as well as undergraduate level courses, something that we all understood pretty early on was that giving students flexibility in how they engaged with various components of the class was the best way to ensure maximum participation on their end. The truth of the matter is that even in the most elite, private schools and universities, Pakistani students do not have uniform accessibility to the technology needed for online learning – they might have a computer they are sharing with other siblings who have their own online classes, they might be attending the online class through a smartphone rather than a laptop (which changes their experience), and there are electricity and internet issues that routinely get in the way of students being able to attend online classes at specific times.

There are other, non-technical reasons why students might struggle to attend online classes at specific times. An important factor is gender. With everyone working and studying from home, there is an addition to the household tasks that need to be done, and these tasks tend to fall disproportionately on female students. Students might also have younger siblings also doing online classes who require supervision that these students might have to step in to do. There is also the real possibility that family members of students can get sick with Covid-19, and the care-taking responsibilities again fall disproportionately on female students. I had several really bright engaged female students who began to attend my courses only sporadically, and all of them cited these increased household and care-taking responsibilities as reasons why it was hard for them to manage keeping up with online classes.

In such circumstances, what works better in my experience is giving students a mixture of asynchronous and synchronous learning components in each course. While synchronous components are live Zoom sessions where everyone has to be online at the same time, asynchronous components are class tasks that they can do any time during a set window at their own pace, without everyone needing to be online at the same time. These asynchronous tasks can be in the form of recorded lectures they can watch, writing tasks they have to finish and submit on platforms such as Google Forms, or weekly readings they have to annotate on a software such as Perusall. In my experience, while students struggle with attending live Zoom classes, participation in asynchronous class tasks tends to be very high. The flexibility of time that asynchronous class tasks provides means that students who might have household and family responsibilities during the day can work on these tasks whenever they are free. One caveat with asynchronous teaching is that organizing and streamlining all asynchronous

tasks for the week is a huge amount of labor – whereas in a physical classroom I would ask students to pair up and take out a fresh piece of paper to do a short in-class exercise, replicating this online in an asynchronous manner requires setting up tasks by scratch on various platforms, emailing the students several links, and reminding them periodically about deadlines and submissions. However, this added work does pay off, as I have found that across the board, these asynchronous tasks are the most effective way of maximizing student engagement.

The challenge with this is that while most universities offer faculty this flexibility in terms of designing and changing course objectives and tasks and so faculty can assess student engagement and participation in a combination of ways, schools tend to follow a more rigid timetable where students are required to attend live Zoom classes, which means that most of the learning happening in schools is synchronous, which brings me to the second lesson I learnt.

LESSON TWO: LIVE ONLINE CLASSES ARE HARD

While the asynchronous components of all my courses worked quite well in terms of fulfilling learning objectives and getting students to engage meaningfully, what I struggled with the most (and continue to struggle with) is retaining student engagement during live Zoom classes. The fact is that when students are in a live Zoom session, their attention is constantly being pulled by a myriad of other things on their devices that they would frankly find more interesting – the whole Internet is on their fingertips. This means that while you are trying to convey an important topic in a class lecture, you have to compete for their attention with social media, with private messaging, and with everything else on the Internet – this is a competition that is almost impossible for you to win. Students, understandably, have a really difficult time concentrating, and you in turn feel frustrated by their seeming lack of interest. There are some features that Zoom and other online video platforms provide to manage these challenges, such as the option of dividing students into smaller "breakout rooms" to encourage class discussions amongst pairs and groups of students, but those only work to a certain extent and feel very contrived as compared to dividing students into groups in a physical classroom.

The challenge of keeping students engaged is exacerbated by the fact that many students are hesitant in turning on their cameras (the reasons are many, from tech issues to internet issues to a lack of privacy in their homes), which means that you have the added pressure of being interesting to a Zoom screen filled with black boxes instead of human faces. In a physical classroom, there is an exchange of energy and ideas between the teacher and the students, where your enthusiasm about a topic is nourished and increased by the curiosity and energy students are bringing to the discussion. However, in a Zoom session where most students have their cameras off and are reluctant to unmute their mics to speak up, this give-and-take of energy becomes wholly one-sided, and therefore much more exhausting for the teacher than a regular, physical class would be. I find myself much more tired after online classes – whereas after a physical class I

would feel energized and nourished by the interaction with students, after a Zoom class I feel depleted and frustrated which, I have no doubt, must be impacting my style of teaching.

LESSON THREE: THERE ARE UNIQUE ADVANTAGES OF ONLINE CLASSES

While live Zoom classes can be tiring and not as rewarding as in-person classes, there is a way to use the format to one's advantage to maximize learning – by bringing in exciting and interesting people as guest speakers from all over the world. As the world is getting more used to online video communication, whether it is in terms of their personal relationships or attending professional seminars and workshops online, an exciting possibility in terms of online teaching has also opened up. As a teacher, I can invite people to come and speak to my students on specific topics, regardless of which city or country or time-zone they happen to live in. This opens up the pool of potential guest speakers exponentially, and is by far the biggest advantage of live online classes.

For my literature course, I invited a total of four guest speakers to speak to my students on the themes and topics of the week – from New York and Sydney to Lahore and Toronto. These guest speakers really added value to my course, which focuses on science fiction and fantasy from around the world. All authors and editors of sci-fi and fantasy, these speakers could offer knowledge on the subject that I myself would not have been able to give to my students, and so in that sense, having this course online made learning for my students more expansive and enriching. In all these guest sessions, my students were eager to learn and eager to have fascinating conversations with these speakers. This freedom and opportunity to invite interesting, willing people from around the world into my classroom is the one thing I would be grateful to take with me back to the physical classroom in the post-Covid world – hopefully this willingness to join in on conversations on Zoom from any place in the world will stay long after this pandemic has ended.

LESSON FOUR: FORMING A CONNECTION WITH STUDENTS IS DIFFICULT

By far the greatest challenge I have faced in my experience with online teaching during a pandemic is the difficulty in forming a meaningful, valuable connection and rapport with students. Given that all of my courses are discussion-heavy, interaction-based courses where nuanced conversation is an essential part of my pedagogy, building a trusting and strong rapport with students is a fundamental factor in the success of my teaching. It is also hands down the most rewarding aspect of teaching in general – getting to know these bright, young people, having them expand my world and my thinking with their perspectives and their passions and getting the opportunity to engage in challenging and meaningful conversations with them is why I love teaching so much. Unfortunately, it is this very aspect of teaching that gets lost in the shuffle and logistics of online education.

Because of many of the factors I have mentioned above – students don't like turning on their cameras, they are hesitant in speaking up as freely and casually as they would in physical classes, technical issues and internet lags make video conversations awkward and stilted – I have found connecting with students meaningful to be the biggest limitation in online teaching. In a physical classroom, within the first three weeks, I get a sense of the students' personalities – the way they greet me before class, the way they joke around with their class-fellows, the things about themselves and their interests that they reveal unintentionally during the casual conversations that erupt during the lulls in the classroom in between my lectures. Online, conversation feels contrived and energy-consuming, and even the small-talk that occurs informally before the class officially begins is hard for students to comfortably engage in. This means that I don't really get to know students as much as I would like – it is hard to know them beyond the work they submit, to uncover the people that they are behind the academics. Without this shared openness and vulnerability, classroom discussions also tend to be more surface-level and less nuanced than they would otherwise be, and many of the lessons that would organically emerge during a class discussion now needs to be spelled out by me, which is a much less satisfying and impactful way of teaching for me.

LESSON FIVE: WHEN IN DOUBT, BE KIND AND GENEROUS

Since it's hard to get to know students online, it is easy to forget that these are real humans, with layered personalities and complex lives that teachers are not getting any glimpses of. If all you know about students is the name that appears on their black screens during Zoom classes, the tendency to not think of them as real can become overpowering. In such a situation, it is also easier to become impatient with students, with their smaller misbehaviors taking on a stronger valence than they would in physical classrooms. Therefore, the lesson which in my opinion is the most important to remember for teachers in terms of online teaching during a pandemic is to be as kind and generous to students as possible.

Because online teaching requires a lot more thinking about logistics and technical issues, it is important to consciously re-orient our thinking to center what is most important in education: students and their needs. The reality is that this is a uniquely challenging time for students – spending the majority of their days glued to their screens and being deprived of real social interaction with their fellow peers on top of the overwhelming anxiety of the possibility of them or their loved ones getting sick means that learning anything at all is nothing short of a miracle. Being stuck at home constantly might mean being forced to be in less-than-ideal circumstances for a number of reasons, and as teachers, we don't know how difficult life is for students at the moment. The most important thing we can offer students at this moment, therefore, is kindness.

This kindness should be in the form of flexibility in terms of assessment and assignment deadlines; in respecting students' wish to not turn on their cameras or to remain quiet throughout a live online class; in checking in on them individually if they have been absent from class activities in a while and in offering to meet with them online on an

individual level so they might feel seen and heard by someone; in listening to the real challenges they might be facing and telling them that you can understand if they are struggling; in not dismissing their requests for accommodations; in challenging our own knee-jerk assumption that if a student seems less engaged in class it is because they are lazy or unmotivated or entitled and reminding ourselves of our own incomplete knowledge of our students' lives and circumstances; in short, kindness should be in form of recognizing the full humanity of our students so that students can come to our online, virtual classroom with a feeling of being respected, heard and understood – which in an invaluable thing to offer them in these unprecedentedly hard times.