The Trials and Tribulations of a Pandemic: From My Camera to Yours

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2020 will go down in history as the year that was. With the emergence of COVID-19 and its rapid spread, one could not help but wonder if movies such as Outbreak, Contagion, or 12 Monkeys were prophecies, or if The Walking Dead was going to become a reality show. COVID-19's spread saw education thrown into turmoil around the world, and Japan was no different. I was starting a new job in April, and I was extremely excited about a new position and meeting new freshmen who were enthusiastic about starting their tertiary journey. However, this excitement quickly changed to apprehension as I had to suddenly find new ways to adapt my lessons to conduct them synchronously online.

While many of my colleagues were panicking and scrambling to rewrite their entire syllabi, I stayed calm and decided to fall back on my own technology knowledge and not "reinvent the wheel", so to speak. I decided to use Zoom as it had all the features I needed for my interactive classes and Moodle, a Learning Management System (LMS), as it is simple to use for teachers and students alike. I made my own manuals with simple screenshots so students could understand easily and quickly. I also uploaded clear information about how classes would be conducted, and held practice Zoom meetings prior to the official semester commencement so students could familiarize themselves with everything before the first class. Organizing myself early on and being accustomed to the technology made it much less stressful.

Having said that, my experience was not all roses. I discovered in the beginning that I had to wear many hats, in that I was not just a teacher, but I was also tech support, online chat support and a shoulder to cry on. Although this was challenging, I also found it to be rewarding. I hope that my experience shows that it is important to stay calm, persevere, be flexible, and keep to what you know initially in order to minimize stress and workload. It is important to keep in mind that this situation is temporary and will pass eventually.

Objectives

– To show that there is a silver lining and a sense of accomplishment even with the stress of online teaching.
– To demonstrate that we have learnt and developed new skills during the pandemic making us more empathetic and better teachers.

Practical Implications

Many teachers were considerably stressed throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, worrying about their quality of teaching, and in turn, the quality of education that their students were receiving. We need to remind ourselves that we were in unprecedented times and we were thrown into Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) which is not the same as online learning. ERT is only meant to be a temporary change in what we think of as a 'normal' mode of instructional delivery due to a crisis or emergency (Hodges et al., 2020; University of the People, 2020). It is important to remember that the goal of ERT is to set up instruction and support quickly; it is short-term and may lack resources at times, but we need to do our best to adapt our classes to engage our learners (Milman, 2020).

My classes were all synchronous and it was important to not change my curriculum too much. I only made minor tweaks in most of my classes so activities would run smoothly and easily on Zoom and to keep my sanity. I found that I just needed to be a little more resourceful than normal and keep tasks simple and easy to understand. The most popular and successful activities were group presentations and storytelling. I prepared a presentation document outlining the presentation topic and subtopics to be researched, lists of group members, and links to the Google Slides that I had made for each group. I gave preparation time in breakout rooms so students could work collaboratively both in and out of class. When I checked on groups in the breakout rooms, one group member was always showing the Google Slides through sharing their screen, and all members

were researching and discussing the content and format of the slides in real time. For storytelling, I gave groups picture prompts (ranging from a haunted mansion, a flying carpet, a group of animals in an African safari park, to a UFO) and made a Google Doc where each group selected one picture and collaborated on writing a story about it in breakout rooms, presenting it to the class in the main room in the last half of the class. Students were quite creative with many showing pictures, using fun voices and even adding background music. These activities were successful because the students said they enjoyed having more autonomy and creativity, and found it easier to collaborate online as they were already using their computers. They said they preferred using Google Slides and Docs because if they were in the classroom, they would not have had their computers, and using these meant all of their content and ideas were in one single place rather than every member having numerous pieces of note paper.

Reflective Conclusion

During ERT I found that it was imperative to lower expectations of students as many were not familiar with technology and others may have been struggling due to the pandemic, either mentally, financially, or both. It was also important to familiarize myself with the technology, websites and apps that I expected my students to use so that I was prepared for any questions and could troubleshoot any potential problems before they arose, as they were inevitably going to. In addition, it helped to put myself in the students' shoes and think about the challenges they were facing and be more empathetic in these challenging times, especially as freshmen were not experiencing the exciting start to their tertiary life that they were looking forward to. While we had many challenges and hiccups on this ERT journey, there were positive points too. I found attendance to be significantly better than face-to-face classes, and I had better communication with students both inside and outside the 'classroom' as students could easily send a private chat message, email or Line message at any time.

If you're continuing to use ERT methods or find yourself taking it on in the future, we now know what to expect and we should not take anything for granted. While many teachers may struggle with teaching online for numerous reasons, many of us are fortunate that we are in a profession whereby we are able to conduct our classes online and keep our jobs, regardless of the obstacles we may face. Teachers and students alike have dramatically improved their technology proficiency and this has been something that COVID-19 and ERT has led us to deal with. I am in no way a tech expert but as teachers, we can view this experience as a form of professional development. We have had the opportunity to delve into and learn new web platforms and become more creative by finding alternative ways for student assessment. From my experience in the past academic year, I found that teachers are resilient and these unprecedented times have seen teachers and students come together and form stronger bonds, helping and encouraging each other with compassion in times of need.

References

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About the Author

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Link to presentation on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2BKUjhH1Sk