Preparing for the 'Next Normal'

(How ready is the remote synchronous classroom?)

by

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Tertiary institutions worldwide were confronted with some level of unpreparedness as they made the sudden shift to teaching and learning online to correspond with social distancing protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhawan 2020; Mitchell 2020). That the exclusive delivery of content online *was* unusual for residential universities was perhaps most evident in their mass digital literacy training for teachers in 2020, although it is fair to say that much of the groundwork had already been laid. In 2019 colleges and universities were among the educational institutions which invested US $18.66 billion in educational technology companies around the world,[1] and learning management systems to enable the upload of course material and interaction had long been developed and utilized. In the context of The University of the West Indies (UWI) specifically, the "green university policy" of the 2012-2017 Strategic Plan was already in operation and the digital transformation of education, in accordance with the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, already underway.[2]

The term *emergency remote teaching* (Hodges et al. 2020) made the distinction between courses which are purposefully and carefully designed for online delivery and those which are taught remotely on a provisional basis during crisis conditions. The concept captured the hasty transition of courses from a face-to-face, blended or hybrid mode to a fully online one but without the "affordances and possibilities" (Hodges et al. 2020) of this medium. Whereas the notion of emergency remote teaching assumed that courses would return to their original format once crisis conditions had abated, one year later the group of authors who coined the term, regarded remote teaching as a possible vantage point from which "the next normal" a flexible, accessible, engaging and effective learning model, could, in fact, be developed (Moore et al. 2021). If teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEI) are to continue in or develop from what was two

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[1] https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/2019-global-edtech-investments-reach-a-staggering-18-66-billion-1028800669

[2] https://www.uwi.edu/vcreport/ft18.php

years ago considered to be an improvised classroom setting, a keen insight into the rapidly evolving features of this learning space is necessary in preparation for the next normal.

Research on equal access to digital learning acknowledges the technical support that is made available to student populations at colleges and universities through the loan of devices such as laptops and tablets, a system which is also in place in the UWI context. But the pressing issue of inequitable internet access remains a concern, particularly in the case of countries with developing-nation status (Aditya 2021; El Said 2021). One survey conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), polling more than 1,000 college students, reported that low bandwidth caused 4% of respondents to be either unable or seldom able to secure a reliable internet connection, and prevented 24% of them from connecting to course content. Further, low household income in the case of 31% of the respondents was linked to unreliable internet connectivity (Parker, Santos and Dancy 2021).

Bandwidth issues may also account for the lack of video-camera usage by students in the digital learning environment, although privacy remains a major consideration in this regard. Reference to the mandatory use of cameras by students attending classes in their home settings prompted feelings of self-consciousness, anxiety and unwillingness to participate (Finders and Muñoz 2021). But when met by blank screens, instructors reported feeling dissatisfied and ill-at-ease. They described their practice as "teaching into the void" and "production-line teaching" (Moorhouse and Kohnke 2021, p. 284) and felt that they were either 'talking to [themselves]' (Castelli and Sarvary 2021) or to "disembodied voices on the other side [of those who] may or may not be paying attention" (Moorhouse and Kohnke 2021, p. 284). The lack of non-verbal cues (nods, frowns, expressions of confusion or boredom) was particularly lamented, given that these allowed for the adjustment of content delivery in real time and were said, not only to build trust and student-teacher rapport, but also to potentially avert feelings of loneliness during the pandemic.

Other direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were reported to weigh heavily on the post-secondary classroom. Mental health issues, characterised by depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder were found to be common among tertiary level students, irrespective of whether or not they became ill with the virus (Dias and Bunn 2021). Svrluga and Anderson (2021) equated mental health distress with economic distress, and listed fear and uncertainty as the main

indicators of student anxiety. The authors reported higher levels of depression and anxiety among young adults; greater socioeconomic and gender inequalities in the cases of women; and increased anxiety and psychological distress with respect to students who either lived alone, or cared for young children, or for the elderly. While Cox (2021) also listed job uncertainty as a trigger for student anxiety, she reported other causal factors as illness and death. Cox reasoned that orienting first-year undergraduate students to the "remote synchronous virtual learning community" was necessary given the realisation that their navigational skills in virtual spaces could not be assumed. Such an orientation exercise, in her view, spared students another stressful emergency situation during the pandemic, i.e. that of navigating the classroom online.

Conflicting reports on digital literacy have challenged the assumption that younger is better (Karagul, Seker, and Aykut 2021) and make a case for equipping students —the same as teachers — with the requisite training to navigate their virtual environment. The extent to which students are required to interact in the classroom is naturally dependent on classroom configuration. Lectures for instance, which traditionally accord with the transmission of knowledge and favour a teacher-centred approach, may be contrasted with student-centred Socratic tutorials (Balwant and Doon 2021) or the second-language classroom which expects that students either demonstrate what was taught in their lectures or use the target language as they build their language competence, respectively. Lectures typically take place before hundreds of students, whereas the setting for a tutorial, like the language classroom, is ideally more intimate, with usually just a few students and a tutor. Tutorials, which are designed to provide personalised attention, are student-centred safe spaces where students develop, not only their confidence but also their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills as they seek clarification, put theory into practice and receive feedback. Levels of interaction are high and may include any of the following configurations: tutor-student, tutor-students, student-student and students-students (Balwant and Doon 2021).

On the basis that tutorials facilitate student participation, Balwant and Doon (2021) reasoned that these sessions with fewer students, afford learners a 'deep' rather than a 'surface' learning experience with more quality learning outcomes than lectures. However, as far as student engagement is concerned in the remote teaching environment, there does not appear to be a clear-cut dichotomy between the two pedagogical settings. Synchronous lectures delivered in the remote classroom are now typically scaffolded by the posting of lecture slides and audio recordings for

asynchronous student use outside of scheduled lecture hours. Further, and in keeping with best practice in online courses, a plethora of digital content resources is made available, and a sense of community cultivated through the active participation of students who collaborate though blogs, discussion groups and boards, formative assessments and question and answer forums (Lumpkin 2021). Professional training for teachers at the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, UWI,[3] prioritises a student-centred synchronous remote classroom with opportunities for interaction through the use of breakout rooms, class discussions, collaborative web platforms, quizzes, and presentations and polls to make learning meaningful and relevant.[4] Bakir and Phirangee (2021) explained that affording students the opportunities for "engagement and camaraderie" reduced feelings of disconnection and isolation, and promoted critical thinking.

But, in order for successful collaboration to occur, tailoring participant expectations to the "affordances" (Hodges et al. 2020) and constraints of remote synchronous communication is necessary so that greater adaptability to existing conditions, and consequently, greater participation may be achieved. The current remote teaching space is facilitated through the use of video-conferencing applications, but without the use of video-cameras, it resembles an audioconferencing medium wherein speaker "discomfort and uncertainty" are said to be commonplace (Earnshaw 2017). The use of video-cameras by presenters while they address their audience is typically short-lived given that information slides and documents take primacy on their screen. The bulk of interaction is therefore largely enabled through the voice and chat features. Written and spoken exchanges occur simultaneously; they are impacted by variables other than internet connectivity and speed, and are governed by different rules. The chat feature is the more practical choice when participant numbers are large, or if participants are without a working microphone, are not stationed in a quiet enough setting, or wish to communicate in a more discreet and unannounced fashion. This function, replete with emoticons, is useful for confirming that a presenter's screen is visible and that his/her audio is functioning. Use of the voice feature operates with turn-taking rules (Earnshaw 2017) where interlocutors unmute themselves to speak and mute themselves when their turn is over. Turn-taking is affected by audio and internet connectivity issues as well as by participants neglecting to unmute (Earnshaw 2017), or mute themselves, as

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[3] https://sta.uwi.edu/cetl/aboutus

[4] Teaching in the online environment …The Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning...Workshop Friday 21st January 2022

necessary. The chat panel does not enable turn-taking and allows for multiple messages to be posted at the same time (Earnshaw 2017; Schwarz and Asterhan 2011). While this was believed to encourage democratic participation by students (Asterhan and Eisenmann 2011), the sequence in which messages appear is dependent on the time which participants take to formulate, type, and post them, and messages posted too distant from the original message they reference, or after the topic of conversation has changed, invariably get lost (Earnshaw 2017). Participants who are not forewarned of these possibilities are likely to feel frustrated as Kebble (2017) indicated with respect to students in asynchronous online discussions who realise that other students had already posted what they had intended to say.

A reflection on the inner workings of the remote synchronous classroom reveals its potential for heightened collaboration with beneficial outcomes once student anxiety can be effectively minimised and student morale boosted. Developing student digital literacy skills, carefully guiding student expectations, and establishing clear protocols for signalling when a communication repair is required (Earnshaw 2017) are action items geared to inspire confidence in virtual teaching and learning spaces. Non-intrusive, non-directive e-moderation by teachers to create equitable opportunities for turn-taking cultivates a supportive environment where students are comfortable enough to generate their ideas, express themselves and evaluate the contributions of their peers (Schwarz and Asterhan 2011). An adaptation of the Socratic method as envisioned by Knežić (2013) in the second-language classroom, is of merit too. Here, the teacher as facilitator uses open-ended questions, pays attention to intended rather than perceived meaning, observes feasible wait times, checks for understanding, and reformulates or summarises information accordingly (Knežić 2013). During the phase of *emergency remote teaching* in 2020, the "empathetic response" of the UWI was noted as policy adjustments were being made to its courses (Kalloo, Mitchell, and Kamalodeen 2020). Fostering an empathetic approach in the remote classroom (Cartee 2021) positions this virtual learning space as a worthy precursor to "the next normal" described in Moore et al. (2021) as a more flexible, accessible, engaging and effective learning model.

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