

ZOOMING OUT FROM THE TEACHER-CENTRED CLASSROOM

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The 2020 pandemic has brought about a series of events worldwide which has impacted the vast majority of society in some way. In post-secondary education the shift from a physical classroom environment to online has produced a series of challenges for educators. This sudden change has been uncomfortable for many teachers and students, and dramatically changed the ways in which students interact with their peers and teachers in the context of a classroom. The classroom as it is commonly thought of has moved from “a unique social environment with its own human activities and its own conventions governing these activities” (Breen & Candlin, 1980, p. 98) to an online platform with prescribed interaction, primarily decided by the teacher, and its own conventions more strictly regulated by the teacher. A resulting factor of these circumstances personally, while teaching during the pandemic, was an increase in the use of Teacher Talk and in turn a more teacher-centred classroom.

A teacher-centred classroom has many features and arguably Teacher Talking Time is a central pivot which determines which category the lesson assimilates to. Teacher Talk is commonly scored on quantity rather than quality (Cullen, 1998). Teachers have often been criticized for speaking too much and depriving students of the opportunity to speak, whilst speaking sparsely is considered to be ‘effective Teacher Talk’. This understanding has prompted more efficient communication on behalf of teachers with an emphasis on facilitating and promoting interaction (Cullen, 1998). This shift from quantity to quality communication was considered important, as simply reducing Teacher Talk would not improve language acquisition and would lead to the detriment of learner interaction (Brock, 1986). These accommodations to physical classroom methodology have been shown to benefit learners.

However, during the pandemic many educational institutions started using a software program called Zoom to conduct lessons. The technology used to create the online classroom allows for all participants to communicate, but multiple speakers cannot speak and be comprehended at the same time. Therefore, communication is limited to one person speaking at a time, a form of turn taking that is completely regulated. In order for the online classes to function as coherently as possible, all participants mute their microphones, with the exception of one, the speaker. The teacher, by hosting the lesson, is given special control privileges as host; the ability to mute and unmute microphones is one of those privileges. The teacher, when using Zoom, can mute and unmute students in order to control the lesson. Obviously, this type of control does not exist in the physical classroom. The software program was created and intended for use by businesses, thus the control within the software is akin to that of a manager and consequently that structure imprints onto the online classroom, where it has its own benefits and downfalls.

This shift for many from a learner-centred classroom where the teacher acts as facilitator to the learning process, by empowering students and by promoting pair/group work and communication, became very prominent when switching from the physical classroom to the online classroom. Other aspects of the learner-centred classroom, such as encouraging peer review and preparing students for assessments relevant to a curriculum designed around these characteristics, became difficult. The curriculum suddenly did not fully correspond and cooperate with my own style of classroom teaching.

Prior to the pandemic I would have considered the majority of my lessons to be learner-centred. Weimer (2002, pp. 75-76) describes this style of teaching as being a "guide on the side" or "coach". The students have the materials and facilities that they require. They are guided to discover and interpret the content which they have been given. It is then through this process that they learn with the incorporation of their own experiences. I admittedly had been trained to teach in this style, and the teacher-centred approach did not appeal to me as it was considered by me personally to be an outdated methodology.

Moving to online lessons resulted in my adoption of a more teacher-centred approach. My lessons at the beginning of the pandemic were very structured around who and what I imagined the primary focus to be during the lesson. To my discomfort, it felt that the primary focus of my lessons had become me presenting information to the class. As I reflected on student engagement and interaction, I realised that in the physical classroom a lot of my communication had been non-verbal. The use of gestures and the students' reactions to my instructions were enough for me to know that what I had said or described was comprehended. However, online my communication was restricted to verbal communication with limited gestures as they could not be fully viewed on camera. This constraint for all participants is a limitation of the software. Participants have the option to view one participant on their monitor or to view all the participants in a grid view, which is my own default view in order to address the entire class. It is very difficult to see all participants and even when viewing students in grid view not all students are totally visible on screen. Some have their camera off for privacy reasons, and some work on a separate desk and thus their faces are not totally in view for the entire lesson. When in screen share mode, there are also limited options on how many students can be seen due to the size of the monitor, as sharing portions of the screen reduces the amount of screen space that can be used for viewing participants. To overcome this issue a second monitor could improve the situation by providing a dedicated screen to view participants.

However, the inability to know if the students did or did not understand instructions left me with few options. I had resorted to asking students to communicate to me in some way using the reaction or chat function in the Zoom software, to indicate if they comprehended my instructions. This method was not always clear. In many cases students would signal with a reaction: some would physically react by shaking their heads, while others would use the reaction option within the software. Other students may also have understood but I may not have seen them for the brief few seconds their reaction was communicated. A number of students would not react at all, but it was difficult to know if they did not comprehend what was

going on or if they became distracted when I asked for feedback. Consequently, this led me to talk more, for example repeating and rephrasing instructions, and to investigate student understanding by asking individual students for clarification. Realistically, however, in many situations I had no clear indication that all students did not understand. This increase in Teacher Talking Time to compensate for a missing segment in physical classroom communication, I felt, bored students and centred the classroom around me. Peer communication and learning could not take place in this environment, even for students who did fully comprehend instructions.

To mitigate this issue, I resorted to giving the instructions verbally to the entire group, then asking students for a signal to ensure comprehension. If by approximation, half of participants signalled understanding of the task, I would then put students into 'breakout rooms', which is a function of the software which allows for participants of the class to form smaller groups. I would then take a screenshot of the instructions and send them to the students with the corresponding task via a group chat software tool. The chat function within Zoom does not collectively allow for students to receive files while in breakout rooms. These extra steps of instruction and ensuring quality communication rather than quantity dramatically reduced my Teacher Talking Time. These steps encouraged pair/group communication, promoted peer scaffolding by more capable students, and allowed me to "guide from the side" (Weimer, 2002, pp.75-76) in order to help students achieve learning outcomes and to move the focus to a more learner-centred classroom.

This development of my own personal teaching style has enabled me to adapt in order to best meet the needs of the students. This adaption will need to be reflected on as the pandemic continues and the Zoom software program evolves. As time continues, I think that the curriculum will itself need to change to suit the limitations of the software which have changed the possible outcomes of the learners. The 2020 pandemic will no doubt create further disruption worldwide, in different sectors and industries. As we navigate through these unprecedented times, we will need to consider the impact on the traditional conventions of the physical classroom and how teachers can create an online classroom style that corresponds with their preferred teaching style and the curriculum.

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