

FINDING BALANCE IN THE PREPARATION AND DELIVERY OF ONLINE TEACHING

Eric Lynch

Kanda University of International Studies

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, and the subsequent decision to teach classes online, all teachers at the university were tasked with getting materials fit for purpose. As a course coordinator I was to provide direction — with the input of the management team— to the 33 teachers who taught the course. Early discussions concerned what would comprise a sufficient level of preparedness — how much did we need to have prepped? And how much actual teaching was reasonable, feasible, over the Zoom software, given that initial experience suggested it to be surprisingly taxing? The following article will reflect on some of my decision-making processes in these novel conditions.

KEY CONCERNS

How Much to Prepare?

Some teachers, admirably, maintained that to feel prepared they wanted a whole store of materials lined up and ready to go before classes were due to start. This would entail a huge amount of work, but the logic was clear: it is hard to fault being prepared. Yet my feeling — little more than a hunch — was that while this might benefit some teachers, it may also be too much for others and even be of limited utility. I felt a day-by-day approach - a week at a stretch - would be more practical and effective; that we be ready in the initial days for the next couple of lessons, then take stock, reflect and react, asking ourselves: *Has the material worked? Was the lesson successful? How best to respond?*

I felt staying agile was a more viable option than drilling down and producing reams of untested material. This perhaps seemed counterintuitive — and again, based on nothing more than a *feeling* — but what I wished to avoid was a situation whereby a teacher amassed a real tranche of materials and then found them to be unsuitable. It seemed to me there were two probable outcomes here: first, that a teacher would be demoralised, her labor in vain or, and more problematically, that a teacher would persist in using these materials, unwilling to let them go to waste. In the first case sympathies go to the teacher, but very much to the students in the latter.

So, as a coordinator, I advocated a slower-paced, more reactive approach to planning and material development. The teachers were free to go about their planning as they chose but I hoped that the policy I was advising might at least take the pressure off some and obviate unnecessary work.

I was also convinced that lessons would proceed at a much slower pace, that the online nature would trammel understanding and efficiency to some degree — that things would take longer to do, in short. And in taking longer the materials would *last* longer, giving more time to reflect and evaluate. Yet I worried that it was the wrong advice and I did not want to underserve teachers; so this caused me some anxiety until someone shared an article from Harvard Business Publishing, with one passage in particular speaking to that feeling I had. The article explained it was important to be realistic, recommending teachers to “cut your expected outcomes and productivity goals by half. If you have four desired outcomes to achieve in an in-person class, plan to accomplish one or two virtually.” (Green et al., 2020). Realistically, we have to expect things taking longer, less getting done than we would like, but at the same time the very nature of the online classes afforded more reflective opportunities, more time to evaluate what was effective and what was not. While I cannot claim this as vindication, it did go a considerable way to relieving some of that nagging doubt.

How Long Should We Teach?

Mindful of “Zoom fatigue”, where students and teachers alike suffer from tired eyes and awkward posture as a result of sitting constantly in front of a screen, our university settled on a recommended strategy of a lesson being 50% synchronous and the remainder asynchronous, i.e. 45 minutes of a 90-minute class should be spent online and the second half offline, where students do assignments.

In the early days of my classes there was so much set-up involved, so many systems or requirements to explain to the students, that my classes always went far longer than the recommended 50% synchronous, and I worried that I was going to burn out both the students and myself. When I finally ended a class at around the 45-minute mark, having assigned the asynchronous tasks, two things happened. First, I felt like a fraud: that I had not done my job, that this was too little. Second, I *thought* I detected disappointment in some of the students’ eyes, that they wanted more.

Accordingly, I started regularly asking my classes which was better: 50% synchronous/asynchronous, or longer classes? When asked verbally students almost invariably asked for longer classes, so to offset possible peer pressure I made use of the new Zoom polling feature, where they could vote anonymously. The results stayed the same: the students wanted longer classes with typically 90% or more preferring this.

For a few weeks I regularly reviewed their options, asking them if this was to their satisfaction and it remained constant: they still wanted longer synchronous sessions. Consequently, while many teachers hewed — with legitimacy — to the guidelines, I found myself teaching a minimum of 70 minutes online in every single class, with the full 90 minutes not being unusual. I worried about the small number of students in a class who had expressed a preference for shorter online lessons, and encouraged anyone who was experiencing discomfort to contact me or write about it in their reflections, but I never got a single case of this, and in subsequent polls these votes disappeared. Nonetheless I am aware of possible peer pressure at work here and I do try to keep a keen eye out for signs of distress or discomfort but as we, at the time of writing, approach the end of the semester the students still appear motivated and engaged.

So what lesson can I draw from this? The one that seems most pertinent is the value of negotiating with your students, that when they state a legitimate preference a teacher can gain a lot of trust and goodwill from acceding to them, or at least meeting halfway.

CONCLUSION

In addition to all the very real and legitimate worries a pandemic throws up, it also introduced the above doubts to my roles as teacher and coordinator. Old sureties were suddenly called into question, while well-intentioned university guidelines did not necessarily all seem to tally with student needs.

I found a feeling, a hunch, to be an unsatisfactory way to advocate strategy; in the absence of literature on unprecedented circumstances like this it was hard and somewhat daunting to trust to do what *felt* right, but upon reflection I have few regrets.

In regards to finding a satisfactory online lesson length, it was liberating to turn to the students, to let them find a duration that felt sufficient and let them help me find some balance.

REFERENCES

Green, L., Ringel, R., & Tarallo, B. (2020, May 13th). *5 steps to stay focused when teaching online*. <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/5-steps-to-stay-focused-when-teaching-online>