ONLINE EDUCATION DURING A PANDEMIC: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HOME SPACES

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused vast disruptions in teaching and learning at all levels of academia. According to UNESCO (2020), as many as 1.5 billion students in nearly 200 countries have been affected by school closures at the local or national level, representing approximately 90% of the global student population. Students and teachers in many countries have been forced to undergo a hasty migration from traditional classrooms to online lessons without an adequate amount of time to adjust to these changes.

The adjustment to learning from a home environment has not been an easy one. Many teachers have little to no experience teaching from home, and even for those teachers who have previously taught online courses, it has undoubtedly been a challenge to make the transition to a fully online teaching load. Likewise, many students may be experiencing online learning for the first time and are also likely to experience difficulties making this adjustment. With this rapid change, it has been necessary to make a strong effort to establish a satisfactory level of comfort on both sides. This paper explores some possible approaches to creating a classroom-like environment, and to avoiding discomfort and distraction while teaching or learning at home.

A WINDOW INTO EACH OTHER'S LIVES

An important part of the shift to online classes is the unavoidable prospect of teachers and students seeing into each other's lives in real time; teachers are often able to directly see students' living spaces and vice versa. This has the potential to cause uneasiness, as not all participants are comfortable sharing their personal lives in this manner. This may be exacerbated when the teacher or students have family members who are present in the home during class time. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, with most people encouraged to avoid unnecessary trips out, many teachers and students with families are likely to fall under this category.

ISSUES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

With schools closed and travel discouraged, I have needed to adjust my teaching style not only to a new method of delivery but also to the presence of family members one or two rooms away from my "classroom." With a spouse and a two-year-old child in my home, there have been two main factors to consider: first, the disruption to my family members' daily routines; second, the potential disruption to my classes.

The first has not been a great concern as my presence in the home (even while teaching a class) is not particularly disruptive; indeed, it has, at times, been beneficial. My child's linguistic development has been impressive during this period of home teaching; she has made rapid progress in her English proficiency, perhaps partly due to the frequency with which she is able to interact with both parents rather than one. This has perhaps been the greatest benefit my family has enjoyed from the shift to online teaching.

However, the possibility of disruption to my classes has been and remains an issue. As with most children of this age, my daughter has a great deal of curiosity, and she has shown great interest in the sounds emanating from her bedroom (my makeshift office). It has been necessary to go to great lengths to prevent her from entering the room and appearing on camera during class time. Fortunately, on the few occasions where she has successfully evaded all attempts to block her entry, the students have been occupied with classwork or group discussions and did not notice the intrusion.

Having anticipated the possibility of such disruptions, at the beginning of the semester I informed each of my classes that, due to the nature of working from home, there was a chance that my family members might appear on camera. I asked for their patience and understanding if this occurred. This also provided me with an opportunity to engage the students in a discussion about what they should do if they have similar problems. Many students live with their parents and/or siblings, and not all of them have private spaces in their home in which to study. As a result, it seemed likely that students would at times have to deal with family members disrupting their learning. Therefore, I decided to explicitly tell the students that I expected such disruptions and gave them some guidance as to what to do if this situation arose.

I instructed students to remain calm and simply excuse themselves (if they happened to be working in groups with other students), mute their microphones and turn off their cameras until the disruption ended. My rationale was that, even if the student's microphone were muted (which is generally the case during teacher-led sections of a lesson) the student would likely feel uncomfortable having their family member(s) on camera. Furthermore, the presence of another person could distract me if I noticed it happening. As many students will at times turn off their cameras while I am speaking (for various reasons), I expected this would be the easiest way to avoid distractions.

This suggestion has had mixed results. Some students will turn off their cameras when a family member is nearby, even if that person is not saying or doing anything. Other students, however, appear to be unfazed by such intrusions. In some cases students also attended class in less than ideal circumstances, such as in public places. This suggests students may not have always been comfortable in attending online classes from their home environments, and have therefore needed to find spaces elsewhere.

My efforts to separate my own home and work lives have been aided immensely by the use of a virtual background: a function built into some video conferencing applications which projects an image of the user's choice behind him or her, obscuring the true background. Rather than

showing students the inside of my home, I instead selected an image of a university classroom. While any photo can be used as a virtual background, I hoped that the sight of one of our university's distinctive classrooms would help promote the idea that the online classroom was to be treated as similarly as possible to the physical classroom.

Students were also able to use a virtual background, provided they were using a device which supported this functionality. It is interesting to note that only a small number of students chose to do so. There are several possible reasons why. First, as suggested above, some students may have been using devices which are incompatible with this function. Second, it is likely that some students disliked the background images available by default in the program and were unaware of the ability to select an image of their choice (or were uninterested in searching for a suitable image). Third, they may have felt that it was inappropriate to use a virtual background. This seems unlikely given that I have used one in every lesson, as have several students. Fourth, it is possible that they may have had difficulty using a virtual background, as its effectiveness is largely dependent on the physical characteristics of the user's room. Finally, and perhaps most likely, the students may simply have had no desire to use a virtual background.

I did not specifically address the use of virtual backgrounds during the orientation period, which was an oversight on my part. It might have been better to explicitly tell the students that it is acceptable to use a virtual background, provided the image was appropriate for a classroom setting - though it is possible that this would have created further confusion as to the appropriateness of a given image. However, I feel in hindsight that the benefits of doing so would have outweighed the drawbacks. It might have allowed the students to feel more comfortable learning in their homes and alleviated the need to turn off their cameras if a family member entered the room. I believe that, for learners to feel completely comfortable attending classes from their home environment, these issues must be addressed directly and thoroughly at the beginning of a course.

CONCLUSION

As the global pandemic continues, it has become clear that, in addition to the many other adjustments needed during this time, it is necessary for both students and teachers to possess a great deal of patience and understanding. Having procedures in place to help establish a good level of comfort with the online classroom, while setting clear rules and boundaries for home learning, will continue to be essential to creating a satisfactory online learning experience.

REFERENCES

UNESCO. (2020, June 15). Education: From disruption to recovery. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse.