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Pragmatic recommendations for a contingency passage of face-to-face teaching to online teaching

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A translation of my original piece "Sugestões pragmáticas para passagem de contingência do ensino presencial para online".

This translation was first disseminated at:
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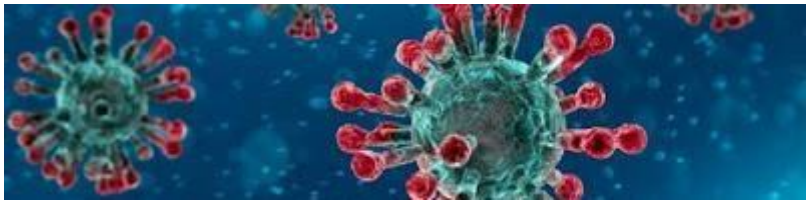
The ongoing Corona virus pandemic has already led several universities and colleges to shut down their operations country-wide, recommending that classes are replaced with online means. I've already been approached by a few colleagues requesting suggestions and pointers.
So, bearing in mind some off-the-mark aspects, unavoidable on something written as the quill flows and the keys pounce, I hope to contribute to help colleagues teaching in face-to-face education, in this phase of troubles.



Universidade Aberta (UAb), where I lecture since 2013, is an entirely online public Portuguese university, our national counterpart to the UK's Open University. It already has 32 years of experience in distance education, 13 of which online following its Virtual Pedagogic Model. We are revising it to include new technology developments, an ongoing process.

Obviously, there is plenty of information online, either at Universidade Aberta, or in other institutions and platforms. However, for one who must start teaching online overnight, there is probably no time, no administrative structure, and possibly not even self-confidence to learn how to adopt a full pedagogical model.

An important aspect is that face-to-face universities have a public with a striking difference from that of Universidade Aberta: while at UAb the typical student is between 30 to 50 years-old, meaning a working student, often with minors or other people to care for, at face-to-face universities the typical student is aged between 18 and 23 years-old, without professional or family responsibilities.

Considering all of this (colleagues requiring quick and pragmatic support; an administrative context organised with the expectation of 9 lecturing hours per week - 12 hours at polytechnic colleges; and students without schedule restrictions), here are my contingency-response suggestions.

1st - Don't just go and stream/record auditory lectures

Let's face the facts: only a few students in your auditorium are actually learning something with your 1-hour or 2-hour lecture. Yeah, we know you're a magnificent public speaker. Oh yeah, we know that students are responsible grown-ups, which will only fail to pay attention if they don't want to, and that they are even mandated to pay attention. We know all of that, for sure. But in fact, we also know that the traditional lecture at universities is a completely inefficient way of making use of time. If it was efficient, one could do midterms and finals at the exit of lectures, and students would reveal the excellency of their learning. But no: after spending one or two hours listening to an explanation, students must still go and study all of it again, so they then really learn. My point: lectures are effective for purposes such as framing, setting up students' viewpoints for subsequent study, forcing them to spend some time (and this won't happen the whole hour for the whole class) paying attention, since we know all too well that many will only care about studying when closer to assessment moments.

Therefore, if you go and record or live stream your lectures, you're just ticking items as done in your calendar, going through the motions. It'll be disheartening to you (because you won't be able to interact in the same flexible and immediate way you're used to). And it'll be disheartening for students (because they'll find lectures even more mind-numbing than usual).

Good "lectures" are not explanations: they are diversified moments. Framing moments, providing the lecturer's personal perspective on the requested study

topics; moments which provide examples that generate conflicts between students' perspectives and reality, alerting them to what may go unnoticed in traditional study; moments supporting self-reflection and organization of study work; and moments promoting debate, giving students a way to develop cognitive links between what they know, the interpretations they develop, and the knowledge and perspectives that the lecture wants them to reach.

In my next recommendation I provide alternatives to video lectures.

2nd - Use an online platform to organize study and students' interactions

Instead of recording or live streaming lectures, get hold of an online space. It can be your institution's Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas or whatever LMS system you use; if you don't have one there, you can create an online space in one of many available online collaboration platforms, or even combine a blog with a shared cloud drive, either at Portugal's MEO Cloud or the international options OneDrive, Google Drive, Dropbox, and more.

2.A - Identify for each week the materials that students should study

That is, what are the relevant pages in the textbook? Which papers? Which online videos? Which technical documents? Which case reports?

2.B - Identify the purpose of studying each material - be objective

This means you should not simply state "study such and such pages". The student will read them unknowing if the purpose is memorising facts or extracting some reflection. The student won't know if the point is confronting ideas from the conclusions of paper 1 with the middle table of paper 2, or instead add up the facts from a paper with those of the following one. State to students what you want them to achieve with each reading/playing/analysis.
In this process, include some training activities. Traditional exercises (not complex ones!) with their answers, problems for analysis alongside their resolution... tell students that the purpose is for them to check if they can reach those answers or resolutions through their study.
For content without straight, "right" answers, provide students with assessment rubrics: that is, tables that help them understand the structural aspects of a solid answer, or of an inconsistent one. There are plenty of online resources about it.

2.C - Lay out activities for discussion e reflection upon the content matter by the entire class - not just "doubt-clearing spaces"

Even with guidance, students can feel discouraged from studying or not really feel they are progressing. Doubts only come about to those successfully

progressing in their study. Those really in need of your teaching action... will probably lack any doubts. But you cannot engage one-on-one with auditorium-filling classes. So, you need them to engage in debate among themselves - or indeed debate you, but as a group, as in a physical class, not as office meetings.

If you have access to a Moodle installation of any other LMS platform, create (at least) one forum for each topic. In that forum, point out which key aspects require debate. Don't rely just on stuff that is lifted straight out of the readings. Please don't! Rather, post real cases, interesting cases for analysis. Theory dilemmas. Exercises, problems or cases that are not trivial to solve, which will lead many students to ask for help from colleagues and from the lecturer.

2.D - If you use some videos of your own, make them short and for framing/motivation; not for explanations

Students like videos. Its a communication format, it's a lingo they enjoy, as long as they're properly made. And when the lingo is the right one that contributes towards motivation. But they also provide a false sense of competence. Empirical research tells us that videos have very differentiated viewing rates, between those seeming them entirely and those watching for only a few minutes.

Therefore, the most effective videos are made for very specific purposes.

- Once in a while, shoe your face or use your voice, so that students feel that it's really their teacher there (it's not mandatory: you don't have to do it in all videos) - I only have a single video with my face, to launch a course.
- Make videos short (3-5 minutes, 6-7 tops) to provide your perspective on the contents that will be studying, to guide the study effort, to motivate. I leave here some examples of my own from an Informatics Engineering course at Universidade Aberta, but they are far from perfect - this is always a continuous improvement process.
- Direct them to videos already on the Net, ones you know are of good quality, as a way to drive students to adequate materials, rather than leaving them adrift in a sea of disinformation.

3rd – Be present in your online course

It's not enough to provide contents and activities, and then wait for queries. That will only support a tiny sliver of very devoted students. And even those are not getting their due support, because if you were there they'd reach farther. There are 9 hours per week (12 in polytechnic colleges) scheduled for lecturing.

3.A - Sow so you can reap

As I've mentioned in recommendation 2.C, don't just announce yourselves available to clarify doubts. It's your responsibility to disturb the waters of thinking, so that doubts emerge. Guide the debate, by providing specific goals. For instance, "Each student must analyse here a different YouTube video, under the scope of study materials x, y, z"; "Share here the result you got using the ACME tool on..."; "You should discuss these cases/examples/dilemmas following the principles of..."; "How can we combine the concepts of John Doe with those of Jane Doe, when they contradict each other in this case...?"; etc.

3.B - Intervene regularly

If students are not participating, go to the forum or discussion location and post some incentive. It can be a plain encouragement and making yourself available, early on. But you can also provide an example of what you want to see. Or share some novelty of interesting complement. Etc.

3.C - Talk with students, not to students

This follows from 3.B. It's not enough to say "Well then, are there no doubts?". That can even be counter-productive. Students must feel it worthwhile to intervene; that they will profit from it with what they'll learn and with what the teacher will clarify. If they feel that they can only intervene to exhibit competence and mastery... only those not requiring your teaching action will intervene.
When encouraging, provide examples of what could be a possible problem or doubt arising from studying, one that could waste lots of their time, but can be sorted out in minutes by their colleagues or teacher if brought about.
When replying to students, don't try to swallow up the sea by answering to each one (unless there's just a few of them): group several queries that have something in common and make a global response to all of them, as if in a physical lecture you allowed several students to have their say and then you'd intervene to consolidate or dissect the discussion.
Try to interpret what underlies students' misunderstanding. Instead of assuming that something was wrongly understood or resulting from not paying attention, ask, providing hypotheses, whether the student is seeing the issue this way or that. Let the final response to a later stage, when it's clearer to you, to the student, and to all colleagues, that you're all in sync.

4th - Use synchronous moments for encouragement and human support: not for content delivery

Face-to-face students are all in the same time zone. And unlike those at Universidade Aberta, almost all have their workweek free for studying (i.e.,

the vast majority don't have a job or family members to care for). This allows you to schedule synchronous sessions and actually have students attend them, be they videoconferencing or chatting.

4.A - Use a community space to avoid feelings of isolation

Today students are not in front of a computer at all times. But they always hang with their smartphones. So, having a chat space with mobile notifications is a good solution to break feelings of isolation. You can use, for instance, WhatsApp, which enables students to have the comfort of knowing that all they write is immediately received by the class. The ones available can react and that cosiness of having available support is comforting. You can complement this with spaces for publishing and sharing documents and other materials, such as a wiki, a Moodle forum, a shared cloud folder, or even a 3D virtual world, depending on your availability, ambition, and perspective.

4.B - Answer queries live only for personal or urgent issues, not as a shortcut

If a student feels that it only takes posting a query on WhatsApp, Skype, Zoom, etc. to get a response... that student will henceforth always use that channel. But there are more students, not just that one! If that query doesn't have any personal dimensions, or other recommending some privacy, the proper thing is to provide a commitment of swiftness in that synchronous moment, but do the process in the online shared space, benefiting all. For instance: "Place that query in this topic's forum, and I hereby promise to answer you in the next half-hour/hour/until the end of the day" (depending on what the situation calls for).

This way, the student has the comfort of knowing that an effective and assured answer will be provided, that the teacher is present, but the query if exhibited to all, generating dynamics in the course and encouraging other students to also come forwards with their queries. And the teacher's answer benefits the overall discussion, not just the student asking it in private.

If the case at hand recommends an immediate answer to the query, then answer it right away. For instance, when a student only has that time slot available at a network-providing location before returning a lodging devoid of network connections, or because the student has been recovering from health issues and one shouldn't waste a moment when the student pulled together enough strength. But in those cases, when should place upon the student the commitment of sharing with the class: "I'm going to answer you right now, but please make me a favour and go afterwards to the course forum, to share your query and my answer, benefiting all colleagues." It is important that it is the student the one doing the sharing, if possible, due to it being a contribution towards peer dynamics (students) not just the teachers' magistral dynamics.

5th - Get more informed - and then some - about online education, and innovate

Going back to what I started with, there's an immensity of papers on how to teach online. The tips I've posted here are just a first drop, for this contingency situation. There are more colleagues helping out, you can start by the tips of George Veletsianos. Then check our 10 fundamental principles in this article at The Chronicle of Higher Education. And then go check more advice for the current pandemics, provided by Tony Bates.

Besides tips, there is a deluge of techniques, practices, and knowledge. A nice summary of 25 years of educational technology has recently been published as a free PDF book by the Athabasca University Press. In the communities and collections at the Open Repository of UAb and other online universities you can find immense resources and works on the most varied aspects of this field. And both in YouTube an in many other online platforms and Web sites you can find suggestions, instructions, examples, tips, and multiple techniques and media.

For instance, you can use Twine so students can create interactive online stories; shared mind maps so you can track how students are extracting meaning from a disjoint set of documentation specimens; have interlinked portfolios of Web pages and shared documents to track distributed team work; and much more.

6th - Be an academic also when reflecting upon e-learning, use your critical sense, don't fall for "I think that"-ism

Too many people, who avoid uninformed or ignorant opinions in their own fields, come to teaching, to education, to learning, full of themselves. Education Sciences have already about 100 years of progress as a science. There is creation of knowledge. There is an enormous community studying, researching, publishing results, and trying to reproduce them. Details such as determining the length of videos depending on their purpose, their structure, their use in the context, how one should write, etc.... for all this there is research. Google Scholar is your friend. It is well worthwhile, as in all scientific fields, to explore the field's literature and get ever more informed.

Dear colleagues, going the way of distance education is worth it.
And who know, maybe you can even use in the future, in combination with your face-to-face lecturing, to extract form each its maximum worth.