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Teaching, Learning, and Assessment during Covid-19: Reflections from the frontline of higher education

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This article explores how Hibernia College, as a higher education institution, adapted to full-time online teaching, learning, and assessment during Covid-19. It reflects on changing pedagogies and the formation of a reimagined identity for teacher educators.

Introduction

When the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) declared a global pandemic on 12 March 2020, our lives changed rapidly. It had been over a century since the last pandemic, and suddenly we found ourselves unprepared as cases of Covid-19 surged relentlessly throughout the world. For many of us, the 'assumptive world' (Parkes & Weiss, 1983), in which we assume our lives continue as they always have, changed overnight. In education, the transition to online teaching was rapid, prompting opportunities and challenges.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes, where practice forms the kernel of teaching, learning, and assessment, were greatly impacted. Shifting their foundation required significant innovation from providers, who had to balance the needs of external agencies and programme accreditation with the needs of students and internal provision. Almost overnight, our identity as teacher educators changed as physical classrooms and lecture halls were closed. The seismic shift in how we taught was a shock for many, but it also provided great opportunity for meaningful innovations.

Having more than twenty years' experience in blended learning helped us as a college to transition to full-time remote learning. Remaining solution-focused, we embraced the move from having 45% of our content taught online to a 100% virtual learning experience for our student teachers. To adapt fully to the move online, the academic team needed to re-examine core teaching pedagogies and develop new ways of engaging with students. Most notably, emerging issues were the need for faculty to (a) examine existing notions of teacher identity, (b) foster a community of learners with opportunities to collaborate and build connections, and (c) reconfigure assessment structures and practices.

Teacher identity

Covid-19 instigated a shift in our teacher identities when all that was familiar had changed. For many educators, this evolving identity required parallel

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Reflections from the
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shifts in their conceptions of who they are as teachers and in what they believe is important as they develop their ‘electronic pedagogy’ (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). To support this changing role, significant investment was required in faculty’s professional development. Hibernia College established a teacher support website to support educators’ pedagogical role. In addition to these resources, we designed a series of live weekly webinars where teachers could see and experience the digital tools in action. These were extremely well attended, and soon a community of practice formed online. Teachers valued their colleagues’ sharing of experiences and the exchange of good practice (see www.teachersupport.ie).

Identity evolves as teachers gain experience, consolidate professional knowledge, and adopt plans of personal and professional development (Tsui, 2007). When surveyed, our faculty discussed what worked during the transition to online teaching and what could be improved to enhance the experience for their students:

The small-group work is essential and to allow space for raising/noting concerns and issues maybe not covered in the presentations and hear the voices that are often silent! Vital to have space for questions and feedback so as to know what students have understood around the material, and any concerns they may have.

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If students in the break-outs had an opportunity to pose a question to us [staff], based on foundation content, as a way of opening up a genuine conversation. And that is what we should aim for, I think, to move beyond Q&A, beyond task completion, and create a real conversation for 30 minutes.

Use polls more, to involve students in another way. Mentimeter or Kahoot would add another element of interactivity. Overall, we might shift the balance slightly from presentation to participation. I also think it might be worth asking to develop the flipped learning a little ... make their task more specific, more demanding, more central to the day.

When faculty engaged with new ways of teaching online in collaboration with others, it gave them an avenue to critically engage, giving them the confidence to try new approaches.

Fostering a community of learners

At the heart of all good teaching is the teacher’s relationship with their students. That does not change with the transition to online. The social dimensions of learning and how connected students feel are increasingly acknowledged as central to their engagement and well-being, and this is even more critical online. In the virtual world, student engagement is a prerequisite for learning (Guo et al., 2014). For some teachers, however, interactions can seem cold online.

The increasing use of an ever-expanding range of digital technologies continues to affect methods of engaging with learners and of creating and providing high-quality learning environments that are increasingly

personalised, media-rich, and interactive. In our online teaching we showed faculty the tools to maintain effective social relationships between learners and teachers and between teachers themselves. We presented examples of digital tools to promote engagement and connection and stimulate discussion. We saw first-hand how effective and timely communication with students puts them at ease and reduces any anxieties they may have: webinars, emails, and phone calls have all provided effective.

Our incoming student teachers in spring 2020 never met us in person. Their orientation day should have been a face-to-face event but was moved online. The class of September 2020 are also unlikely to meet peers for some time. To help a smooth transition and support the development of a community of learners, we established a digital café on Zoom and scheduled it weekly. This provided a space for student teachers to meet informally and build collegiality. The cafés were optional, but students found them very helpful to create bonds:

Worthwhile, nice to get a chance to speak to your classmates. Beneficial to bounce ideas off one another.

I really enjoyed it. It was great to finally meet and chat with our group as best we could. It was also nice to ask one another questions regarding course content, as some, including myself, are still a little uncomfortable asking questions in the bigger group.

It was a nice informal way to chat to fellow students and nice to have a space we can do this, especially in current times. Great idea.

We also looked at our approaches to collaborative learning. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have consistently evidenced the benefits of collaborative learning (Hattie, 2009; Educational Endowment Foundation, 2020) in fostering critical thinking through discussion, clarification of ideas, and evaluation of others' ideas and reflection (Gokhale, 1995, 1996; Higgins et al., 2012). The method we used allowed for collaborative teaching: a number of lecturers taught in an online classroom before moving in and out of break-out rooms. Students praised this move:

I liked the fact that there were different tutors contributing throughout the day with very different styles and presentation methods (something as small as having a different styled deck of slides made a difference). It always worked best when there was a second lecturer clarifying points and answering questions in the chat box.

Your department took a group of strangers and gave us the tools and support to become friends and classmates, to share our ideas in discussion groups and lean on each other for support and help without ever meeting each other face to face. I've found online teaching really exciting, but challenging too – and I know my students! I can only guess how much work must have gone into creating a space to build such a community behind the scenes.

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Reconfiguring assessment structures

Contingency plans for assessment were possibly the most challenging, particularly for practice placement modules. Assessments had to be adapted to suit the new restrictions: the oral exam was moved to Zoom, school placement assessment moved to a reflective online interview, and written exams were replaced with take-home papers. In student teacher research, for some cohorts, submission dates were extended, and students were given guidance on data collection in the constrained circumstances. For other cohorts, the research project will now be desk-based and focus on an integrative literature review methodology. These were new experiences for the college, and ensuring academic integrity was paramount. Guidelines were written for these new exams, to support students and assessors and to ensure academic integrity.

The use of video in assessment was another new and worthwhile development. As well as fostering digital and communication skills, it helped to create an invaluable personal link between the student and college. Key to ensuring the success and accountability of this process was the rigorous review of learning outcomes, grade descriptors, and marking systems, the creation of targeted sample questions, and the selection and training of assessors.

“ **The oral exam was moved to Zoom, school placement assessment moved to a reflective online interview, and written exams were replaced with take-home papers.** ”

As part of our revised assessment for placement, we incorporated a new form of online reflection in a forum called Community of Learners. The aim was to give students an opportunity to participate in an online community of learners based on shared beliefs, values, and experiences of placement. We introduced it to the students at a webinar and outlined the criteria for participation. Students were given daily topics for discussion and were asked to make four daily contributions. The topics were based on their experiences on school placement and related to areas we had noted as challenging, engaging, and worth exploring.

During a subsequent interview assessment, some students highlighted this as a highly collaborative and beneficial opportunity to engage in professional discussion. Some said it would encourage them to actively engage in collegial professional discussions in their future workplace. The experience has prompted us to consider using this format of reflection during future school placements.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has fuelled the debate on online learning. It is important to recognise that online teaching is a complex task that requires commitment and can be time-consuming and demanding. All teachers must be trained to design and deliver online, with professional development that focuses on both the use of technology and online pedagogy. Effective online teaching requires the skills of a team who can contribute their knowledge of content, pedagogy, and technology, which go hand in hand. Ultimately, teaching in the digital age requires a paradigm shift whereby ‘the responsibility and to some extent the power to change lies within teachers and instructors themselves’ (Bates, 2015, p. 436).

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If you're successful in delivering eLearning, the learner won't be focused on the "e" part, they'll just be focused on how awesome the "Learning" part is."

– Keith Philips