

Rapid transition from face-to-face to online learning: Application of lesson learned from Australia to the local context

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Abstract

This is a work in progress paper exploring alternative ways to convert face-to-face teaching into online and blended mode for the institution especially in context to Covid-19 health crisis. The study employed literature review of the publicly available information and research and some online consultation with academics in different part of the world. As a part of the study, the literature around the rapid transition was explored by the authors and customised the lessons learned from them to the local institution. The information then was used to create a plan to implement blended learning in the institute.

Keywords: Covid-19, Online Learning, Australian experience, LMS

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Background

Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way the students learn. The main author of this paper was the principal of the Shree Bhagwat Vidyapeeth Shikshashastri Mahavidyalaya, Sola, Ahmedabad when this plan was made. The institute is catering to the students wanting to be the teachers of Sanskrit in public school system of India. The institute has intake of 55 students per semester and the course constitute of four semesters, in all 2 year. After 2 year, students are graduated with bachelor's in education with majoring in Sanskrit. The institute delivers all education in Sanskrit medium. The institute has limited staff due to the limited funding. The technology and infrastructure available to the students is very limited. The institute has computer lab with 15 computers with no internet and one of the classrooms has data projector.

The institute has in all 8 lecturers. The ability of the lecturers to use the technology is very limited and there is no allocated funding for the retraining of the staff to strengthen the technical knowledge and improve their abilities. As many universities all over the world, our institute also had to deliver all teaching online in response to the COVID-19 health crisis during 2020-2021.

Around March 2020, the institution had to be close. In Jun 2020, the face-to-face exam was conducted with Covid restriction and social distancing. Sem 3 was assessed through assignment and internship which was submitted to the lecturers with graphic/documentary evidence of teaching students via Zoom. It was challenging to manage the teaching and assessment at a distance and yet maintaining the quality of education with no or limited technology access. There arose an urgent need of adjustments to be made to so that majority of their teaching and learning activities to be provided online. As compared to any other well-funded universities in India and overseas, the institute had no technology support staff or learning designers to help with making this shift from entirely face to face to entirely online

teaching and learning. Students were not technically equipped either. It is responsibility of the principal to take this challenge as an opportunity to review the teaching and learning in the institute and other universities globally. The institution needed to develop strategies for the teaching and learning to deal with emergencies such as pandemic and develop plan for that could be gradually implemented to prepare the institution for online education.

Teaching before Covid-19

Prior to Covid-19 pandemic, the institution delivered face-to-face teaching during the regular teaching hours. The students have after hour access to the computer lab if they needed as the students resides on campus. The computer lab has no internet. All the assessment were conducted as summative assessment at the end of each semesters. There were no interim assessments. When Covid-19 hit, as there was no such plan in place in case of any such situation or for the students who may have to access the education online in special circumstances.

Impact of closure on teaching

The institution was closed due to pandemic from March 2020 onwards. Initially it was assumed that the closure would be temporary and hence no serious consideration was made for the alternative arrangement but within few weeks of closure, it was apparent that the closure would remain, and the institute required alternate modes of teaching delivery. As any other institutions/universities, institution was not prepared for this. The author, being a principal had responsibility to organise the teaching to maximise the learning outcomes for the students. The first and feasible response was to deliver lecture via Zoom as all students have access to mobile device with data. The lectures were delivered through Zoom from July 2020 onwards. The institute have no provision to comply to social distancing requirement face-to-face classes.

Despite that the lectures were running well, there were practical constraints. The lecturers and students were using mobile phone and hence the small screen. It was hard to see the students let alone the screen sharing. There was another practical constraint around the recording of the lectures. There was no Learning Management System (LMS) through which the lectures could be delivered and recorded for the further reference.

This situation created an urgent need to explore various delivery options that could be used in special circumstances such as pandemic. As a principal, the author started to explore the open-source material around the rapid transition from face-to-face to blended and online mode of teaching delivery. The literature around the best online practices and rapid transition

was explored from different university websites all over the world and published research papers.

The following section outlines some of the relevant literature and best practices around the globe that were taken into account to learn lesson from and planned the teaching and learning for the institute.

Impact of pandemic on higher education

Late 2019 Covid-19 health crisis emerged, and social distancing requirements have necessitated all education institutions to interrogate their current or predominant practices of teaching and learning (Huber et al., 2020). The mass closure of the tertiary institutions required rapid response in delivering teaching and learning in online mode. In response, institutions were bound to transition and scale up online teaching to ensure that learning would not be completely disrupted. This transition seemingly happened overnight (Dhawan, 2020) and has, consequently, mostly been characterized as adventitious, rapid and incipient (Johnson et al., 2020). Johnson et al. (2020) further states

“For many, the headlong thrust into providing learning experiences for students via a digital interface has been confusing, unfamiliar and unwanted. Some experienced discomfort and anxiety not only due to the technology but also from being forced to employ new pedagogical techniques at a moment’s notice” (Johnson et al., 2020)

Almost every course had to move online. In surveying close to 900 faculty and administrators at various institutions in the United States, Johnson et al. (2020) found that the guidance and information about the best practices in online learning was most sought after by the academics. Watermeyer et al. (2020) suggested that in the rush to perform online migration of courses academics are employing “entry-level” digital pedagogies. Consequently, whilst the pandemic has accelerated the inevitability of a widespread adoption of online learning there exists a concern that the rapid response to online may have resulted in prejudicial and distorted views of digital pedagogies from the academic community (Watermeyer et al., 2020).

There is obviously much uncertainty currently plaguing the educational landscape. However, what could be conclude from emerging literature is that, in the midst of significant disturbance and dissatisfied staff and students, there is a need for support staff who possess expertise in how students learn. This is affirmed by the recommendation of equipping academics skills required to effectively teach online. Failure to do so may result in “dumbed-down pedagogy associated with the current emergency online migration”(Watermeyer et al., 2020)

The tertiary institutions around the globe have professional staff called *learning designers* who have expertise in the area of collaboration, technology, teaching and learning and project management. In recent times, the expertise of the learning designers was utilised by the tertiary institution due to their expertise in online learning (Pevneva & Edmunds, 2020). Unfortunately, little is known about the ways in which educational designers have adapted and responded to the unfolding crisis. One of the key challenges for teaching staff, in many cases, is their lack of knowledge of the pedagogical principles needed to design and facilitate online learning (Rapanta et al., 2020). The gap between the necessity and support required by the academics and the actual skills of the academics can be minimised with the help of learning designers. The learning designers proved to be the best support in designing the remote/online learning. The literature suggests that where the transition was made successfully, the learning designers plays central role.

The following section will discuss how the teacher education is carried out in Australia and how web technologies are used in a rapid transition from face to face to online learning.

Rapid transition – Australian experience

As a principal, the author needed to know the first hand experience of how the web technology is used. Several teacher education staff (lecturers) of different universities had been contacted to discuss the use of web technology in teacher education in special context to the Covid-19 health crisis. Amongst all contacted universities, the Charles Darwin University (CDU) from Australia was studied as a case to gain better insight into web technology used for teacher education and how the transition took place from face to face to online.

CDU is one of the most prominent online universities offering face to face and online teacher education. Due to pandemic, the university was closed, and the teaching was offered online. CDU uses the LMS (called Blackboard) to deliver the teaching material. The example of the course menu is presented below.

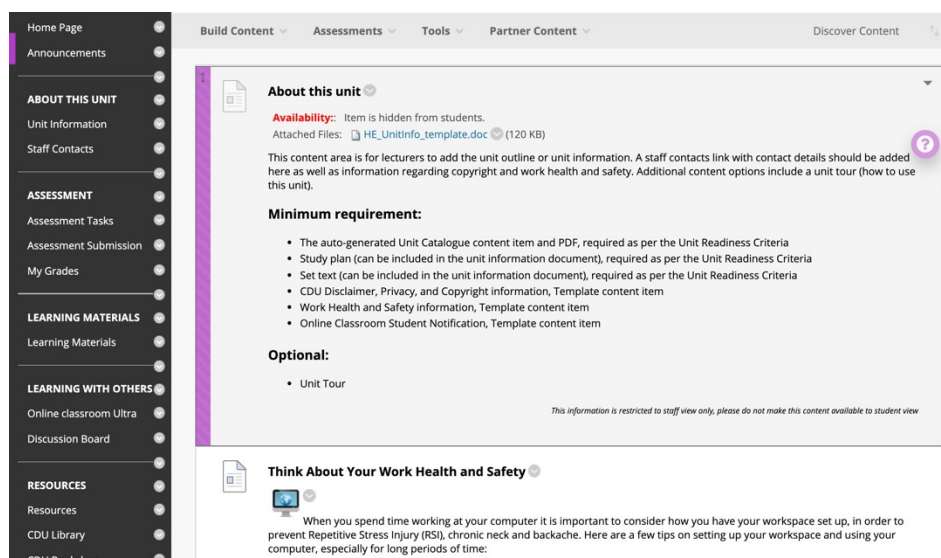


Fig.1 Example of Blackboard LMS course menu

The assessment is done via online submission of the written assignments and participation in the discussion board, which is an online tool in the LMS. The LMS has separate sites for each unit (subjects). Each unit site has teaching material that includes text and multimedia material. The material is developed by the lecturers and presented through LMS with the help of learning designers who are expert on various aspects of online learning. The lecturers have weekly lectures, and all lectures are recorded and placed in LMS for the further reference for the students. The students may or may not attend lectures depending on their convenience and they can watch the recording of the lectures at their convenience. Students are engaged in meaningful discussion on weekly topics through the online discussion board that lecturers moderate. During the semester, the lecturer is available to answer any questions that students have via email. All email queries are promptly answered.

At the end of the semester, students fill out the feedback form suggesting any creative ways the course can be improved. The next iteration of the course offered includes those suggestions and the content is amended. Textbooks are not necessarily part of the material. The university endeavors to offer cutting edge information in the subject area and hence at times includes latest research papers as a part of the course rather than prescribed textbooks. School placement is part of the teacher education and in pandemic situation, it was cancelled due to the pandemic. As the practicum is part of the teaching degree, students will have to fulfill the practicum requirements when schools reopen. The practical school teaching experience is a non-negotiable part of the teaching degree.

Reflection and recommendations

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The review of the literature and the case study of CDU provided greater insight into not only the use technology but also the need of better understanding of pedagogy and teaching and learning process and modes of delivery. The outcome of the review process resulted into following recommendations for the institute:

- ✚ The institute needs to make the required technology available for the students. This recommendation has financial implications. As a residential college, the institution needs to provide a computer lab with internet access for the students.
- ✚ Institution needs to make LMS available for students to access all the learning material. LMS can be used for engaging students into synchronous (e.g. online lectures) and asynchronous activities (e.g. discussion, access of content and group work).
- ✚ The academic staff required to update their technical skills/training to be prepared for the technology enhanced teaching and learning.
- ✚ Academic staff also need to be aware of online pedagogy. This includes the understanding of prominent teaching and learning theories, constructive alignment (Biggs, 1982, 2014), TPACK (Koehler et al., 2013) and other foundational theories of learning.
- ✚ Students also need some training to be able to effectively use the interface if made available.
- ✚ Recruitment of learning design specialist for the institute.

The next step

The next step for the institute would be to explore the possibilities of mobilising some funding and source appropriate technology to strengthen the blended and online component of our teaching. Professional development of the staff is vital in successfully implementing technology enhanced learning. The institute would also need explore the possibilities of having the digital library of the material created by the lecturers for the reuse and repurpose the material created overtime. This will save lecturers' time and help maintain the quality of the teaching and learning.

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