

## Preparation for Emergency Remote Teaching: A Personal Reflection

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### Abstract

*Due to COVID-19, almost all educational institutions were temporarily closed across the globe. As a result, many educators have focused on delivering courses through emergency remote teaching. Preparation for remote teaching was itself a great challenge. In this reflective paper, I have presented my own experience of preparation for emergency remote teaching for one my courses in one of the Canadian universities. I have mentioned in the paper the factors that were helpful in the preparation for remote teaching such as my own background knowledge of online learning, training for remote teaching, designing and developing the course, using synchronous and asynchronous, engaging students, and presences.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, course development, online learning, remote teaching, teaching

### Introduction

We have a history of past pandemics e.g. Flu, Cholera, H1N1 influenza, HIV/AIDS, and SARS. Probably, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is the worst of all of them. In the current scenario, almost every country around the world has been trying to control the spread of coronavirus (Whitworth, 2020). The coronavirus disease has been impacting all spheres of life. We often listen to the news about the effects of COVID-19 on local and global economies. In a matter of days, our society changed, schools were closed, most of the stores and malls were closed, and many countries ordered nationwide lockdown due to the COVID-19 (Shim & Lee, 2020).

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global pandemic. During the month of April 2020, most of the

formal and non-formal educational institutions were temporarily closed to prevent COVID-19 spread. Approximately 1.5 billion children's education was disrupted due to the pandemic around the world (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Quezada et al. (2020) made a very good point by stating that most of the stakeholders were not ready for school closures during COVID-19. In the adverse situation, some of the institutions considered offering courses through emergency remote teaching. Many educators struggle with switching in-person teaching to remote teaching (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Offering courses through remote teaching is a daunting task which involves a considerable planning, training and preparation. In March 2020, I was assigned an undergraduate course to teach on-campus at one of the Canadian universities for spring 2020. Due to COVID-19, during the same month, the university announced to offer all its courses through remote and online teaching.

Primarily, online courses are developed with the help of instructional designers and content experts. Therefore, the online courses are intentionally designed and developed to teach through learning management systems where the students and the instructors involved in teaching and learning from separate places. On the other hand, remote teaching is different from pre-planned online teaching (Whittle et al., 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) define emergency remote teaching as a temporary shift of teaching to alternatives modes of delivery. As I mentioned earlier, switching an on-campus course to remote teaching is not an easy task specifically when there is around one month to deliver the course. Shim and Lee (2020) clearly state that teachers and learners face challenges in using emergency remote teaching as they pre-planned class design are not available. In one month, I prepared the course by designing and developing the course for remote teaching and by applying various strategies to teach. In this paper, I will reflect on the strategies that I have applied to prepare my course for remote teaching.

### **Locating the Literature**

First, I looked for online available literature on emergency remote teaching. From search engines, data-based sources, and online library sources, I found some articles on the topic. Through an in-depth analysis of the literature, it appeared that the scholarship on emergency remote teaching was minimal. Most of the papers on the topic were published in 2020. Throughout the literature that was published in the past year, various themes emerged in response to emergency remote teaching. The very first theme was that most of the educators were not ready for remote

teaching. As educators extensively use technology for emergency remote teaching, this situation uncovers a gap between teaching preparation programs and the use of technology for teaching at distance (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Some researchers reported that many of the educators were not aware of how to use the technology. Gares et al., (2020) reported that limited internet bandwidth and speed were problematic for some of the instructors and students. They further noted that access to the internet was worse in some of the rural communities.

Some researchers demonstrated students' lived experiences on remote teaching. The themes emerged from students' lived experiences regarding access to technological devices, access to the Internet, financial constraints and the need for emotional support (Abel, 2020). Gares et al., (2020) reflected on their own experiences of switching in-person teaching to remote teaching and reported some challenges such as academic integrity, laboratory component and the use of technology. In the literature, educators were also concerned about building a positive and meaningful relationship with students. They see it as one of the challenges of remote teaching. I have found a variety of sub topics relevant to emergency remote teaching. The available literature on the topic provided enough guidance for emergency remote teaching. Due to the pandemic and sudden move to emergency remote teaching, some of the researchers describe differences between online teaching and emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020). Many researchers have focused on suggesting ways to switching to emergency remote teaching. Others emphasized a need of incorporating technology for the successful emergency remote teaching. Some argued in favor of better teacher training (Whalen, 2020). Gelles et al. (2020) asserted the need for flexibility and self-discipline for students.

### **Background Knowledge of Online Learning**

Some researchers report that the differences in background knowledge may lead to differences in understanding of the concepts (Neuman et al., 2014). The background knowledge of online learning may vary from person to person. The first effective factor was my own background knowledge of instructional technology, particularly online learning. In my case, I completed some research projects in the past regarding the use of instructional technology. Additionally, during my doctoral project, I had focused on online learning. I have read many articles and a couple of books on online learning. I have also completed some online courses through

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). I have had the opportunity teach many graduate level courses through online learning. Therefore, when I was asked to prepare the course for remote teaching, I was well aware of issues, trends, and challenges in online learning. I knew the use of online teaching and learning. Some researchers add that academic background, online teaching experience and online teaching dedication are important factors for online teaching adoption (Badia et al., 2017).

### **Training for Remote Teaching**

Throughout the literature, many researchers support the use professional development opportunities for faculty. For example, Diaz et al. (2009) suggested that the successful institutions provide student centered professional development opportunities to the faculty. In order to prepare the faculty for remote teaching, the host university not only offered online training but also offered financial incentives for those who completed it. The training was offered through online learning. This was a complete self-paced training module. I enrolled in the module and successfully completed the training. The module covered many important topics such as remote teaching approaches, remote learning, tools for remote instructions, and online assessment. One of the beneficial points of the training session was that the module was open in my learning management system and I could revisit the topics whenever needed. Additionally, I took some initiatives to prepare myself for remote teaching. For example, I attended a webinar ‘How to Teach Online Effectively Using Zoom’ which was offered by Contact North and moderated by Dr. Ron Owston. This webinar was very informative which guided me to use Zoom for my live sessions. I learned many strategies from that webinar such as using breakout rooms for group discussions or designing a survey. YouTube is another very important source of learning. I watched a couple of short YouTube videos on using Zoom for teaching and learning.

### **Course Design and Development**

During the pandemic, the curriculum transformation for the remote teaching was rapid without enough preparation time (Mohammed et al., 2020). My course was not ready as I was the first time offering the course. I was responsible for preparing the course starting from designing, developing and delivering the course. Chen (2014) points out that instructional designers and developers use principles of

learning to inform their practices. Based on the program and the course expectations, first of all, I created the learning outcomes and aligned those learning outcomes with assessment and lessons. I already had a concept map. Then, I prepared the course syllabus. In the syllabus, I clearly stated the expectations. I used simple instructions. I also prepared a weekly schedule for the course. So, students would know what was happening in each week. Then, I designed the modules and lessons on a word document. I made 4 modules, each with three lessons. I named the modules and lessons as I knew that some students would not be able to have access to the textbook due to COVID-19. Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) argued in favor of using open educational resources in these challenging times. Therefore, I decided not to use a specific textbook; instead, I used open educational resources. I took extensive benefit from the google search engine and looked for the resources which were easily and freely available online. When I found the resources, I analyzed them to ensure that they were suitable for the course. After writing the description of each module and lesson, I uploaded all the material on the learning management system. Although a university staff was there to help, as I mentioned earlier I have a background in online learning, I myself developed online modules, lessons, discussion boards and assessment sections on my learning management system.

### **Use of Synchronous and Asynchronous**

When I was designing and developing the course, I had three very important points in my mind e.g. student engagement, development of students' self-regulation skills and student involvement in collaborative projects (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). Aguliera and Nightengale-Lee (2020) emphasize differentiating students' experiencing by adding flexible content delivery, collaboratively developed expectations and the learning experience. Primarily the course was scheduled on-campus and there were some expectations that the course would be delivered with all synchronous sessions. I was aware that online learning was a different learning environment. Therefore, I did not want to imitate the face to face class to an online class. I had discussions with the administration and I decided to use the blended learning model with synchronous and asynchronous modes of delivery. In one week, the students would work asynchronously by reading the learning resources and writing the posts at their own convenience. The students had flexibility in writing their posts. They had one complete week to write their posts. In the second week, the students would read the learning resources before coming to the synchronous session which was held on a specific time. In synchronous sessions, the students

talked to each other, shared their viewpoints, and felt like part of the community. Thus, I used both modes in my course synchronous and asynchronous.

## **Implementation**

Disasters create disruptions for all including students, teachers, staff and administrators (Hodges et al., 2020). As educators, we need to understand our learners who may not have the same interest in studies due to the crises. Therefore, student active engagement in the course is vitally important. Martin and Bolliger (2018) demonstrate that student engagement is important to increase their motivation and to decrease isolation factor in online courses. Chakraborty and Nafukho (2014) found that some factors are very important for student engagement such as creating and maintaining positive learning environment, building learning community, prompt feedback and appropriate technology. In both modes of delivery, asynchronous and synchronous, I paid special attention to students' active engagement. During an asynchronous week, for example, the students would engage with the content by reading the resources and then, write a post on the given topic. During the same week, each student had to comment on a fellow's post by agreeing and or disagreeing with the fellow's viewpoint. In the synchronous sessions, the students would discuss and share their experiences and viewpoints in small groups as well as in large groups. For the live sessions, the university bought license from the Zoom. The Zoom has a very good feature of breakout rooms where you can divide the whole class in small and large groups (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Serembus & Kemery, 2020). I used breakout rooms frequently to engage students in live discussions. Additionally, I was flexible with students' requests for extensions in assignment submissions. Some researchers suggest the use of flexibility in online courses due to technological, connectivity and mental health issues (Schlesselman, 2020).

## **Presences in the Course**

According to Bowers and Kumar (2015), one of the main reasons for students' dropout is the lack of social and teacher presence in online courses. I was aware that interaction is a social phenomenon (Picciano, 2017). Therefore, I was interested in creating ways to interact with my students in the online course so they did not feel isolated. It was my main aim that my students should perceive me as a real person on the other side of the computer. In the literature on online

teaching and learning, three types of presences are very common: cognitive, social, and teaching (Garrison et al., 2000). Some researchers suggested some techniques to enhance social presence in the course such as introductions of participants, facilitating some social interaction along with academic interaction, and providing collaborative learning experiences (Cobb, 2009). I took special care in showing my presences in the course in various ways. I logged in the course three or four times a day. I checked students' emails and replied timely. I provided prompt feedback on assignments and on weekly discussions. If a student needed one on one support, I set a live session for the student to clear the concepts. Each week, I posted a news item about the current or upcoming module or lesson or assignment. I also designed students' final projects in a way that encouraged students to work in groups. Furthermore, I have regular meeting with my students synchronously and asynchronously (Gares et al., 2020).

### **Conclusion**

Of course, moving an on-campus course to remote teaching was not an easy task for many educators around the globe. Most of the educators use multiple strategies to be successful in the remote teaching. In preparation for my course for remote teaching, many factors played a critical role. My background knowledge of online learning is one of them. I also pushed the boundaries by training myself through the available resources. I frequently used asynchronous and synchronous modes of delivery. During these challenging times, flexibility was another factor which played an important role. The students who asked for extensions had the extensions to submit their papers. I made the learning environment positive clear course expectations, prompt feedback and through active learning. I made possible in the course that the students could reciprocate my social, pedagogical and cognitive presences. All these educational resources, experiences, and training guided me to design, develop, and teach the course in an emergency. This was my journey of designing, developing and teaching a course during uncertain times of COVID-19. I might have missed some steps or this journey may be different from someone else's journey in the same scenario.

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