ONE HEAD, MULTIPLE HATS – LESSONS LEARNED FROM ONLINE TEACHING

Brândușa-Oana NICULESCU, Isabela-Anda DRAGOMIR

”Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy, Sibiu, Romania
branducosma@yahoo.com, izadragomir@yahoo.com

Abstract: *The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has caused an unprecedented crisis in all areas of human activity. In the field of education, this new and unexpected situation has led to an extraordinary shift of paradigm, as a considerable amount of institutions and faculty have been forced to pivot from purely face-to-face lessons to wholly online contexts, despite minimal preparation time and training. This paper aims to analyse the implications of this turn, as well as some of the key lessons that can be garnered from it. The gauge of this article will be on lessons learned, from the perspective of the changes that occurred in role of the teacher in the online context and the ramifications these have on teachers’ role and responsibilities.*

Keywords: lessons learned, teacher roles, teacher competencies, traditional versus online teaching

1. Introduction

With online teaching increasingly becoming the buzz concept of the present educational context, it seems that the educators’ main role is to prepare students for tomorrow’s workplace while dwelling on yesterday’s methods. The current epidemiological situation has generated not only the displacement of education from the traditional classroom to virtual environments, but has also imposed the adoption of new approaches to teaching and learning, with the focus being shifted from content to delivery. Digital technology is the ideal locus facilitating the experimentation and implementation of new methods of information dissemination. Against this background, the role of the teacher has dramatically changed. Educators have been experiencing a major change from what they were trained to do to what they are expected to do. Technology has become increasingly important and the

popularity of learning tools has skyrocketed. Successfully integrating traditional methods and modern technology requires constant adaptability, versatility, creativity and innovation.

2. The Role of the Teacher – a Shift of Perspective

In order to provide high quality instruction in online learning, online course instructors had to reconsider the traditional set of beliefs about learning. Principles that used to be successful in the traditional classroom “must now be modified to facilitate effective online learning”. [1] As early as 2007, the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL) reported that many students in the 21st century consider technology an essential element of their daily life. Consequently, online learning should not be thought of as separate from education, but rather an integrative part of it.

In this context, the most important resource that needs re-adaptation is the teacher. Among other paradigm changes, online education has brought about the term “learning coach”, implying that teachers now have to guide, support, and encourage the learners, while facilitating their educational experience. Although these may not be new roles for teachers, they are definitely new “hats” that need to be taken out, dusted off and worn while teaching online.

Specialized literature discusses the concept of a novel teacher competency framework [2], [3], [4], [5] which emphasizes a series of key areas that need special attention in the context of online education: planning, supporting, assessing, communicating, and developing. Planning teaching and learning includes a solid understanding of learners’ needs and the associated pedagogical processes, thorough knowledge of the curriculum and syllabus requirements, lesson objectives, aims and outcomes, and lesson tasks, activities and materials. Supporting learning has to do with adopting new teaching methodologies, utilizing adequate resources and materials, methods of virtual interaction, virtual class management, the know-how of using digital media, diverse methods and techniques for monitoring the learning process. In terms of assessment, digital teachers need to correlate evaluation with the curriculum objectives, be knowledgeable about the different testing possibilities (online test types – selection, design and administration), be aware of the impact online evaluation has on learning and provide constant and relevant feedback. Communication is also an essential part of the teaching-learning process and has become invaluable important in online instruction. Teachers must use the target language effectively, provide pertinent explanations and guidance, be prepared to offer both oral and written feedback and tailor their discourse so as their message should not be misinterpreted or misread

(tone, register, choice of words). Last but not least, continuous professional improvement must not be overlooked. As part of their development, teachers should use self-assessment tools, find ways to collaborate with other teachers and share good practices, explore new avenues of digital instruction and be ready to constantly reinvent their role.

3. Moving Education Online

In order to successfully transfer the quality of traditional programs to online learning, it is essential to incorporate the strategies used in the face-to-face classroom into the virtual classroom. The instructional strategies employed must be specific to the course goals and objectives, while the methods to manage and effectively implement these instructional strategies must be continuously adapted and revisited throughout the online course.

Watwood, Nugent, and Deihl [6] state that, “although in many ways, the design of an online course mirrors the design of a face-to-face course, the fundamental practices for delivering the instruction and facilitating learner interaction are quite different”. They argue that in order for an online class to be efficient, three factors must be met simultaneously:

1. Faculty must be socially present in the learning environment;
2. Students must form a learning community;
3. Students must be actively engaged in learning activities.

The discussions that would have taken place in the traditional classroom can be hosted in the forums. Communication is important and must not be overlooked just because face-to-face interaction is no longer possible or is limited. Forum discussion threads are interactive, engaging and facilitate participation. Encouraging students to get involved in discussions and respond to each others’ questions creates a sense of community that focuses learning and ensures motivation. Having the teacher

present as part of these interactions is a clear statement of the degree to which the faculty makes its social presence not only visible, but also valuable for the learning process.

Online learning must support the self-directed learner in pursuing individualized, self-paced learning activities. Synchronous and asynchronous learning contexts must be created so that students are given opportunities to work at their own pace outside the time allotted for online meetings and interactions. Moreover, teachers need to design supplementary tasks and activities in order to provide continuity and coherence in terms of information and skills to be practiced individually and autonomously.

Collaborative learning is also an effective strategy to be used online. It involves combining two or more students to work together on a project or assignment. Online learning models are natural environments for collaborative learning, but must be designed carefully to be effective. As a technique, the online class can be divided into smaller, more manageable groups, which can be given different collaborative tasks, such as discussing content, expressing opinions, sharing ideas, solving problems, and even providing peer feedback for assignments. Campbell, Campbell, and Dickson [7] believe that “the academic achievement of many students is increased when collaborative rather than competitive models of instruction are used”. Based on their conclusion, we argue that collaborative learning can be more effective than competitive and individualistic efforts in promoting cognitive development, self-esteem, and positive student-student relationships.

Projects (individual or in groups) make the learning experience more relevant and authentic and are an extremely efficient method of bridging the gap between the often sterile theory and the more practical application of notions and concepts to real-life contexts. To fill this void, online

projects can be tailored to give students an opportunity to pursue their special interests and relate to their chosen career field.

By and large, the manner in which the online learning environment is designed is largely affected by the teacher’s philosophy of learning and understanding of educational learning theories. As educators, it is important we understand how people learn and how they consciously utilize educational theory as the foundation to construct meaningful learning experiences in the online classroom. With the aim of meaningful learning at the core of any strategy and method of online education, we insist on designing online learning contexts that should provide active, authentic constructive, intentional and relevant activities. Rather than testing inert knowledge, educators should help students to learn to recognize and solve problems, understand new phenomena, construct mental models of those phenomena, and given a new situation, link old and new knowledge, make connections, set goals and manage their own learning (by learning how to learn).

4. Identified Lessons

The experience with online courses must be garnered into lessons learned that aim at identifying the challenges teachers face in the virtual educational environment, as well as the solutions to mitigate them.

1. On-line education is more learning and less teaching.

It comes as no surprise that online instruction involves more learning than it does teaching. As education becomes more student-centered, the traditionally-assigned teacher roles are replaced with other “hats” that transform the teacher into a guide, facilitator, motivator, and ultimately resource.

While the traditional face-to-face learning environment is teacher-centered, with the teacher controlling the delivery of the information, with the advent of the Internet, which has facilitated quick access to vast

resources of data and information, learners are no longer dependent on faculty for knowledge. Online classrooms have become learner-centered, empowering students to control, negotiate and manage their own learning experiences, often through peer interactivity and collaboration. In this context, online instructors are now facilitators of information, guiding students toward self-learning.

2. Students' expectations must be managed.

In an online learning environment, students have different expectations regarding the availability of information not only in terms of access, but also in what regards relevance and timeliness. Students nowadays have tremendously developed abilities in searching the Internet for information; however, they often lack the skills to evaluate it and determine its relevance or usefulness. A challenging aspect of online education is building on these particular skills and directing students to learn how to assess, retain and/or discard and ultimately use the information they have access to. Given the synthetic and often limited amount of information that can be transmitted during synchronous activities, coupled with the myriad of online resources at the student's disposal with just one click, teachers must now base information search and content-related research on criteria such as importance, relevance, credibility and authenticity.

3. Communication is important.

As mentioned before, interaction is essential, especially in virtual contexts that need to be more controlled and regulated. Continuous communication, be it oral or written, must focus on reinforcing aims and objectives and specifically on providing feedback and correlating students' and teachers' expectations in terms of evaluation criteria and standards. Furthermore, communication must be straightforward, simple and to the point. Although it might require more detail than in traditional settings, the advantage is that it can be performed via various means of

interaction: forums, emails, private messages, or synchronous meetings. Also, it can be individual, group or class-oriented, depending on objectives and specific needs.

4. Designing and maintaining an online-course is time consuming.

Moving the content of a discipline in the online environment is almost like starting from scratch. Teachers need to re-think all that they have taught previously. Even if the objectives remain unchanged, the alterations target content, specifically activities, tasks, and materials and, consequently, strategies, methods and techniques that need to be tailored for online learning. Designing an online course involves finding new resources for students to access; new ways of presenting the information; diverse methods of evaluation; more time to spend on feedback and personalized instruction. Class preparation definitely requires an increased amount of time and consequently extended office hours. Therefore, one major impact of online teaching that needs mitigation is faculty workload.

5. Technical know-how is a must.

Teaching online presupposes that the teacher is (ideally) technically savvy. However, experience has shown that more than often, educators who had to move from the traditional classroom space to the virtual environment almost overnight, have had difficulties in adapting teaching strategies to this new framework. In addition to being a pedagogical or a methodological challenge, transforming materials, tasks, and activities into online-friendly and online-ready resources requires technical knowledge and abilities that need to be learned and practiced. In this context, training is essential. Moreover, technical support must also be available 24/7, so that possible issues could be solved in due time, before they can hinder the process and generate frustration.

6. Evaluation is a challenge.

Online evaluation presents a whole set of new issues that would not otherwise be

experienced in traditional classrooms. To begin with, the concept of ethics must be revisited. As we insist on collaboration and research outside the traditional framework of the course, it becomes extremely challenging to (re-)define cheating. If we encourage our students to access information whenever they need it, why are they not allowed to do so with assigned tasks? When they discuss an exam question or an activity with their colleagues, is it not collaborative learning? It appears that there is a thin line between what teachers consider appropriate academic behavior and what students believe it to be. Success in the online class depends on how willing teachers are to give up their pre-conceived notions of do's and don'ts in the traditional classroom. The solution is, once again, to resort to a change in the evaluation paradigm. Instead of assessing sterile and inert knowledge, evaluation should emphasize critical thinking skills, and be focused on tasks and assignments that do not rely on pure memorization, but activate cognitive abilities, such as paraphrasing,

summarizing, analyzing, interpreting, explaining, and problem-solving. Individual opinions should be targeted and the personal internalization of information must be valued. And, in the end, even if students rely on course notes, the internet or their peers to conceive or validate their answers, the important aspect here is that learning has happened. Probably not in the traditional way, and not as teachers might have expected, but definitely with the ultimate instructional goal having been met.

5. Conclusion

The effectiveness of an online course requires not only technical knowledge, but also a reflective and innovative attitude that prioritizes the learning process focused on the student. This process must be complemented by a constant evaluation of the course curriculum and objectives and of the tools available for the effective delivery of online content. This paper showed that the online experience has unquestionably changed the way in which teachers perceive their role, competencies, and responsibilities.

References List

- [1] Richards, L.J., Dooley, K.E., & Lindner, J.R. Online Course Design Principles. In Howard, C., Schenk, K., & Discenza, R. (Eds.). *Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Educational Paradigms for Online Learning*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing; 2004. 99-118.
- [2] Farrell, C. *Lessons Learned from Online Teaching – An Institutional Perspective* [Webinar]. National Geographic. 9 December 2020. Available from: <https://webinars.eltnl.com/9-decemberlessons-learned-from-online-teaching-an-institutional-perspective>.
- [3] Ally, M. Competency Profile of the Digital and Online Teacher in Future Education. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*. April, 2019; Volume 20, Number 2: 302-318. Available from: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/download/4206/5083>.
- [4] Bigatel, P.M., Ragan, L.C., Kennan, S., May, J., & Redmond, B.F. The Identification of Competencies for Online Teaching Success. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, January 2012; Volume 16, Number 1: 59-77. Available from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ971040.pdf>.
- [5] Kuboni, O. From Lecturer to Course Coordinator: Redefining the Role of the University Academic for Teaching in a Distributed Learning Environment. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*. March 2009; Volume 5, Number 1: 138-148. Available from: https://jolt.merlot.org/vol5no1/kuboni_0309.pdf.

- [6] Watwood, B., Nugent, J., Deihl, W. *Building from Content to Community: [Re]Thinking the Transition to Online Teaching and Learning*. Virginia Commonwealth University: A Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE) White Paper; May 2009. 1-22. <http://augmenting.me/cte/pdfs/OnlineTeachingWhitePaper.pdf>.
- [7] Campbell, L.C., Campbell, B., Dickson, D. *Teaching and Learning through Multiple Intelligences*. 3rd Edition. Seattle: Pearson; 2004.