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ABSTRACT

This report describes the adaptations made to one initial teacher education course at a Hong Kong university designed for face-to-face instruction that was required to be delivered exclusively online due to the suspension of face-to-face classes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It describes the adaptations the tutor made, and the challenges faced adapting to the new mode of delivery. It is hoped that others can learn from the author's experience and be prepared for the suspension of face-to-face classes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or other health emergencies.

Introduction

The 2019–2020 academic year has been challenging for Hong Kong universities and initial teacher education (ITE). The academic year started in September during widespread civil unrest triggered by the now suspended '2019 Hong Kong extradition bill' which led to campus occupations and the suspension of face-to-face classes in mid-November 2019. Face-to-face classes resumed in January, only to be suspended again in February 2020 due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 (Zhao 2020). Due to the suspension, Hong Kong universities decided that temporarily, then later for the full spring semester, courses would be taught completely online. As courses were designed for face-to-face instruction, this meant that course tutors needed to adapt them to make them suitable for online instruction. This report details the adaptations and challenges one tutor (the author) made to one ITE course that forms part of a two-year part-time Postgraduate Diploma of Education (PGDE) in primary English language education. It is hoped that others can learn from the author's experience and may be prepared for the suspension of face-to-face classes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic or other health emergencies.

The course

As part of the PGDE, students take a three-semester long methods course that covers aspects of English language teaching, learning and assessment. There are 35 students in the 2019/2020 cohort. All are full-time in-service teachers (permitted but not qualified to teach) or classroom teaching assistants.

Sessions are held one evening a week and each session lasts for two-hours. They include a balance between input, discussions, and activities. Students critique curricula, materials and methods; design lessons, activities and materials; and engage in demonstrations and micro-teaching with an emphasis on experiential learning (Lee 2019). The course is designed to be delivered face-to-face with the tutor acting as a facilitator in a highly dialogic classroom. The online content includes the dissemination and storage of readings and session materials on a Learning Management System (LMS) and the use of an Instant Messaging Platform (IMP) to facilitate out of class communication (Moorhouse 2018).

Adaptations and challenges

Due to the suspension of face-to-face classes, the course had to be delivered online exclusively. A combination of asynchronous and synchronous modes of instruction were adopted.

The asynchronous online instruction involves the dissemination and storage of readings and session materials on the LMS with the addition of annotated PowerPoints, with the tutor providing voice-over narration. Session activities and discussion tasks were changed to individual tasks with additional instruction and notes provided for clarity.

The synchronous online teaching involves one-hour long real-time live lessons delivered through Video Conferencing Software (VCS). These are held a few days after the students receive the session materials. Initially, these were optional and designed to be open discussions about the session content where students could ask questions and session activities could be discussed. However, the tutor found that less than ten students joined, and unlike the face-to-face sessions, the students rarely talked, instead preferring the text chat function. The sessions were teacher-centred with the tutor mainly recapping the content of the PowerPoint. This was partially due to the tutor's lack of experience and skills using VCS to teach. Synchronous online teaching requires a 'new and extended skills set' (Peachey 2017, 114).

After three sessions, the tutor adapted his approach making the VCS sessions mandatory; utilised an additional feature of the VCS that allowed for small group discussions, 'breakout rooms,' and provided more structure to the sessions. The 'breakout rooms' feature means the tutor can allocate students to a group for discussion tasks and monitor the discussions by entering the different rooms (Peachey 2017). To maximise session time, the tutor includes a preparation task with the session materials, such as, analysing a lesson video or learning materials. Then students come to the session prepared to discuss the task in groups. A VCS session starts with a review of the session materials and readings and time for questions. This is followed by the group discussion and whole-class feedback. Sessions are recorded and uploaded to the LMS. These further adaptations have led to greater attendance (>28), and increased student participation and interaction.

The VCS sessions are still more 'bumpy' and teacher-centred than face-to-face sessions. Group and whole-class discussions are characterised by longer silences and shorter student responses. This is made harder because of the large class size and students turning their cameras off due to privacy concerns, limiting paralinguistic communication (Peachey 2017). Activities such as micro-teaching are not easy to facilitate. However, the blend between synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction seem to be

a possible way to support learning in ITE when face-to-face instruction is not an option. Students' anonymous feedback collected through a Student-Response-System attests to this. One student wrote:

> There are pluses to face-to-face lessons, the main one being it is possible to do group activities. But, I think the current [lessons] are great. The annotated [PowerPoints] are really useful. The [VCS] sessions are useful for Q&A, as well as looking at activities.

Throughout the course, the tutor kept in close contact with the class through the IMP, informing students of the adaptations and regularly eliciting feedback from them on their experiences.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, the course is still on-going. However, with the COVID-19 pandemic spreading globally and forcing class suspensions, the author hopes ITE course tutors are preparing for online instruction. The author is not arguing that the instructional approaches adopted would work for everyone, nor that there is evidence to their effectiveness beyond the anecdotal. Indeed, more research is needed into online instructional replacements to face-to-face lessons. In addition, training should be provided to ITE course tutors, so they are prepared to deliver courses online in the event of health emergencies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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