

Face-to-face delivery this week; online the next: a reflection

Face-to-face
delivery

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the effects of online learning on student engagement as a result of a shift from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand.

Design/methodology/approach – The reflection expresses the accounting lecturers' observations and experiences of student engagement in online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown focussing on the three facets of student engagement; social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence.

Findings – The focus on social and teaching presence in online learning by Unitec academic staff had a positive impact on cognitive presence as student course success rates and course ratings were similar to rates achieved from face-to-face delivery despite a rapid transition to online learning.

Research limitations/implications – This reflection is based on the experiences of three academic staff in one tertiary organisation.

Practical implications – The findings of this study can be helpful for tertiary institutions that are planning to adopt blended learning in the future. Academic staff may revisit teaching pedagogies to design new strategies and institutions may develop blended learning guidelines and tools to support academics to embrace blended learning.

Social implications – The reflection shows the respect, support and care provided by academics to students building a sense of belongingness and supporting students' mental well-being in a period of fear and anxiety about COVID-19.

Originality/value – This is a reflection on students' online engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has not been addressed previously in the academic literature.

Keywords Online learning, Student engagement, COVID-19, Reflection

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the effects of student engagement as a result of a shift from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown in New Zealand. The reflection focuses on the experiences of three accounting academic staff at Unitec Institute of Technology (Unitec) in Auckland, New Zealand. Unitec is part of the Te Pukenga- New Zealand Institute of Skills and

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Technology and has offered an undergraduate business degree in accounting for several years and a Master of Applied Practice Professional Accounting since 2016.

The reflection is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a background of the spread of COVID-19 in New Zealand and the response to the subsequent lockdown by the New Zealand Government and Unitec. In Section 3, the method is explained, and our reflections are set out in Section 4. Section 5 summarises our learnings from a shift to online teaching, and Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Spread of COVID-19

2.1 *New Zealand and COVID-19*

Knowledge of a mysterious illness spreading rapidly from Wuhan, China, first began to be communicated by world media in January 2020. The possibility of a worldwide pandemic emerged in mid-January when the illness began to spread throughout China, Japan, Korea and Thailand (Radio New Zealand [RNZ], 2021). On 24 January 2020, the New Zealand Government established a project team to monitor the situation and began restricting travel to and from mainland China. The New Zealand Government introduced mandatory self-isolation measures at the beginning of February for all travellers arriving in New Zealand from overseas.

On 11 February 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) named the illness coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). COVID-19 continued to spread to other parts of the world – Italy and Iran and the number of cases escalated. New Zealand reported its first COVID-19 case on 28 February 2020. By 7 March 2020, New Zealand had a total of five COVID-19 cases. On the 11 March 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 an official pandemic. The number of cases throughout New Zealand started to increase, with all cases linked to people returning to New Zealand from overseas (RNZ, n.d.).

The New Zealand Government closed its borders on 19 March 2020 to all travellers who were not New Zealand residents or citizens. On 21 March 2020, a four-stage alert system was introduced with the whole country placed at alert Level 2, a status indicating that the disease is contained, but there is a risk of community transmission. The country rapidly moved to alert Level 3 (a heightened risk that disease is not contained) on 23 March 2020 and then to alert Level 4 (disease is not contained) at midnight on 25 March 2020 meaning all but essential workers had to work from home. Schools and higher education institutions were closed on 24 March 2020 (RNZ, n.d.) and shifted to online delivery of teaching.

2.2 *Unitec response to COVID-19*

2.2.1 *Preparation phase: Mid-March.* Unitec's first semester started under normal circumstances on 27 February 2020 but planning for the possibility of campus closure was underway. All academic programme managers and academic staff were requested to complete a detailed spreadsheet of what courses may or may not be possible to deliver remotely. These options included synchronous and distance asynchronous delivery and practical components not being able to be completed remotely, which would require extensions or deferrals for students were to be highlighted by each school.

2.2.2 *Implementation Phase – Government alert Levels 3 and 4 announced.* The Unitec campus was closed from 23 March 2020, two days before the alert Level 4 lockdown and seven weeks into the semester. The closedown period of a minimum of four weeks was expected. During the week beginning 23 March 2020, all classes were cancelled, and students were requested to undertake independent study for the week to give lecturers time to prepare for the online delivery of their courses. During that week, teachers and students undertook Zoom and/or Echo 360 training. Online teaching and learning plans were approved by academic programme managers and published on all Moodle courses. The online learning plans included changes to

scheduling to accommodate online synchronous and asynchronous learning, changes in assessment dates, computer and software requirements for students and details of support available to students. The executive leadership announced that the campus would be closed for a further five weeks after the initial four-week lockdown period. This required updates of the online teaching and assessment plans and approval of any extensions or deferrals of delivery dates by the Academic Recovery Committee. From 29 May 2020, there was a gradual return to campus as government alert levels reduced. Requests for return to campus were submitted to the Academic Recovery Committee and Incident Management Teams for approval and oversight of health and safety procedures. For the accounting programmes, the decision was made to remain to deliver online to the end of the semester.

2.3 COVID-19, online learning and student engagement

There is an extensive literature on student engagement in online learning. The literature covers a range of perspectives including frameworks/theoretical approaches of online student engagement (Coates, 2007; Vaughan 2010; Pardo *et al.*, 2016; Kahn *et al.*, 2017) factors that improve student engagement online (Denny, 2013; Gray and DiLoreto, 2016; Nortvig *et al.*, 2018) and strategies and tools to improve student engagement (Chakraborty and Nafukho, 2014; Khan *et al.*, 2017; Martin and Bolliger, 2018; Dewan *et al.*, 2019; Dwivedi *et al.*, 2019). This paper extends this literature by considering online student engagement in an extraordinary worldwide pandemic.

There are a small number of recent studies (Craig *et al.*, 2020; Joshi *et al.*, 2020; Verawardina *et al.*, 2020; Wieland and Kollias, 2020) that have addressed COVID-19 and its impact on online learning and teaching from the perspectives of educators, students and consultants. However, none of these studies have focussed on online engagement during a pandemic where a sudden transition from face-to-face learning to online delivery has taken place. More recent and relevant studies are discussed below.

Wieland and Kollias (2020) reflect on the transition from face-to-face learning to online learning before, during and after COVID-19. They observed the high level of stress that academics were put under to move to online delivery. They noted that the academics relied heavily on Zoom or similar platforms and had a lack of knowledge of alternative online tools that could enhance online delivery. They concluded that the industry has failed to equip educators with tools to curate and deliver digital and online content. In the post-COVID period, they advocate for empowering educators to use digital tools to create authentic online learning experiences. Two studies from Asia highlight the difficulties in transitioning to online delivery in developing nations during COVID-19. Verawardina *et al.* (2020) consider the impacts in Indonesia and note the need for planning and preparation to provide platforms to support online learning and to equip teachers with the skills to use technologies to develop synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. In India, Joshi *et al.* (2020) interview 19 teachers and identify that a lack of technical infrastructure impacted the delivery of online learning. Teachers had limited awareness of online teaching platforms and received little support for integrating technology into course delivery. Craig *et al.* (2020) explore changes to student engagement and learning in a USA college history class of 93 students using Net.Create, a Web-based collaborative visualisation tool, that supported group-based remote learning during the COVID-19. Students were surveyed before and after using Net.Create. The study showed that the tool supported collaborative knowledge-building and student engagement as students felt connected to peers and believed that they could learn from each other.

3. Method

This research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which explores a person's lived experiences about a particular phenomenon (Smith and Eatough, 2007; Alase, 2017;

Joshi *et al.*, 2020) and helps in understanding the experiences rather than generalising them to existing theories and concepts (Dipboye and Foster, 2002). In this research, IPA is used to understand the experiences of three academics teaching undergraduate and postgraduate accounting courses during COVID-19. Of the three, two academics taught six accounting courses: four undergraduate and two postgraduate. The third academic is the programme manager of the school's accounting postgraduate programme. COVID-19 did not impact the learning outcomes or course content for each course, and there was no change in the lecturer for each course once the lockdown was announced. In some cases, assessments had to be adapted from the previous semester for an online environment.

This reflection uses a community of inquiry model framework developed by Garrison *et al.* (2000) to assess student engagement in online delivery during COVID-19. The framework includes three dimensions; social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Social presence is the degree to which students feel connected to each other and feel comfortable in the online teaching environment. Cognitive presence is the extent to which students can construct meaning through higher-order processes such as critical thinking and problem-solving. Teaching presence focusses on the design and delivery of the course and how it generates interest and engagement of students.

4. Reflection on student engagement in online teaching

Section 4 describes what support was provided to students when transferring to online learning and provides insights into how Unitec and the lecturers adapted content and delivery to contribute to the three facets of engagement of students. In this reflection, we focus on the social, teaching and cognitive presence of student engagement in moving to an online environment. Figure 1 demonstrates the three-dimensional framework by setting out the factors which we identify as contributing to student engagement. These factors are discussed further in detail in the following sections.

4.1 Support provided to staff to transition to online learning

The accounting courses in Unitec's School of Applied Business have historically been delivered to students using face-to-face delivery supported by the Moodle learning management system. Lectures were not recorded to supplement face-to-face classes. Although some teachers had engaged online using accounting software, videos and online games, no courses were delivered solely online.

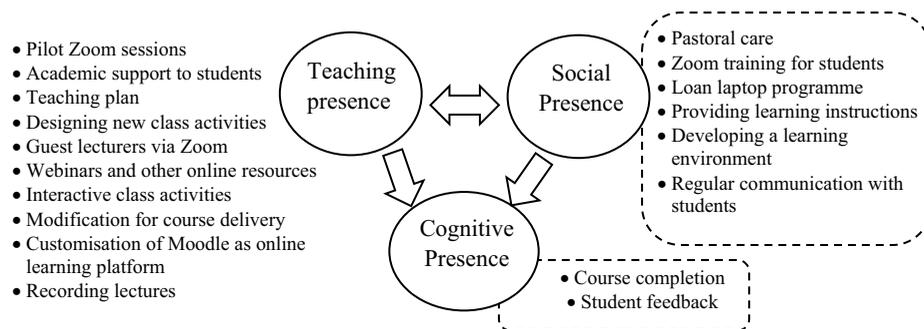


Figure 1.
Factors impacting student engagement during COVID-19

Source: Adapted from Garrison *et al.* (2000)

As a result of COVID-19, the academic staff made considerable effort to familiarise themselves with Zoom, Unitec's chosen online delivery platform by attending on-campus workshops (pre-lockdown), seeking support from other lecturers and/or our teaching and learning support person. The efforts of academic staff to promptly adapt to online delivery, in particular, familiarising themselves with Zoom technologies highlighted the factor of teacher presence in student engagement.

Although there was support from Unitec to adjust to online delivery, a week to switch from face-to-face to online delivery was not enough time for academic staff to prepare and created significant challenges for them to adapt. Academic staff were not only required to prepare for teaching remotely, but they also had to support students to transition to online learning. The negative effects on student engagement owing to the time pressure placed on academic staff were ultimately mitigated owing to academic staff supporting students to transition online. To reduce the pressure on academic staff and students, Unitec could have extended the length of the semester or brought forward the mid-semester break.

4.2 Support provided to students to transition and engaged in online learning

Support was provided to students to ensure they were connected and comfortable in the new online environment, including support of their physical and mental wellbeing. Unitec and academic staff communicated the new online learning environment to students and adapted learning activities for a remote environment, assisting the continuity of students learning. These methods of support enhanced social and teaching presence perspectives of engagement (Figure 1).

4.2.1 Student transition. Unitec provided training to students to use Zoom for the online delivery of their courses. All students were contacted by support services to ensure they had access to computer devices and the internet. One of the main barriers for students to engage in online learning was that they did not have laptops or had poor internet connectivity. To mitigate this issue, students were surveyed to identify what they needed to get ready for online delivery. Unitec loaned laptops to students who required support. This contributed to social presence engagement of students as it ensured that students could remain engaged in their learning.

4.2.2 Providing learning instructions. Online learning and teaching plans were prepared for each course and communicated to students in advance of the first online class via Moodle. The plan included:

- An allocation of the learning hours for the course over each week clearly outlining to students the learning activities that they were to engage in such as synchronous Zoom sessions, reading resources, analysing case studies and completing practical exercises.
- Instructions to students on how to communicate with their lecturer. These included Moodle discussion forums to raise questions to the whole class, Zoom office hours, meetings via Zoom upon request.
- Requirements for student's computers and software necessary to participate in the online classes.
- Links for students to access academic learning and pastoral support. The plan provided a single source of information to students to provide continuity of their study and assisted their continued engagement, through both social and teaching presence, in their courses.

4.2.3 Pastoral care from Unitec and academic staff. Unitec and academic staff provided significant pastoral care to students at the beginning and throughout the lockdown period. The lockdown created much stress for students as they had to transition rapidly from a

learning environment where they were physically present with other students and a teacher to an online environment. Many students were away from families or in self-isolation if they had developed COVID-19 symptoms. Other students lost their part-time jobs as businesses closed down creating financial pressures for them. In the first week of lockdown, all students were contacted by Unitec support services to check on their health and welfare. Students identified as requiring on-going support were followed up regularly and where necessary referred to other services such as counselling.

Academic staff provided learning support to their students as well as significant pastoral care to help students manage their stress resulting from a range of factors such as isolation, job loss, working from home and caring and home-schooling children. Providing pastoral care to students enhanced social presence engagement. This was crucial to their successful completion of the course(s).

4.2.4 Developing an online learning environment. Before online classes started, all students were given a practice run on Zoom to ensure they could connect to the online class and to familiarise themselves with the learning platform. In the first Zoom class, students shared their feelings and experiences of lockdown helping to re-establish classroom relationships that existed before lockdown. This social presence, demonstrated “manaakitanga”, showing respect, support and care for others and “whanaungatanga” building a sense of belonging supporting students’ mental well-being.

Regular communication between lecturers and students helped to keep students engaged in their learning. Through teaching and social presence, lecturers used announcements in Moodle to communicate instructions to students each week on what was to be prepared for the class. Zoom invitations were sent to all students one week before the lecture, and a reminder was sent the day before. These steps made students aware of the learning expectations and the learning activities required before each class. If students had concerns or issues with their academic learning, these were often resolved by providing extra Zoom class sessions or using Moodle discussion forums. Students also contacted lecturers individually if they had difficulty understanding course content. This communication was done via email, texting or direct calling lecturers’ mobile phones.

4.3 Design and delivery of course

Improvement to student engagement through teaching presence was achieved by modifying the design and delivery of the courses to support online learning. The course content was amended into smaller portions of learning as compared to face-to-face delivery with additional activities developed to maintain student engagement such as online-in-class presentations, quizzes and discussions and case scenarios using breakout rooms on Zoom. Breakout rooms were used as a platform for students to interact, share their views and collaborate. The breakout rooms were immensely useful for the auditing and assurance course where students discussed audit cases in groups and participated in other group activities. However, undergraduate students appeared to use the breakout room sessions as more of an opportunity to socialise and connect with their peers while postgraduate students were more focussed on completion of the relevant learning task.

New online activities such as polling were used to assess and motivate student engagement in pre-class activities. For example, students had the opportunity to become involved in class discussion by debating responses to poll questions when sharing their answers as well as allowing the lecturer to identify those who did not participate and, therefore, were not engaged in the learning.

To maintain student engagement by teacher presence, we shared additional resources with students to improve their subject knowledge, such as the free webinars relating to accounting and

auditing which were offered by professional accounting bodies during the lockdown. Also, we made use of Zoom to invite guest speakers to classes. All Zoom sessions were recorded, which enabled students to review the recordings at their own pace and time. Some students indicated that they found the recordings useful so they could go back and revise again if they needed.

The whiteboard option in Zoom was especially useful for calculation-based exercises in accounting-based courses. We observed that the accounting students were more likely to engage by demonstrating step-by-step how to complete an accounting exercise using the whiteboard in Zoom.

Students were encouraged to use the chat option in Zoom to raise questions and interact with the lecturer and other students. This improved teaching as well as social presence because students felt comfortable communicating and connecting with other students and lecturers in the online platform. We observed that students that would not normally ask questions in the face-to-face class environment were comfortable asking questions via the Zoom chat function. However, we received informal feedback from a few students who indicated that they were less comfortable asking or answering questions when online classes were being recorded.

The significant focus on social and teaching presence had a positive impact on cognitive presence. We assessed cognitive presence through the analysis of successful course completion rates and course ratings based on student survey results. We found that these results were comparable to the prior semesters, where face-to-face delivery was the sole delivery format to students.

5. Learnings from the transition to online delivery

Based on our experience of this transition from face-to-face to online teaching, we have several learnings. A key learning of Unitec was to quickly connect staff with students to maintain their physical and mental wellbeing as well as ensuring they were prepared to move to an online learning environment. Lecturers invested considerable time supporting students, including much one-on-one support. This showed students that Unitec and staff cared for them and their success. This demonstration of “manaakitanga” is integral to the values of Unitec by putting students at the heart of what we do.

Secondly, based on our experience, we are of the opinion that the online delivery model used during COVID-19 is not sustainable on a long-term basis unless additional resources are provided. For example, some academic staff estimate they spent up to twice the usual time on delivering their course and supporting their students. Alternative ways of supporting students must be developed to ensure this is not always provided on a one-on-one basis by lecturers. For example, this may be the increased use of Zoom class sessions or discussion forums to give all students opportunities to ask questions on assessments that are due.

Thirdly, if online learning were to be primarily used again, it would be useful to seek feedback from students on the recording of classes before the beginning of their courses to ensure they are comfortable in the learning environment. Some students were not happy to interact in the classroom if Zoom classes were recorded. In contrast, other students took advantage of the Zoom sessions being recorded by not attending and not participating in interactive online sessions such as group discussions.

Fourthly, key learning from teaching online is to reduce the number of synchronous hours. In most courses, the same number of face-to-face hours were used for a Zoom session. On reflection, these sessions were too long and students lost concentration. It also put increased pressure on the lecturers to plan a range of interactive activities over the 3- to 4-h period.

Fifthly, a more blended learning approach in online learning is required to maintain student engagement, such as creating more tasks that are to be completed by students before or after class as independent learning.

It is expected that the COVID-19 experience will have a major influence on teaching delivery at Unitec in the future with a much greater emphasis on blended delivery than there has been in the past. Lecturers were propelled into a new environment where they were forced to explore new tools and technologies. This experience provided the opportunity to reflect on the predominantly face-to-face model of delivery and to consider alternative delivery options for the future.

6. Conclusion

Before COVID-19, Unitec's School of Applied Business focussed primarily on face-to-face delivery of academic learning. With the support of Unitec's support services and academic staff, the school was able to transition to a solely online teaching model during the alert Level 4 lockdown. This transition resulted in some key learnings for the future. Online learning requires significant support to be provided to ensure the necessary social, teaching and cognitive facets of student engagement is maintained. This includes learning support as well as pastoral care. Academic staff have been able to identify new ways of course delivery by incorporating online technology. We predict that the school will shift to a blended delivery model, whereby there is a greater emphasis on online learning tools than ever before. We consider that the school must leverage off the experiences of online learning to develop more flexible learning options for students and to ensure that the school offers contemporary learning experiences.

This research has practical and social implications. The findings of the study can be helpful for tertiary institutions adopting blended learning. Academic staff may revise and design new teaching pedagogies, and also institutions may introduce guidelines and technical supports to assist teachers in successfully embracing the blended learning for students in the future. Academic staff recounting their experiences provides insights on managing a rapid transition from face-to-face to online learning during COVID-19. Further, the respect, support and care provided by academics to students to build a sense of belongingness and well-being had positive social impacts.

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