COVID-19 Outbreak: A Critical Reflection on Teaching

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges faced by the author in preparing for a fully online learning environment for her students. Making its first identified case in December 2019, COVID-19 has not only change how people work, it has also changed the way businesses and education are conducted. Labelled as the new normal, 100 percent online learning requires a different level of commitment from educators and students alike. Given that the author has not had the experience of 100 percent online teaching, it is interesting to investigate the reflections that come with the experience. A mixed method approach is adopted for this paper, where qualitative data come from the author's observations and documentations of her online activities and materials whilst conducting online teaching. The quantitative data come from a short survey completed by the author's students on their new normal in learning. Preliminary findings are threefold, including the duration of online learning is slightly shorter than face-to-face sessions, students are learning mostly asynchronously, and the author faces difficulties in selecting and curating online teaching materials. What can be discerned from the experience and reflection is that the new normal of learning has certainly challenged educators around the world; the author is pushed to learn, relearn and unlearn her pedagogical skills.

Keywords: *COVID-19, critical reflection, new normal of learning, online learning, online teaching, panicgogy*

1. Introduction

This paper is a critical reflection of the author's teaching journey during the COVID-19 outbreak. Making its first identified case in December 2019, COVID-19 has changed how students and educators alike view online learning. Especially in Malaysia, the higher learning institutions are now faced with massive challenges in order to prepare for the best learning and teaching environment for the students and educators. Labelled as the new normal, 100 percent online learning (and teaching) requires a different level of commitment from both educators and students. Given that the author, who is a teaching member at the NDUM, has not had the experience of 100 percent online teaching before, this paper aims at investigating the reflections that come with the experience.

The NDUM or National Defence University of Malaysia is the only tertiary military institution in Malaysia. The student population consists of about 65 percent military cadets and 35 percent civilian students. It is a residential campus since 98 percent students live on campus. Nonetheless, in order to control the spread of COVID-19, the government has enforced the Movement Control Order (MCO), which started from 18th March 2020. During this MCO, all students including the military cadets are allowed to be with their families. Since then, the author has embarked on teaching fully online.

The author only has one active course that she is teaching for the semester. When the MCO started, it was the fifth week of the semester. The course involves second year students of the Bachelor of Social Sciences (Languages and Cross-Cultural Communication). Up till this paper is written (which is during the Conditional Movement Control Order – CMCO, starting 4th May 2020), the students have undergone nine weeks of online learning. As this paper focuses on the author's critical reflection of her teaching strategies and tools utilised, two research questions will be answered at the end of this paper. These include, firstly, what are the platforms, tools and applications used for her online teaching, and secondly, what are the challenges faced by the author when embarking for the first time teaching fully online.

Before this paper proceeds, an overview of the paper is apt. This paper has five main sections including this introduction. The next section presents the selected literature on tools and strategies for online teaching and learning. Next, the third section briefly explains the methodology adopted for this paper. This is then followed by the findings and discussions. The last section closes the paper with suggestions for future research and lessons learnt.

2. Selected Literature

This section focuses on the tools and applications that are argued to be suitable for online teaching and learning. Of all these tools and applications, some have been utilised by the author during this trying time for her online lessons.

In an attempt to create authentic learning experiences for students in online course delivery, suitable activities and relevant tools are important [1]. Bloom's Taxonomy has been used to design and develop teaching outcomes and activities for many years at the NDUM. Fig. 1 presents how each level of Bloom's Taxonomy can be used with appropriate digital applications and tools.
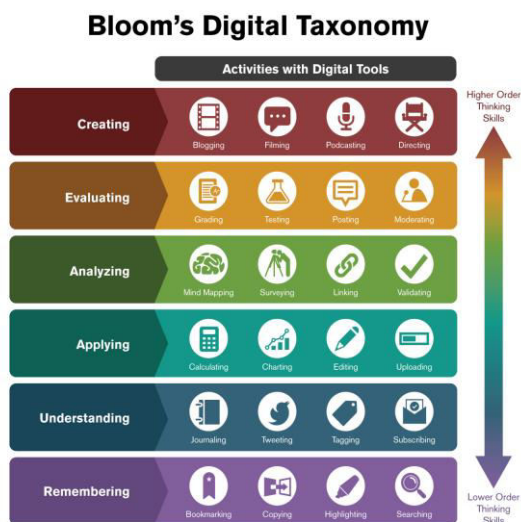

Fig.1 Activities with Digital Tools for Levels of Bloom's Taxonomy [1]

Choosing the right applications and tools for content delivery online may be challenging, but it is possible. Being the first to be affected in the world, China requires effective and efficient strategies to continue schooling. Responding to this, a group of researchers propose quick solutions for online education or what they term as flexible education in order to ensure learning remains. For synchronous live teaching, educators are encouraged to opt for Rain-classroom, Tencent Ketang Chaoxing Learning APP, ClassIn, CCtalk, UMU, and for social communication, they use QQ Group and Wechat. For meeting, they choose Welink, Dingtalk, ZOOM, FEISHU and TED Conversations. Teachers affected by COVID-19 outbreak too take advantage of using available online course platforms, including icourse, edX, Coursera and Udacity [2].

Alternatively, asynchronous teaching uses course sharing platforms such as icourse, edX, Coursera, Udacity; regional MOOC platform, CNMOOC; local university MOOC platform, UOOC; Tsinghua University MOOC platform, XuetangX; and Peking University MOOC platform, CHINESE MOOCS. Some educators also opt for enterprise online course platforms such as Zhihuishu and ulearning [2].

In addition, Table 1 compares strategies and tools that could be used online by educators when planning for their teaching activities [3]. What could be concluded from the table is that learning will not stop unless educators and students refuse to continue with teaching and learning, respectively.

Table 1. Strategies and Tools for Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

Activity	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Blogging and Vlogging (creating video blogs)		/
Collaborative writing or story making	/	/
Content production (word processing, spreadsheets, etc.)	/	/
Discussion forums or text-based chats	/	/
e-Portfolios		/
Games/Gamification	/	/
Intelligent tutoring (online teaching and assessment tools)		/
Live video chats	/	
Mapping (mind-mapping, using interactive maps and charts, etc.)	/	/
Multimedia presentations	/	/

Online drawing and drafting		/
Plagiarism checking (to provide feedback)		/
Quizzes and surveys		/
Video chatting and conferencing	/	
Video creation and sharing		/
Virtual gallery walks	/	/
Virtual reality scenarios	/	/
Wiki building		/

Furthermore, Boon [4] proposed the importance of creating educators' presence in an online learning and teaching environment. According to her, there are various facilitation strategies that would allow students to feel more engaged in their learning. These strategies are summarised in Table 2. It can be concluded from Table 2 that despite suggestions listed by more experienced online educators, some of these may not be suitable for the author for reasons analysed in the later sections of this paper.

Table 2. Selected Facilitation Strategies

What to do?	How to do?	Online tools to use
Offer synchronous online office hours to support student learning and knowledge development	• Face-to-face meetings • Telephone consultations • Online audio/video	• Collaborate (Blackboard Learn) • Skype • Google Hangouts
Engage in personal communication with students, individually or as a group	• Email greetings • Posted or recorded welcome messages (audio or audio + video) • Post announcements on the course page	• Email • Blackboard Video Tool • Other lecture capture software (such as Camtasia, Mediasite)
Provide recorded lectures and assignment explanations	• Audio + video (highly recommended) • Audio only (at minimum)	• Mediasite • Audacity (audio only) • Screencast-o-matic • PowerPoint (with audio)
Provide direct (synchronous instruction)	• Develop seminar or lecture courses • Facilitate meetings with students • Set up student group work space	• Google Hangouts
Interact regularly with students, individually or in groups	• Email • Participate in online group discussions • Conduct chat sessions with individuals or groups	• Collaborate (Blackboard Learn) • Google Hangouts
Create a positive learning environment to stimulate learning	• Show respect for students by appropriate conversational tone and word choice	• Email

3. Methodology

Data for this paper were collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. As this paper records the author's reflection of teaching fully online due to COVID-19 pandemic, critical reflection is used as the method of inquiry to document the experience of the author for the past nine weeks from 18th March to 19th May 2020. According to Morley [5], in order to critically reflect on a situation, a project, research problems, a theory and discussions are needed. This paper has all with the exception of a theory to underpin the analysis and discussions. Nonetheless, the author argues that despite missing a theory, this paper is able to reflect and discuss the issues at hand since it uses just the author's personal reflection and experience. Alas, the author would like to highlight 'panicgogy' as an approach to address the impromptu drive for teaching fully online. This term is explained more in the last section.

Quantitative data were gathered through a short survey distributed to the author's students. These students too are first timers to 100 percent online learning. There were only three questions asked, and they were all manually analysed for frequency and percentages.

4. Findings and Discussions
This section answers the research questions posed earlier. Based on personal observations and experiences, together with the students' responses to the three questions in the short online survey, the author sums up that her teaching practices during the outbreak are as such.

4.1 Platforms and Tools Used for Teaching Fully Online
The platforms, tools and applications utilised during the nine weeks of teaching fully online are illustrated in Table 3. It can be concluded from the table that WhatsApp is the most popular platform used by the author. This is because based on the survey done on the students, the majority of the students is facing accessibility problems, including poor Internet connection and low data subscription (31 students or 74 percent). At the same time, 27 students (65 percent) prefer the use of WhatsApp for an easy and hassle-free online learning.

Table 3. Platforms, Tools and Applications Used

Platforms, Tools and Applications	Sessions & Bloom's Digital Taxonomy	Comments
WhatsApp • Voice Note • (send) Images • (send) Video Nuggets	• First session – Monday • Posting	• WhatsApp is used because it requires low Internet data consumption, and it is easily accessible/connected • Voice Note is used to ensure that students are active during the session • Text message allows for reflection
Toonly (to develop video nuggets) + ClipChamp	• First session – Monday	• Toonly uses animation to attract students' attention • Videos are below one minute each to ensure low Internet data consumption • ClipChamp is used to reduce the size of each video
Loom	• Throughout the week	• Screen recording of 'How To' series for the students; Videos are uploaded on the Learning Management System (LMS) and shared on WhatsApp too
Kahoot	• Throughout the week	• Quizzes are developed and students are put into challenges (a few days are given to complete the challenges)
Microsoft Teams • Microsoft Assignment	• Second session – Tuesday	• Video conferencing facilities are used to demonstrate issues in students' writing tasks • Assignment is used for revision quizzes
Google Forms	• Second session – Tuesday	• Revision quizzes
Exam.Net	• Second session – Tuesday	• Tests I and II • *Final examination (most probably)*
Al-Fateh e-Learning Portal – LMS • Notes • Videos • Chat Room • Forum	• Throughout the week • Second session – Tuesday • Mind mapping, Editing, Posting	• The main source of online materials (the author relies on this previously for her flipped classroom strategies) • Online materials include videos, SCORM, lecture notes, reading materials and related links

4.2 Challenges of Teaching Fully Online
After nine weeks of online teaching, three challenges have emerged. The author quickly realises that the hours spent teaching online are much reduced than having face-to-face sessions. The normal contact hours for the course taught by the author is four hours weekly, split into two sessions. With

online teaching, the duration for the first session on Monday (following the physical schedule), is reduced from two hours to about one hour and 15 minutes. The same thing happens for the second session; the session is reduced by 30 to 40 minutes. The ability of the students to focus becomes lesser online, possibly because they require high motivation and self-discipline. Arguably too, the lesser hours are because students become passive most of the time.

Secondly, the author observes that some students may have to learn asynchronously due to poor Internet connection. Often during the scheduled sessions, only about 27 to 35 students would appear 'live' online from the total of 42. For example, when the WhatsApp log is monitored progressively, the author finds that the number of students reading the messages or watching the video nuggets has increased. What they may be missing is just participating during the live sessions; they could still listen to all Voice Notes, or read the forums and chats. The turnout for quizzes is promising, but then again, the trend is similar to online scheduled sessions. As to the challenges by Kahoot, students are given five to six days to complete, and if they missed the due date, then they would not experience the challenges of answering fun quizzes!

Thirdly, the author has to admit, albeit painfully that she faces massive tasks to choose and curate the best possible teaching and learning materials for the students. These materials must be able to stand alone, without any support from face-to-face or physical sessions to give further explanation. As a first timer to teaching 100 percent online, the author starts adding the materials to be used by exploiting video nuggets, 'How To' videos, and using various quiz platforms such as Kahoot and Google Forms. The author opines that her 'presence' is imperative to motivate students to continue with online learning. One way of maintaining her 'presence' is by recording videos with herself in them! Nevertheless, are all these sufficient for the students?

5. Conclusion

Could it be that the author succumbs to 'panicgogy,' a state where she is thinking of how to teach with the most appropriate materials and tools hastily? The author opines that, despite being actively involved in flipped classroom for the past six years, she is taken aback by the differences in conducting fully online teaching because materials, delivery methods and online presence are crucial in ensuring that the students are not at a loss. An immediate research must be conducted though, to examine the platforms and tools used during the MCO. The readiness of other educators, who may have experienced 'panicgogy' too must be investigated. To conclude, the author needs to be more creative in delivering the lessons of the week, whilst at the same time trying to ensure that students get what they are supposed to be getting, and ultimately, achieve the course learning outcomes. In this case, the author must learn, relearn and unlearn!

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