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Some Reflections on Teaching Online

Philip Park

Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea

Introduction

In spite of the continuing spikes in coronavirus cases around the world, a greater part of the international community has come to simply acknowledge the possibility of infection as a new and permanent part of our everyday reality. Measures to address the pandemic took on a variety of forms, one of which being the collective migration to online spaces in which participants were to conduct their work or receive a service from behind a computer screen with people who were doing the same. This adaptation was seen throughout a variety of industries, where it was largely welcome by employees as an opportunity to spend more time at home. The adoption of life conducted online, however, was not as well-received by consumers who were receiving services who were told that they would now be receiving an online version of a service they expected to offline.

Of course, the most representative example of this dissatisfaction was found in academic institutions, as students were suddenly told that the product that they were expecting to receive was suddenly set to be adjusted with these adjustments not reflected in their tuition. Many students later found these adjustments to be poor substitutes for the product they paid for; they paid for offline classroom experiences but were receiving online ones that many felt were led by technologically incapable or minimally motivated professors. In fact, according to a sur-

vey conducted by Lederman, the percentage of students who indicated that they were highly satisfied with their classes fell 30% after the transition to online classes (Bailey, Almusharraf, & Hatcher, 2021).

Offline vs. Online Results

Having taught online for more than two years and now preparing for a full-fledged return to the classroom in the fall, I felt that organizing some of my thoughts on my experiences in this communication piece would be a good opportunity for me to see if other educators had similar experiences or responses over the course of the pandemic. I am particularly interested in thinking about factors that led to student satisfaction as well as the connection between satisfaction and learning achievement.

While I reviewed the literature on these topics, I found that, while I appreciated the data-driven analyses conducted, most of the conclusions I encountered were somewhat obvious to anyone who had experience conducting an online or offline class. These conclusions were, for example, along the lines of *as there is less interaction with the professor, students prefer offline classes and while online learning can help enhance communication skills, it suffers from possibility of technological problems* (Hazaymeh, 2021; Zboun & Farrah, 2021). Of course, research is often a means of affirming our intuitions with data, but in terms of providing new insights or practical advice on how to hone my pedagogical skills, the works I found on the topic of interest were wanting. The disconnect between academia and practice is nothing new, but in all honesty, I found the lack of applicable research on these questions to be somewhat disappointing. Most of the writers were educators writing for other educators in a situation in which we all took hesitant steps into a new terrain, making the missed opportunity even more stark.

I am currently responsible for teaching business English to

business majors at a Korean university. While the demands of a foreign language classroom will undoubtedly have an impact on the extent of change perceived upon the transition to online platforms, little research has been done on whether this transition produces different results depending on the kind of class studied (e.g., lecture vs. practicum). One notable exception is work done by Maican and Cocoradă (2021), who found that the video-conferencing component of online classes was appreciated more by students in the social sciences, humanities, and arts than by students in STEM programs. Even their work does not address the impact of the change in medium on educational outcomes.

One particular case stands out as a possible indicator of this impact of change. For the two and a half years our university mandated online classes, I conducted speaking tests as I did before the pandemic. For one speaking test, using a publicly shared Google spreadsheet as a sign-up sheet and Zoom to show students the speaking prompts, I was able to meet and evaluate each student enrolled in my class. Zoom was and is still widely used by educators and has been been found to be a useful tool in assessing student progress (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). With the exception this speaking test being online, all the other elements of the test were identical to the speaking test given offline before the pandemic: students were given a specific amount of time and were shown a timer, they were allowed to choose from a random pile of prompts, grading rubric, etc. In fact, the prompts themselves were identical to the ones given to the students taking this class offline before the pandemic. However, in spite of these similarities, the average score of the students taking this class and test online was noticeably lower than scores from before the pandemic.

While the written exam averages (for both the midterm and final) were also lower than their offline counterparts, these differences might be attributed to differences in test-taking procedures. For example, online students, who took the tests while being proctored on Zoom, were given shorter tests with shorter time limits (in order to decrease the possibility of cheating), possibly leading the students to feel more rushed. The online speaking tests, on the other hand, were conducted under almost identical conditions (with the exception of being held over Zoom and not face-to-face in a classroom) but produced significantly lower results. It should also be noted that the class content itself was reproduced almost identically for an online platform: The lectures and PowerPoint slides were recorded, and students were given more than ample time to watch the videos at home. The one difference was that for the offline version of the class, I provided some class time for the students to practice conversation scripts with their partners. These scripts were

given to the students, and students were encouraged to practice these conversations with a set of "virtual partner" sound files I had prepared.

Upon noticing the difference in speaking test averages and the relatively low number of downloads of the "virtual partner" sound files, I assumed that the poorer performance on the speaking tests could be attributed to two factors. First, students taking this class online were not practicing the practice conversations provided; instead they were passively watching the class videos and trying to absorb only what was necessary for the written exams. Second, they were not in an environment in which they could observe classmates put in the effort, thus depriving them of the pressure of knowing that their classmates were investing time to develop their skills. The lower speaking test scores of students taking the online version of the class could thus be attributed to environmental factors: They were not practicing before the speaking tests, one reason for which possibly being the lack of social pressure that is present in an offline class.

While this test case may seem relevant to language classes alone, the general assumption held by instructors of other courses about the average level of class content mastery seems somewhat pessimistic. Accountability and social pressure are widely accepted to be pivotal factors in motivation studies, but these concepts were not found to have been covered in the recent literature on the efficacy of online classes.

Conclusion

This experience and similar ones over the course of my online teaching thus have revealed the important potential of work that examines factors of motivation in a classroom setting. If the purpose of research is to improve our practices, some qualitative work that examines the factors of educational motivation may be in order. Conducting research on motivation can have rich practical implications in classroom settings, in spite of our return to offline classes. Of course, my highlighting the need for qualitative work that presents novel approaches to an understanding of a complex problem is in no way intended to disregard the importance of quantitative work. Quantitative work serves the important purpose of verifying that our intuitions are correct or incorrect. However, with the submissions of quantitative work noticeably outweighing those of qualitative and with this quantitative work only venturing to corroborate widely held assumptions, the declining utility and thus relevance of academic research seems to push research into an online void, unvisited by the people who would benefit from it the most.

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