

Online Instruction in the Age of COVID -19

Christopher Bozek*

Abstract

In the Spring of 2020 schools, colleges and universities across the globe went through a dramatic change to online instruction. Though online teaching has been in existence for several years, many teachers with no experience in online course design or teaching online had to adapt to the new normal of online instruction because of the devastating effect of the COVID -19. This paper details one teacher's account of his online teaching experience as well as explaining advantages and disadvantages of online teaching for teachers and students.

Introduction

2020 is a year of change all across the world. Such upheaval in countries' economies, ways of life, people's emotions and educational systems were never expected when the year started. As the COVID -19 spread from China to other countries, people lives changed drastically. As the threat of contagion intensified, educational authorities suddenly found themselves closing schools. In Japan, the new school year begins in April and in the closing months of the winter, decisions with huge impacts for both teachers and students were being made. Teachers were told that they could not teach regular, in-person/face-to-face classes. This paper details the experiences of one Japanese university English instructor in changing from in-person classes to online teaching.. By detailing these experiences, examining disadvantages and advantages of online learning and presenting a practical "things to do" checklist, this teacher hopes to help and inform other teachers who have not taught real-time online classes or who have only made on-demand or recorded classes.

The Spring Semester in Japan and KIT

1)Overview

In March 2020 people in Japan were changing how they worked, played and communicated with others. Many office workers were encouraged to work from home, if possible. Even members of the Japanese Royal Family had to adapt. Instead of attending functions in person, members of the Royal Family started to take part in events online (Crown Princess). Usually in April universities across Japan welcome new students, but in 2020 most universities did not start classes on time. Kitami Institute of Technology (KIT) was one of the first national universities in Japan to decide that the instruction for the spring semester would

* 北見工業大学講師 Lecturer, Kitami Institute of Technology

be done almost completely online. It was a shock to the faculty because many of the teachers had never taught even one online class and then suddenly they were asked to teach an entire semester online. “It is impossible.” and “There is no time to prepare.” were among the comments that teachers made. Classes started one month later than usual. Though there was not so much time to prepare, teachers across Japan and also here at KIT were able to successfully teach their first semester courses online. The teachers at KIT were fortunate because they had a choice of doing live real-time classes (synchronous), recording videos and/or PowerPoint presentations for students to view (asynchronous) or using other learning management systems (LMS) such as Moodle. My university allowed teachers to work from home. I went to the university each day and used the computer in my office, but many of my colleagues chose the option to work from home. The variety of formats as well as the freedom to choose a format certainly helped teachers accomplish this new way of teaching.

2)The Start of Online Classes - Cisco WebEx

Even before the pandemic, many universities around the world purchased large online learning systems and instead of each teacher designing their own course, some universities have design teams to create centralized, standardized course models (Santelli, 2015). Here at KIT, that is not the case. Each teacher had to design and implement their own online course. Regardless of who designs the course, learning how to use a Learning Management System (LMS) takes a great deal of time and much trial and error. I was fortunate because I had fantastic colleagues who helped me when I had a question or could not figure something out with the LMS. KIT recommended using the Cisco WebEx course system instead of the more popular Zoom system. “After an influx of Zoom bombing incidents in early 2020, Zoom has achieved a reputation of being less secure than its competitors — including WebEx.” (Zoom vs. WebEx).

3)What is the Core of Classes - Engagement

Making ties with other humans during the Covid -19 pandemic is not easy, but necessary for the mental health of online learners. Engagement is a term used to describe interaction between students and teachers, as well as between students themselves. In online learning, students have fewer chances to be engaged and so the universities as well as the teachers have to strive for frequent communication (both synchronous and asynchronous) with students (Pattenaude, 2020).

4) Effective Tool of Online Classes- The Chat Function

One helpful tool in the Cisco WebEx live course system is the chat function. During class, I ask students to send me a message if they have a question or when they have a problem. These chat messages are private, so students will not be embarrassed for any question or problem they may write about. The chat also serves an important role for teachers because sometimes students can tell the teacher about a mistake she/he has made. For example, if a teacher has forgotten to restore the slide presentation after pausing it, any student can simply tell the teacher about that in the chat. In each real-time online class I ask every student at least one question. Sometimes they do not answer. Some students may be away from their computer or else their mics are not working. It in this chat tool that students often inform me when their microphone is not working. I also use it when doing a cloze exercise with my rhyming booklet. I have written many rhymes and I leave the last word in each rhyme blank. The students have to read the rhyme, look at the corresponding rhyming word and think of the word that fits in the blank. Instead of just giving them a few minutes and then telling them the answer, I ask students to send me their answer to me via the chat function. In this way, I can determine which rhymes are difficult for students and also I can praise students who are actually sending me their answers.

It is beneficial for an online teacher to be on the learning end instead of just being the teacher. It is good for an instructor to participate as a learner in a weekly or monthly online learning group of some kind. I am a member of a student group that studies Japanese sign language online. It is an official university club at KIT. It is useful for me to be a learner, so that I can see what the teacher is doing, teaching techniques he is using and how he presents the material online. I can experience everything from a learner's point of view and it helps me with my own real-time online classes.

5) Difficult Aspect of Online Classes – Test Taking

Another area of change in 2020 for both teachers and students is test taking. In the past, I have given students speaking tests done in pairs. Doing the tests in pairs was not possible in 2020, so I chose to give the students online, open book quizzes and a final written test. The quizzes were multiple choice and were completed on our university's LMS. The final test was done during a live real-time class and it consisted of students listening to my directions and writing down the correct item in the correct place. After completing the test, each student took a picture of their test paper and sent it to me through the LMS. Students were given ten minutes to photograph their test paper and send it to the LMS. I made sure all the tests were received on the LMS before going on to the next part of the class. The final test I created for students worked well, but was not completely impenetrable to cheating. For any instructor, the issue of

cheating must be faced. The opportunities for cheating are greater with remote education. Cheating and plagiarism are concerns for online teaching (Albrahim, 2020). Since students were not allowed to gather on campus, it was impossible to have them in one place, which is easy to monitor. This is one reason I chose to give open book quizzes and the open book final test. Students could have easily gathered with another classmate in their apartment and taken the test together and compared answers. I do not think this happened in great numbers, but it was possible. Other ways to prevent cheating include using webcams to proctor test takers who are in a large classroom. Other ways do exist. For example, recognition software is used to determine students facial, voice or biometric data (Berkey, 2015).

Two Modes in the Cisco WebEx System – Meetings and Events

Providing extra English practice to students is beneficial, especially to students who have not been able to take in-person classes. In my extra practice sessions, students had to turn on their cameras so there was two-way video interaction instead of just one-way teaching. The Cisco WebEx system has two different modes for online instruction. They are called WebEx Meetings and WebEx Events. WebEx Meetings is for smaller groups with video and WebEx Events is for one-way instruction for larger groups. I used Events for my online instruction. Students could see only me and hear only me. They could not see their classmates. When I wanted to ask a student a question, I had to click on the unmute button. In the summer months I decided to use WebEx Meetings for those students who were interested in practicing their English. I was expecting a huge turnout, but in reality, there were only three or four in each class who wanted to practice online. Each practice session was 45 minutes long. I prepared PowerPoint presentations to guide the sessions. For most participants, it was the first time to see and communicate with their classmates. Because each participant used their video camera, the teacher as well as the other participants could see each other's background. One interesting outcome was that family members sometimes came into the room where the student was without realizing that he/she was in class.

Fall Semester 2020

1)Start of Breakout Rooms

Now looking back at the first semester, I have learned a great deal by teaching completely remotely from my office. This was a task that I thought was impossible just four months ago. Even though the teachers here at KIT and I have completed the first semester, we have to continue to learn and improve our online teaching skills. In the late spring and early summer there were online meetings where teachers could listen to speakers who have taught online to gain

insight into how to manage online classes. There are still online seminars, teacher forums, and conferences, as there should be, because having completed one semester does not make us experts. We still need to learn more and try new techniques to make our classes even better. For example, I used Cisco WebEx Events in the first semester to deliver half of my classes, but from the second semester I will use Cisco WebEx Meetings. The Meetings system has the option for breakout groups that the Events system does not have. It is easier to use the same method as the first semester, but because I want students to get into groups during my class, I will try this new system.

2) Questionnaire and Its Review

Since students are online for several hours throughout the day, I would like to conduct surveys in order to collect students' feedback about each English class. For example, I would like to use the online application called Typeform to make surveys to ask students what they remember from the class, any words they did not understand and any vocabulary they thought was particularly useful. Collecting feedback from students in this year is very important because most learning was forced to change from in-person to real-time online formats.

Measuring students' needs, likes and dislikes is important. Steele(2019) explains that first year university students may need a great deal of immediate feedback or reinforcement by the teacher. If this is given then it will lead to greater instructor presence, which is important in online teaching and student outcomes.

Effective Time Management

Time management is critical for online learners. At first glance, studying online seems to be a great time saver for both students and educators. For students, certain aspects such as not having to go to campus, this is true, but not in all areas. In the first semester, KIT university students were able to watch their on-demand presentations any time during the week, but the administration changed this policy for the second semester because students were not managing their time very well and it led to students having to watch many hours of online presentations right before the deadline. In the second semester the administration told the students that attendance would only be given when they watched their on-demand classes during the official class time. The administration hoped that this rule change would help students manage their time more effectively.

Practical Steps for Teaching an Online Class

When I wrote this paper, I wanted to have practical steps for teaching online classes that teachers could read and say to themselves, "I do that.", "I don't do

that.”, or “I should give that a try.” etc. The following is a list of practical steps a teacher can take before starting her/his online class.

1)Before Online Learning

1. Review your presentation and make sure you have edited your PowerPoint slides to reflect the correct date or words such as yesterday or today so that they correspond to today’s class.
2. Make sure you go to the restroom shortly before class.
3. Make sure all the lights are on in the room where you are teaching. Lighting is important. Make sure your face has enough light so that students can see it. Make sure that light from a window is lighting up your face instead of making it dark.
4. Make sure that your “Online Class in Session” sign is on the front of your office door.

2)During a Real-Time Class

1. When you start class, be careful of looking down at notes or the textbook for long periods of time. I noticed this happening with a Zoom chat that I belong to. One of the participants was looking down at the book and all I could see was the top of his head. For example, when reading a dialog in the textbook with a student, I hold the textbook up in front of the computer screen, but not blocking the camera. In that way, students can still see my face and I can read the dialog.
2. If you have many students and you want to ask each student a question, start off by saying his/her name and hello. I learned this from a call in radio show I used to listen to. This is effective for two reasons. First, the teacher can make sure that the student is in front of the computer. It alerts the student. They know the teacher will ask them a question. Secondly, when the student replies with “Hello”, the teacher can make sure the volume is high enough to hear the person. Saying hello is a small thing, but it makes asking questions to a long list of students proceed smoothly without wasting time.
3. Have the Post-it notes ready to use. When teaching an online class, write down sentences that you can add to slides, write ideas to make the slide show go more smoothly or write explanations that will make comprehension easier. I write these things down on Post-it notes during the class and can refer to them after class. I use Post-it notes instead of paper because I after I complete the change, I can easily throw the Post-it note away.
4. Remember to smile. When I am teaching my real-time online classes, I often smile for no reason into the camera. In regular face-to-face classes, I smile often and tell jokes. It is even more important in online classes to smile in order to 30
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3)After Online Learning

There are several actions I need to do on the LMS for each class. I do these actions immediately following the real-time online class, so that I do not forget them.

1. Input the students' attendance.
2. Write messages to students who were late logging in to class, did not attend class, or who did not answer the teacher questions.
3. Change the date on your slide show presentation.
4. Make any changes that you wrote down on Post-it notes during the class.

Disadvantages and Advantages of Online Learning

1)Disadvantages

There are some disadvantages in online learning for students. For tactile learners, online classes may be of little interest. Since students do not know each other, having them do group projects through email is challenging (Adnan, 2020). Michelle Obama's public health campaign was named "Let's Move". It was created because this generation of children do not go out and play as much as past generations. This sedentary lifestyle is leading to health problems such as obesity. Another disadvantage of online learning is that students do not have to leave their rooms or apartments and it may lead to a sedentary lifestyle. It is the same for teachers. I never thought of my job as sedentary because I was walking to classrooms and always moving around the classroom while teaching. Now that I am teaching online, I sit in my office for several hours each day. I do not own an Apple watch, so I do not have reminders to help me stand up or move. Instead I have to create little errands around the school campus to get me out of my chair such as putting my seal in the attendance book, throwing garbage away or checking my mailbox in the teachers' room down the hall. I wonder if many teachers gained weight in the first semester because they were not teaching in a classroom. Another disadvantage is the absence of the social aspect of participating in a face-to-face class. At KIT, students usually take their classes with the same group of students. This leads to building strong friendships and helping each other. If a student misses a class, she/he can easily ask a classmate the contents of the class and any assignments that were given. Social interaction among students that is normally found in classrooms was not attainable. Friendships that can easily be formed in the classroom, in clubs and at festivals on the campus were not formed because the students hardly ever or never saw each other, even during online instruction.

2)Advantages

There are advantages to online learning as well. In the first semester, which began in May 2020, first year students were not required to be in Kitami. They could take their courses from their home because all classes were conducted online. Living at home may have saved students money. Most of the classes at KIT were on-demand classes, which means they were recorded by the teacher and could be viewed by the students any time during a one-week period. This is an incredible amount of freedom for the learners. If a student is not a morning person, it would not be a problem because they would not have to watch a class at a specific time. They could watch the class at their leisure. The normal daily routines associated with attending university classes such as getting dressed, taking a shower, brushing teeth, etc. were not required because the students did not have to leave their room.

The advantages for teachers were also readily seen as soon as the semester began. Teachers did not have to go to a classroom and teach. Instructors doing real-time classes could teach from their home. Those who recorded their classes in advance, only had to teach one time and then upload the recorded class onto the LMS. Teachers with many sections of the same class were very fortunate. Teachers did not have to use a loud voice when speaking to a large class. They could use their normal voice when speaking into a computer's microphone while sitting in a chair. Teachers could take a sip of water or coffee without being seen. One teacher at KIT, who is a heavy smoker, enjoyed teaching his real-time classes because he did not show his face to the camera and was able to smoke while he taught.

Future Outlook

What does the future hold for online learning? Of course online learning will continue, but no one knows if it will replace face-to-face learning or if there will be a blend of the two formats. Teachers in the soft sciences have it easier than science teachers because lectures are more easily adapted to online teaching than experiments. It is October and universities in Japan do not know what kind of teaching format we will use for next April. Students would like to know and of course teachers would like to know, but it is too early for administrators to make decisions because the COVID -19 virus is still a problem. Ideally we will go back to face-to-face teaching, but there will most likely be changes such as conducting face-to-face classes with social distancing and/or a mask mandate.

There is a large body of research for online learning. Universities across the globe have been providing online courses for many years, but 2020 is different. Because of the pandemic many institutions had to change most of their courses to online learning. I think an appropriate saying is: "Strike while the iron is hot." Classroom teachers should immediately start to conduct research that

includes eliciting feedback from current university students and their expectations and their actual learning experiences in 2020.

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