

A 23-YEAR VETERAN UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBER'S TRANSITION FROM GROUND TO SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE CLASSROOM DURING THE GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

This article is an example of a 23-year veteran university faculty member's reflective practice, which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic forced educational institutions to immediately move to e-learning which impacted instructors in all levels of education. Numerous challenges to overcome, such as maintaining student engagement, coping with student distractions, incorporating technology effectively, and minimizing vocal fatigue arose as instructors navigated this new modality of delivery. In this paper, through the process of reflective practice, I explain the situation I experienced and compare that experience to the literature to help me to better understand the challenges I faced. The process of reflective practice allows for improved decision making to provide solutions for future semesters of teaching. The reflective practice process has a goal of positively impacting one's development as a professional and potentially helping other professionals faced with similar situations. I explain potential reasons for the challenges, evaluate those reasons, and decide on what is the most plausible explanation for the unexpected challenges I experienced. After the evaluation is complete, I make an informed decision for future practice. I conclude with recommendations for future research.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

As a university professor, I aspire to perform my role as a facilitator of student engagement and learning at a high level, for my students and the professions they will soon enter. Like many instructors across the globe, I questioned whether I was doing my job well during the abrupt transition that took place when the COVID-19 pandemic immediately changed the mode in which education was delivered (Kulikowski et al., 2021). I sought to reflect on what occurred to improve my practice in the future as well as potentially positively impact the practice of others.

The process of professional development is common in many professions and required by many regulatory bodies (Fragkos, 2016). Much of this

professional development is achieved by attending educational seminars to increase knowledge and skills without incorporating a formal process of inquiry and reflection to inform one's practice in the field. Reflective practice is performed in various ways by various professions including nursing, medicine, education, psychology, theology, business, and management, as a technique experts in these fields use as a conduit to continually develop professional knowledge, competence, and behavior to inform the quality of their work (Connelly et al., 2020; Dewey, 1933; Donohoe, 2019; Fragkos, 2016; Greenberger, 2020). John Dewey's (1933) seminal work in a book entitled, *How We Think*, is regarded as the foundation of reflective practice. In this book, Dewey, a philosopher focused on

education and learning, talks about various types of thought including belief, imagination, and reflection. Reflection is described a process that allows the thinker a deeper understanding of an experience and compares those experiences to other experiences. It is a disciplined, systematic process that leads to intellectual growth of self and others (Rodgers, 2002). Reflection, as described by Dewey, is an emotional, intellectual, time-intensive process (Rodgers, 2002). Since this influential publication, reflective practice has been expanded to include becoming aware of self and others, and changing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, in order to become more effective in the practice of one's profession (Schön, 1983; Van Beveren et al., 2018).

Although many professionals informally reflect on their craft, the concept of reflective practice has been defined as a process to engage in a purposeful activity, occurring either during or after an experience, where an individual critically examines one's own experience and compares that personal view to related literature in order to inform professional development (Fragkos, 2016; Graham & Johns, 2019). The reflective practice process has a positive impact on university faculty, which allows them the opportunity to incorporate new ideas, attain a deep understanding of one's strengths, improve decision making, and have a positive effect on student engagement and learning (Greenberger, 2020). Much of the reflection that takes place in higher education is informal and does not always critically examine associated literature (Leigh, 2016). I, too, have often reflected on my practice as a higher education faculty member, but without meeting the outlined details found in the process of reflective practice. This reflective critique is designed to allow me the opportunity to evaluate my thoughts and personal experiences related to this transition in education and compare those experiences to current published research to determine my best path forward in order to impact student learning; a process regarded as a fundamental piece of pedagogical practice in higher education (Donohoe, 2019; Greenberger, 2020).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The transition from ground instruction to synchronous online instruction proved to be a challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization

declared COVID-19 a world-wide pandemic (Jebril, 2020). This pandemic completely impacted the daily lives of people across the globe, and for most individuals, the onset of the pandemic changed the way they perform in their professions. Although it was unexpected and thrust upon us very quickly, we have come to realize many of our newfound techniques for conducting business may be here to stay for the long-term, far beyond the conclusion of the pandemic. Many educational institutions, at all levels, were immediately required to go completely remote for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, and most institutions maintained this format well into the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. Remote teaching is commonly referred to as e-learning, virtual learning, or traditional online synchronous (TOS) learning whereby the students view a live lecture via an online video format such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams without attending a face-to-face physical classroom and complete all activities virtually (Coman et al., 2020; Dew et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Peñarrubia-Lozano et al., 2021; Rahiem, 2021; Ramo et al., 2021). In the higher educational institution for which I work, the faculty and administration were dedicated to bringing students back on campus and allowing them to continue their education in person via the ground classroom as much as possible while adhering to local governmental guidelines to maintain physical distancing and wear facemasks in public places. Some students chose this mode of delivery and others chose to continue taking all their classes in a remote, e-learning format.

Just like the general population in most parts of the world, college students had endured many months of isolation at home and were anxiously awaiting return to our university campus. At our institution, the return to classes took on a blended format or a traditional online synchronous format (TOS). The blended format occurred on ground, and the TOS format occurred remotely via videoconferencing using the Zoom platform of delivery. The TOS format followed the same schedule as our previous ground courses. Many instructors chose to teach TOS believing it would be a seamless transition from ground courses. Many of us thought we would simply take our ground course material and present it via Zoom. This transition was not as effortless as we imagined.

During this unprecedented time in history, the

transition from teaching traditional ground courses to aligning two new and different modalities of instruction for the same course simultaneously proved to be an unexpected challenge for many instructors. The challenges arose in many ways. At our institution, we focus much effort in maintaining consistency across sections of the same course. This expectation includes consistency in course objectives, rigor, and student engagement. As many of us were teaching multiple sections of the same course across multiple modalities in the same semester, we continued to place emphasis on maintaining consistency across sections. Although ground instructors are well versed in student engagement and classroom management in the face-to-face classroom, a challenge was maintaining the consistency in student engagement, discussion, and participation in the new TOS mode of delivery.

ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

Over the course of teaching in a traditional on-ground university with undergraduate students for the past 23 years, I acquired and implemented many techniques to engage students and manage my classrooms in a face-to-face format. A general format might be to introduce information for a short period of time, then allow students the opportunity to interact with the material during in-class discussions with their peers or work on associated individual activities. This may be followed by a discussion on the material as a class and continuing with an introduction to a deeper understanding of the material. I continued a similar process in spring 2020 until the COVID-19 world-wide pandemic changed everything. I was unaware of the challenges that would be seen as I transitioned to teaching in this new physical distancing scenario.

Covid-19 changed our world in countless ways, including higher education instruction. Our university decided to allow students to either take blended classes or traditional online classes as the pandemic continued throughout the summer of 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021. The blended format occurred on campus in our ground classroom in a face-to-face format. Half of the students in one class attended a face-to-face class one day a week and the other half another day a week. During their blended day, they completed blended activities with a Blended Learning Assistant in a virtual environment. Although I had experience

teaching in a blended format, this blended model required much work to redesign the course for a one lecture a week format with many blended activities completed outside of class. Therefore, I, like many other faculty members, spent many hours preparing for the transition to this new blended learning model.

For those students who chose to remain at home and avoid travel to campus, our institution chose to offer a remote learning option for courses. Students were offered the opportunity to stay at home and learn synchronously online in a new format called “Traditional Online Synchronous” (TOS), commonly referred to as e-learning or virtual learning. In this format, the instructors would live stream lectures from their offices or home during a set weekly schedule. The entire class would be conducted in this format throughout the semester. Faculty teaching schedules also changed to accommodate the change in format. Our classes were changed to all 1-hour and 45-minute class sessions, many of which were back-to-back. For example, I taught three back-to-back class sessions each at 1 hour and 45 minutes every Tuesday and Thursday for a total of six hours straight with a small 15-minute break to walk across campus to my next class. Our faculty were familiar with the 15-minute break schedule, but we were much less accustomed to the format of classes. This TOS option was new to our institution.

As a faculty member, I am proud to be a part of an institution offering the students these various opportunities and felt I could teach different sections of the same course in the two different modalities without issue. I took on this challenge with two different classes in the same semester as I did not realize how challenging it would be to balance various modalities for different courses. After the first day of classes, I immediately started noticing the differences between my ground sections of my classes and my TOS sections. In the ground classroom, I could see my students faces even though I could only see their eyes and corners of their smiles peeking beyond their face masks. I could look around the room and determine their engagement level. They were able to talk to one another, from a social distance with their masks on, to engage with the content. In my TOS courses, I quickly realized I did not have a good perspective to evaluate student engagement. Although most

students had their videos on, I could not determine if they were actively engaged with the content or distracted. Some students did not turn on their videos for a variety of reasons, and although I asked for their videos to be on, I could not fully enforce the request. It was also difficult to simultaneously look at their videos, concentrate on the chat box, and lecture.

Not only did I notice a difference in engagement, I also realized the flow of the class was much different. I was talking much more than I was in my ground courses. In fact, after one day of teaching three back-to-back courses, I noticed vocal fatigue and avoided using my voice when I left the office for the day. Although I had prepared for these new modes of delivery, I also noticed I seemed to feel more stressed and uncomfortable during and after teaching. At the end of the day, I started contemplating what the difference was between my ground and TOS courses that was leading to my perception of decreased student engagement, my increased vocal fatigue, my decreased confidence in my teaching abilities, and increased stress levels. If I could determine the cause, I could find a solution to improve this situation for me and my students.

I believe this transition was most challenging because I was well-versed in teaching students in a ground classroom where I saw all my students either two or three days a week. I have also taught in the traditional blended learning format, but this semester was much different. I had never taught live online before as we did not have this format as an option previous to the pandemic. Even if it were offered before, it likely would not have been my first choice because I really enjoy seeing my students in person where I can see their smiling faces, get to know them, and engage with them regularly in a face-to-face format—one of the highlights of my job as a professor. Given the extreme circumstances of the pandemic, I accepted the challenge of teaching multiple modalities, including synchronous online format to allow my students the opportunity to learn in a remote setting if they chose to do so for health and safety of themselves or their family.

REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

As a faculty member who has taught ground classes, blended classes, and online classes for many years, I can look back and determine several

possible causes for the challenges I experienced in teaching the same course in an on-ground blended class and a traditional online synchronous class in the same semester. Student engagement was an immediate challenge I noticed. Numerous student distractions may occur to college students in ground and TOS courses, but during this time in history, it seemed the quantity of distractions were increased. Lastly, I expect I was utilizing my voice differently in the TOS course as I felt vocal fatigue instantaneously. As part of the reflective practice process, I thought thoroughly about each of these as plausible causes of my unexpected challenge.

Student Engagement

Synchronous online instruction can provide benefits and also challenges as compared to face-to-face teaching and learning for both instructors and students (Gordon, 2020). The first potential cause for my difficulty in transition to traditional online synchronous method of teaching may involve the difference in my familiarity in teaching ground classes and engaging students in a face-to-face classroom as compared to my lack of familiarity with engagement of students in a virtual zoom meeting, as was used in the TOS courses. I have dedicated much time over multiple years learning and incorporating techniques to engage students in the face-to-face setting. This includes techniques gained from professional development conferences, seminars, and readings on classroom engagement and assessment techniques. In the ground classroom, I can physically walk around the classroom where I can see students during their discussions and activities, talk to them, and give feedback. I can also easily determine when all groups have completed discussing items, so I know when to discuss the topic as a class. In the TOS courses, to mimic the group work in my face-to-face classes, I organize students in breakout rooms to discuss topics with their group. From the first day of my TOS course, there was a clear difference in the engagement of breakout rooms via zoom as compared to in-class discussions in face-to-face classes. I am familiar with engagement and active learning in the ground face-to-face classroom, but it was clear the same engagement technique did not carry over to the TOS classroom seamlessly.

Various New Methods of Technology

The second plausible cause for these challenges

is somewhat related to the first. Because of my unfamiliarity with conducting classes in an online synchronous Zoom meeting, I needed to spend much time learning how to use various methods of technology to my advantage and to the advantage of my students. It is one thing to read about it and study how to implement techniques, but just as we teach our students, you must then take that knowledge and practice it to build skills and your art to your profession. I knew breakout rooms in the Zoom classroom would be useful, but I had to determine how best to use them. It proved to be unrealistic to visit each breakout room to guide students in discussions because I had TOS classes of over 90 students. In addition, once they were in their breakout rooms, they could not see my PowerPoint presentation slide to guide them in discussion. They could return to the main Zoom meeting at any time when they finished their group discussion, but it seemed many students would just wait until I brought them all back. I also used other technology in my classes, such as Poll Everywhere and our learning management system, but in a synchronous online class, the dependence on technology is intensified as I would go through an entire semester and not ever see my students in a physical face-to-face classroom. In a ground classroom, I would use typical hardcopy participation documents where students would add to their “exit ticket” as we went through class and submit at the end of class. In a TOS format, hardcopy document submission was not an option. The time to prepare all the various engagement techniques and incorporation of technology such as Poll Everywhere, blended activity worksheets, Zoom meeting breakout rooms, and transitioning all exams to an online format, dramatically increased my preparation time for each of my seven courses during this first semester of this format of teaching.

Student Distraction

The difficulty I experienced in student engagement was likely amplified by the student distractions that occurred in the environment they found themselves during class time. There were many issues related to internet connectivity, distractions from other student videos, and other distractions in their home such as their family members working and going to school all in the same house. I had many students send chat

messages to apologize because they had to share a room with a family member and share internet, which interrupted their engagement in class. In addition, students suddenly found themselves in situations where the mode of communication with friends shifted from in-person, face-to-face communication to electronic communication. Since students were now engaging in the TOS classrooms via their computers, they were likely interrupted by messages and other internet distractions while on their computers. When I visited some student breakout rooms in the TOS classes, I determined they were not as engaged as ground students as student videos would be off or students were not talking to each other as planned. I also had students return to the main Zoom meeting where they told me they returned because no one was talking in their breakout room. These are indications students were distracted during online classes.

Vocal Fatigue

The distractions and decreased student discussion likely contributed to the development of vocal fatigue with my TOS course delivery. In ground classroom, throughout a 1-hour, 45-minute class session, I have time to rest my voice. This occurs when students are completing in-class participation activities and discussions as well as when students verbally ask questions. In a ground classroom, when students are discussing items and engaging with the content via activities, they are engaged with the content while I have time to rest my voice. During a lecture, as I am presenting or walking around the classroom, students can verbally ask questions, and other students can hear their questions. In a Zoom meeting, it seemed that many students were not as interested in asking questions verbally. It seemed they felt more comfortable asking questions through the chat feature, likely because if they did verbally talk, their video popped up on everyone’s computer screen, their face becoming the center of attention. The chat box is a good communication feature for Zoom, but it was challenging for me as an instructor because any time there was a question in the chat box, I received the alert that would state someone had a question, and then I would feel obligated to read the question out loud to everyone. So, rather than resting my voice during a question, I would use my voice more to read the chat box question. In addition, when I

am in a face-to-face classroom, while walking around while students are in groups, I can answer questions as needed, but do not need to talk, if unnecessary. In a Zoom meeting, when I went into their breakout rooms, students would either not be talking or stop talking when I entered, and I would initiate a conversation. I realized the vocal fatigue after my first day of teaching in this new format. I attributed this vocal fatigue to the incorporation of TOS courses as I had not experienced it this intensely in past semesters. Because of the vocal fatigue, I may have inadvertently impacted the student engagement through decreased instructor entry into the breakout rooms. My familiarity in ground classroom engagement techniques, the time commitment necessary for learning and incorporating new technologies, the observed increased student distractions, and instructor vocal fatigue are some plausible reasons for my difficulty in comfort in transition to a traditional online synchronous format of teaching. The next step in the process of reflection is to determine if other instructors experienced similar challenges and to determine what might be learned from the literature to inform my teaching for the future.

EVALUATION OF THE REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

After reflecting on the potential reasons for my experience, I sought out scientific literature related to each reason to evaluate the merits of my own thoughts and experiences. This evaluation is the next step in reflective practice. This evaluation will supply me with the information necessary to make a judgement to determine a solution to the problem (Greenberger, 2020).

Differences in Student Engagement Techniques

Student engagement and active learning are focal points in education to allow the learner to interact with the course content to enhance learning. Engagement is defined as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Engaging students in a TOS format is different than engaging students in a ground format of classes, and as a result, student participation and engagement has been found to decrease when transitioning from a face-to-face classroom to synchronous online. Reinholz et al. (2020) noted the avenues for participation in a synchronous online classroom must be different. The instructor

must first provide a safe space for discussion before engagement can take place effectively (Reinholz et al., 2020). To engage active learning in an effort to enhance learning, an instructor must design participation activities to promote verbal talk to deepen understanding, activities to develop identity, and allow the opportunity for students to find a sense of belonging and social connection in the classroom (Banes et al., 2020). Asking questions and incorporating discussions in small groups has been shown to be effective techniques to facilitate active learning (Shoepe et al., 2020).

The transition from face-to-face classroom to online synchronous has been making forced progress in the last year. Online asynchronous classrooms have been thriving for many years, but synchronous online classes with live instruction and facilitation is more novel. Francescucci & Rohani (2019) compared virtual interactive, real-time, instructor-led online learning (VIRI) to an asynchronous online environment. A difference that was noted was that the VIRI promoted a student connection with instructors and other students when compared to asynchronous (Beege et al., 2018; Watts, 2016). This type of instruction seems to show promise as compared to asynchronous online classrooms, yet there are hurdles to overcome to maximize student engagement in the TOS format.

It is important to promote experiences for students to become active, scholarly participants in the learning process, yet this has shown to be complicated to do effectively in a synchronous Zoom lesson (Gordon, 2020). A major hinderance to this active learning process in moving from a ground classroom to a synchronous online learning classroom, is that the conversational or relational aspect of education is not easily reproduced (Gordon, 2020). Flynn-Wilson et al. (2021) found that students did not perceive to have robust discussions in online virtual synchronous courses, which resulted in decreased student engagement. Students prefer case studies and discussions over traditional passive lecture (Rizvi & Nabi, 2021), but unless much time is spent in planning such activities, the format of TOS lends itself to lecture rather than discussion-based learning.

Increased Preparation Time for Incorporating Technology

Although many instructors have been trained

in instructional and technology techniques for online and blended learning to enhance student learning in various formats of delivery, the onset of the pandemic forced many of us to transition to full technology integration in a new format of traditional online synchronous (TOS) learning. It is commonly perceived that e-learning (TOS) uses traditional methods of teaching in a new online format, but there are many differences (Kulikowski et al., 2021). The transition from face-to-face to TOS learning includes incorporation of many different types of technology including, but not limited to, Zoom lectures with breakout rooms and chat boxes, documents distributed electronically, polling online, and exams for online delivery as well as proctoring exams virtually. To utilize these technologies appropriately, there is a time commitment to learning them as well as the time necessary to convert materials to the various formats for full integration.

Instructors were well aware that this change in format of education may have detrimental effects on students' knowledge and skills and impact many college seniors negatively as they would soon be entering the work force (Revilla-Cuesta et al., 2021). Ramos-Morcillo et al. (2020) found the abrupt transition to online teaching during the spring of 2020 led to the student perception that teaching quality was greatly reduced. Instructors were aware of this perception and most of us, including me, worked extremely hard in our attempts to achieve a smooth transition. I felt the weight of my influence on the future of my students. As a result, many instructors had a sense of unpreparedness, were worried and extremely stressed, and others approached the situation with the feeling that it would be over soon, which may have affected the amount of preparation, the time spent learning new teaching techniques, and their attitudes about e-learning (Besser et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). When courses transitioned from face-to-face to online, students perceived university professors were knowledgeable about the content of the courses and had the personal and social skills to adapt to the online environment (Revilla-Cuesta et al., 2021). Instructors had knowledge and experience in new technologies that may be used in the classroom, but they frequently overlooked the implementation of these technologies prior to the pandemic (Revilla-Cuesta et al., 2021). Learning

any new teaching technique or technology takes time and effort.

The traditional mode of delivery allows for more interaction between the instructor and student, so although the thought has been that the preparation of TOS learning is like traditional ground, face-to face learning, the instructor must spend more time preparing synchronous activities in the TOS environment (Lambie & Law, 2020). The transition from ground to TOS has proved to be time consuming and, as a result, numerous publications were designed to provide guides for instructors and included suggestions, such as taking the time to practice with the platform of delivery, and enhancing cognitive presence and a sense of community by focusing on improving learner engagement (Luke, 2021; Sharp et al., 2021). The first technology instructors must learn to transition to e-learning is using Zoom or a similar videoconferencing platform, for a synchronous session (Lambie & Law, 2020). Many faculty members practiced utilizing Zoom with coworkers, but it is much different practicing with a few faculty coworkers than it is in a classroom of 90 students where engagement in the content is essential. In the TOS model, small group work is achieved in Zoom breakout rooms, and traditional ground activities must be adapted to fit this new model (Lambie & Law, 2020). It is noted that breakout rooms are difficult to manage when a professor has many students in one class and could have 30 or more breakout rooms (Sharp et al., 2021).

There are various other techniques that are unique to the TOS model. Utilizing prepared PPTs, organizing slides to allow participation, and adapting it to the new format while annotating and drawing online during lectures takes time and practice (Lambie & Law, 2020). Some of the techniques for engagement include chat boxes, class polls, and breakout rooms (Sharp et al., 2021). Instructors who used these techniques agree it increases workload and is difficult to focus on lecturing when chats are coming in simultaneously (Lambie & Law, 2020; Sharp et al., 2021). Other suggestions to improve student engagement include designing practical, exciting activities to engage students with the content, but the time component for integration can hold back the implementation of those techniques (Saha et al., 2021; Sharp et al., 2021). The time necessary to transition exams to

new online exam delivery methods is also a factor to consider when managing time (Saha et al., 2021).

It has been noted that the success of e-learning depends on instructors' attitude and technical competence (König et al., 2020). This forced e-learning situation has highlighted the difference between students who grew up utilizing technology and instructors who have been transitioning to incorporate technology (Frey, 2021). Kulikowski et al. (2021) found that forced e-learning during the pandemic led to a decrease in job motivation by decreasing task identity, task significance, autonomy, and social dimensions of work in university faculty members. This has been shown to lead to a negative instructor experience related to e-learning where faculty become discouraged and have job performance declines, and those faculty may choose not to adopt e-learning in the future. For more experienced and self-confident university faculty members, this decrease in job motivation is influenced by feelings of stress, low self-esteem, vulnerability, and frustration related to supporting student participation and engagement (Özgür, 2020; Scherer et al., 2021). Interestingly, studies have found that female teachers were more likely to have positive attitudes toward online learning with higher self-efficacy and personal readiness to implement online teaching techniques (Scherer et al., 2021). Research on the transition from ground to TOS found that the technology obstacles used in this transition must be dealt with proactively in order to properly utilize this platform (Nicol et al., 2018).

Technology has been increasingly promoted in face-to-face classrooms for years, but increased access does not necessarily translate into increased use. Many instructors perceive external barriers and difficulty integrating practice in the classroom. Barriers include administrative support, expectation of technology integration, and sufficient time and training to prepare to integrate technology into lessons (Vongkulluksn et al., 2018). It has also been found that more experienced teachers incorporate technology less in the classroom (Inan & Lowther, 2010). Prior to the pandemic, research found that instructors who believed technology would enhance the classroom experience integrated technology more readily (Vongkulluksn et al., 2018). During the pandemic, although many instructors valued and relied on the use of technology, the lack of sufficient

time and training seemed to play a bigger role in the quantity and quality of integration (Frey, 2021). Technology has been available for many years, yet it will take some time to train all instructors on applying the most applicable techniques to the specific subject, course, and context (Peñarrubia-Lozano et al., 2021).

Student distractions

The student distractions that occur during e-learning have been studied for many years, and it is agreed that online e-learning introduces recurring problems even among the most effective e-learners. This occurs when students have difficulty finding separation between academic pursuits and social interactions for extended periods of time while on electronic devices (Winter et al., 2010). Because students are accustomed to using technology for social communication, students have long-reported challenges managing learning and non-learning tasks while on electronic devices (Winter et al., 2010). Keeping students engaged and interested during TOS takes a whole new set of skills (Saha et al., 2021). Maintaining focus during many long back-to-back Zoom lectures has proven to be challenging to students (Rizvi & Nabi, 2021; Sharp et al., 2021). Many of the student distractions may be related to student continual unmonitored access to their personal computer and phone, internet issues, lack of instructor supervising engagement in breakout rooms, and distractions at home, among others.

Throughout a typical day, college students spend many hours on their phones and send hundreds of messages for social purposes (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). In a ground classroom, students have reported sending 15-20 text messages during a class period and spending 40-60% of their time off-task on electronic devices. These distractions have been shown to be more prevalent in medium-sized classes of 36-149 students (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). As a result, when students use electronic devices for off-task purposes, learning is hindered as note-taking decreases, performance on exams decreases, and overall GPA is impacted negatively (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). Although it has been shown to impact learning, many students consider regulation of off-task technology to an individual choice falling under the purview of personal decision making unless the activity

disrupts another student (Neiterman & Zaza, 2019). In the case of synchronous e-learning, the disruption of other students would occur if the students were not interacting with their breakout rooms, but during other times in lecture activities, the off-task activities would only be interfering with the student's learning, not others.

It has been found that although students are well versed in technology, many are not prepared with the appropriate level of organizational and time management skills without guidance from instructors and structure of a ground, face-to-face classroom experience (Müller et al., 2021). Ground classroom instructors spend much time preparing detailed face-to-face lectures and activities to facilitate in-class learning. In the case of the transition to online learning, the student must self-regulate to focus their attention on their study schedule and habits that impact their learning (Revilla-Cuesta et al., 2021). Mukhter and Chowdhary (2020) found that students reported challenges in creating a home environment conducive to learning. Rahiem (2021) determined that students excelled and improved learning outcomes when they were motivated by their surroundings. Many students achieved this by designing their learning space to be comfortable and specific to learning, but others had issues achieving a learning environment conducive to learning (Rahiem, 2021). Many students have a lack of privacy in their home learning environment and multiple added responsibilities including personal home responsibilities, such as caring for children or siblings who are also learning online (Mukhter & Chowdhary, 2020). In addition, many students may have experienced a decrease in family income due to the pandemic, which added stress and an increase in work and home responsibility (Müller et al., 2021). These situations are added distractions to student learning.

Although useful in delivering information, Zoom introduces many challenges as compared to monitoring and facilitating learning in a ground classroom, especially when TOS classes are large. Observing student engagement in the general Zoom classroom is challenging as well as monitoring student group discussions in breakout rooms (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). Instructors have an additional burden of motivating students to speak and ask questions online (Lambie & Law, 2020). Student self-initiation to respond to

questions, ask questions, or provide opinions is minimized in the TOS classroom (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020). Many instructors attempt to observe student engagement by asking students to have their videos on during lectures, yet according to the FERPA act, students may opt out, in which case it would be more difficult to determine if they are engaged in the class (Sharp et al., 2021). Screen fatigue is also a deterrent to learning and can lead to distractions interfering with learning (Mukhter & Chowdhary, 2020). It has been determined that well-timed breaks and activities may improve focus and attention and combat "Zoom fatigue" (Sharp et al., 2021). Internet connectivity and inadequate bandwidth have also been seen as major hinderances to consistent student engagement in this e-learning format (Rizvi & Nabi, 2021). These issues have been shown to be pervasive worldwide (Coman et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2021; Rizvi & Nabi, 2021).

There are numerous qualitative differences between face-to-face classrooms and synchronous online classrooms. Some of the differences seen in the synchronous online classroom include lack of shared physical space, decrease in spontaneous comments and laughter, inability to view non-verbal communication, and difficulty incorporating group work and interactive activities as compared to the ground, face-to-face classroom (Gordon, 2020). Coman et al. (2020) found student distraction can be attributed to lack of physical interaction with others, physical problems that may occur due to back and sight problems from sitting at a computer for many hours, lack of outdoor physical activity, and the total time spent on the computer, which decreases motivation. Mukhter and Chowdhary (2020) found students report being bored and lonely without the social interaction they had in the face-to-face classroom therefore leading to lack of motivation and attention in online synchronous classes. Lack of focus in online learning has been attributed to student mental state as well (Rahiem, 2021). Students who were intrinsically motivated and had a high self-efficacy have been shown to overcome obstacles and make sacrifices in order to focus on necessary course-related tasks (Rahiem, 2021). Many instructors were unsure of how much time and mental effort students were devoting to their studies and were also unsure how to positively affect this mental effort appropriately (Müller et

al., 2021).

Not only do student distractions hinder learning on the part of the student, student distractions also have been shown to impact student-instructor relationships, which in turn, has a negative impact on learning (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). Many instructors find it difficult to balance attempting to deter off-task behavior and reprimanding students for off-task behavior. Reprimand for off-task behavior has been viewed as demotivating by students and decreases student engagement (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). In addition, instructors report that students' digital distractions impact student-instructor relationships in a negative manner, and as a result, decrease the instructor's professional satisfaction (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). It is an area that has been a challenge to overcome in the ground classroom for years. Many instructors have techniques and enforcement strategies they implement to mitigate the off-task activities in a face-to-face classroom as they can see these activities taking place. Some of these techniques, such as relinquishing devices and monitoring use to enforce policies (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020), are not applicable to the online synchronous format as instructors cannot observe student activities on their computers or on their phones. Other proposed strategies have been to motivate students to be self-regulated learners and practice delayed gratification (Flanigan & Kiewra, 2018).

Vocal fatigue

Although many people may not categorize a college professor as a professional voice worker, an instructor's voice is considered an occupational tool (Nanjundeswaran et al., 2021). Over 57% of teachers in the United States have reported voice issues during their careers, and these voice issues, if not resolved, may have a detrimental effect on their professional career (Banks et al., 2018). The study of vocal fatigue in teachers is not new as teaching is a vocally demanding profession, and much effort has been devoted to learning about vocal fatigue and designing techniques and therapies as treatment for vocal fatigue (Imaezue, 2017). Vocal fatigue may be measured by a Vocal Fatigue Index (VFI). This evaluation device is based on items related to a tired voice, increased sense of effort while talking, throat pain at the end of the day, hoarseness, weak voice, and not wanting to talk at the end of the day

(Nanjundeswaran et al., 2021).

The increase in online synchronous teaching has been shown to be contributing to an increase in vocal fatigue for university professors (Nemr et al., 2021). It has also been noted that vocal fatigue is higher in female teachers and is associated with larger classroom size (Banks et al., 2018). The pace of a synchronous online class is different than a traditional face-to-face class. In a ground, face-to-face class, the pace of the in-class activities are moderated when a student asks an instructor to explain a concept further, but in remote synchronous online learning, the student may not ask questions in class and will attempt to understand more material alone (Revilla-Cuesta et al., 2021). Nemr et al. (2021) questioned over 1,200 teachers in various levels of education on vocal self-perception during the pandemic and found when comparing voice fatigue symptoms during the pandemic to pre-pandemic symptoms, teachers cited more dry, sore, and tired throat; hoarseness; and making more vocal effort during remote classes. The psychological stress of transitioning to remote online synchronous instruction can also have a negative effect on the voice (Besser et al., 2020). Interestingly, over 35% of the polled teachers reported using techniques such as voice rest, drinking water, home remedies, good sleep, stress reduction, using a headset microphone, having fewer students, and drinking hot coffee or tea to reduce vocal fatigue (Nemr et al., 2021). This cursory review of vocal fatigue in college professors indicates vocal fatigue is an issue affecting university faculty during the transition to online synchronous instruction.

DECISION

After a reflection on associated literature in comparison to my experience, I can see there are multiple reasons contributing to the complexity in transition from the face-to-face, ground format of teaching to the Traditional Online Synchronous (TOS) e-learning format of teaching. The review of literature highlights the notion that many teachers and university faculty struggled with the transition from face-to-face ground classroom to online synchronous teaching, as I did, and there were many contributing factors to this challenge. These causes were varied and included the challenge in engaging students in a TOS format as compared to a ground

classroom. This challenge in student engagement may have been impacted by the time constraints associated with incorporation of a dearth of robust technology, the various student distractions in their new learning environment, and vocal fatigue that occurred in many instructors during the transition to the new online e-learning format.

Prior to the pandemic, many instructors across the globe had not gained extensive experience in teaching in this new format; it was thrust upon us at a moment's notice. Instructors have described it as stressful and overwhelming to learn new technologies while attempting to maintain high quality education through engagement and active learning techniques. Müller et al. (2021) found that educators were stressed, anxious, and felt unprepared during this transition. It has been suggested that e-learning was not the issue, but that the issue may have been the instructors being forced into the situation without proper preparation during a chaotic time in history (Kulikowski et al., 2021). Although it is commonly perceived that synchronous online format of teaching uses the same techniques as traditional ground classroom instruction, there are many differences, and because of this, many university faculty members had a unfavorable experience, became discouraged and unsatisfied with their jobs, and do not want to make the permanent change to the new format (Besser et al., 2020; Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020; Kulikowski et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

As faculty member for over 23 years, I have learned to incorporate active learning and student engagement techniques to facilitate student learning in a ground classroom. In addition, I include physically walking around the classroom and incorporating proximity and verbal facilitation in small groups as an effective ground classroom engagement technique (Rocca, 2010). This is the mode of teaching I am most familiar with. I have incorporated classroom assessment and engagement techniques as outlined by Angelo & Cross (1993) and Faust & Paulson (1998), including engaging background knowledge, paraphrasing, misconception checks, group work, clarification pauses, question and answer pause, share-pair, discussion, note comparison among students, and role playing, among others. These active and collaborative learning techniques have been shown to facilitate student knowledge, competence,

and personal social development (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Although I am familiar with incorporating active engagement techniques in the ground classroom, I was unfamiliar with incorporating engagement techniques in the traditional online synchronous (TOS) classroom. I also have years of experience in teaching ground blended classes and online classes, but TOS is different. In addition to the TOS transition during the summer of 2020, we were also transitioning to a "blipped" model of teaching our ground courses. This was a combination of blended and flipped type of teaching technique. Although this exact style of education was new to us, we spent many hours preparing for this new avenue of teaching as we were keenly aware it would be a unique experience. Unfortunately, I did not think it would be as challenging to adapt to the TOS version of the class.

Facilitating student engagement was a prominently reported challenge for instructors while transitioning to teaching in this online format of teaching (Müller et al., 2021; Ramo et al., 2021). The lack of transmission of non-verbal cues, decreased social connection, decreased conversational aspect of learning, lack of sharing physical space, and inability to seamlessly incorporate various methods of engagement usually used in the ground classroom setting have been cited as reasons for this difficulty in student engagement (Gordon, 2020; Müller et al., 2021). I found this in my experience as well.

There are numerous differences that must be addressed in engaging students in active learning techniques when transitioning to TOS. One factor is related to asking and answering questions. When a student asks or answers a question in the TOS format, their video highlights in front of the entire class of over 80 students. Unlike in a ground classroom where other students may or may not look at them while they speak, in this new TOS format everyone will see their face filling up the computer screen. Part of this pressure may be minimized by allowing students to answer questions in breakout rooms. One of the difficulties is that, unlike in a ground classroom where I can walk around, answer questions, and talk to many groups, I cannot go into all breakout rooms to determine the level of engagement. Suggestions for engaging students include think-and-write activities, then cold calling

on students to answer (Reinholz et al., 2020; Sharp et al., 2021). As long as this is well established in the class, it encourages preparation and engagement. I included this technique in my classes, and it seemed to work well.

Another factor related to the difficulty in transition was the time to incorporate necessary technology. Although technology may be used in a ground classroom, it is essential in a TOS format and time-consuming to implement. I practiced with Zoom and knew how to use many interactive technologies such as polling and chat boxes, knew the design of practical activities, understood the learning management system techniques, and knew how to format exams to an online platform; however, the amount of time to implement these techniques for the variety of different classes I was teaching was overwhelming. In my classes, some students were asking relevant questions via the chat box, while others were using the chat feature to inform me of internet problems, pet issues, or their need to excuse themselves for a bathroom break. This highlights the fact that learning and applying these technology techniques appropriately, takes time and practice.

Many instructors felt this method of teaching would be over soon and did not take the time to learn all the new techniques necessary, but those who did take the time found there was an increased time commitment, which was much more than expected (Lambie & Law, 2020; Saha et al., 2021). This has been made clear in the fact that numerous articles have been published in the past year to provide instructors with tips on easing this transition (Law & Lambie, 2020; Luke, 2021; Sharp et al., 2021). Sufficient time and training is important for instructors to properly transition to the TOS format (Frey, 2021; Vongkulluksn et al., 2018). This will improve the instructors' attitude, job satisfaction, and technical competence while decreasing feelings of stress and low self-esteem (König et al., 2020; Kulikowski et al., 2021; Nicol et al., 2018; Özgür, 2020; Scherer et al., 2021). Incorporating appropriate techniques to specific courses appropriately will take time (Peñarrubia-Lozano et al., 2021).

In observing my students in the TOS classroom, I felt there were various distractions occurring in students' home environments, which may have negatively impacted their learning. I believed there

was more opportunity for students to be working on off-task activities. I am also aware that many were also affected by internet and family issues as I received multiple chats concerning those situations, and I witnessed students "kicked out" of the Zoom meeting and rejoining after reconnecting. These interruptions during class time would certainly be an obstacle for maintaining engagement and motivation during a TOS course.

It is a difficult situation for a student who is protected from many of these distractions in the ground face-to-face classroom to be suddenly put into a situation where distractions are various and frequent. The techniques instructors use in a ground classroom to mitigate distractions and off-task activities do not work well in a TOS course (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020; Flanigan & Kiewra, 2018). Research shows there are various distractions in the e-learning, TOS format of classes, and observing and monitoring for student distractions is challenging (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Sharp et al., 2021). Screen fatigue and internet connectivity are also common distractions to learning (Coman et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2021; Rizvi & Nabi, 2021). The lack of physical interaction, students' mental states, and social connection are considered contributing factors that contribute to distractions (Mukhter & Chowdhary, 2020; Rahiem, 2021). In addition, the off-task distractions not only contribute to a decrease in learning directly, but it also decreases student-instructor relationships and instructor job satisfaction, which in turn, may have a negative impact on learning (Flanigan & Babchuk, 2020). This is a plausible reason for my discomfort during this transition as it has been shown to impact many other faculty members as well.

Research shows vocal fatigue to be common in instructors through increased throat pain, tired voice, weak voice, and hoarseness to the point of not wanting to talk to their family after work (Imaezue, 2017; Nanjundeswaran et al., 2021; Nemr et al., 2021). These are all symptoms I experienced during the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. I credited this vocal fatigue to the new TOS format and attributed it, in part, to differences in student engagement, which did not allow time for my voice to rest. If students were not engaged with the content and I entered their breakout rooms, I would not have the time to rest my voice. If they were not discussing

items in class or answering questions thoroughly, I would not have time to rest my voice. Lack of student engagement is likely related to vocal fatigue experienced by synchronous online instructors.

Numerous factors have been shown as issues to overcome when transitioning to an e-learning, TOS format of teaching in a university setting. The difference in engaging students in the TOS format as compared to a face-to-face classroom is the most commonly reported challenge in transitioning to this format of teaching. The time commitment to learning and implementing proper technology into classroom appropriately is a factor that has led to a decrease in instructors' attitude, job satisfaction, and self-esteem and an increase in stress. Research shows that student distractions at home contribute to decreased student engagement, student learning, and instructor job satisfaction. Vocal fatigue is common in instructors who teach in an e-format, and this vocal fatigue has been on the rise during the pandemic. I have concluded that each of these are valid reasons I experienced difficulties during the transition to this new format of Traditional Online Synchronous teaching. Many tips exist to contribute to an easier transition, all of which take time and training. Educational institutions have pondered the question of whether this type of education will be a temporary or permanent style of education (Wang et al., 2021), but many educators agree this type of e-learning will continue after the pandemic has ended, and instructors must adapt to the new situation (Saha et al., 2021; Sharp et al., 2021). Incorporation of appropriate techniques is imperative and takes time to implement.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

The process of reflective practice is to critically examine one's own experience and compare that to current literature in order to develop professional knowledge and competence, incorporate new ideas, improve decision making, and become more effective in one's professional practice (Connelly et al., 2020; Dewey, 1933; Donohoe, 2019; Fragkos, 2016; Greenberger, 2020). For a university instructor, this means to ultimately have a positive impact on student learning. A desire of this veteran faculty member is to develop as a reflective practitioner to become more effective in my practice and impact student learning positively.

Throughout this reflective practice process,

I have been able to examine my experience on transitioning from ground to traditional online synchronous teaching and evaluate it compared to what other instructors have experienced. I spent many hours researching and planning for my new blended classes, which I understood would be a difficult transition, but my transition from ground face-to-face classes to traditional online synchronous e-learning was not as simple a transition as I thought. There are many techniques for student engagement that must be implemented differently in a TOS format. Incorporation of the techniques may have a positive impact on vocal fatigue if implemented appropriately. There are various techniques to assist students in minimizing distractions to improve learning outcomes and retain student-instructor relationships. There are numerous technologies that must be incorporated appropriately to be most effective. Each of these techniques take time and effort to learn. I agree, as do many university instructors, that this abrupt situation we suddenly found ourselves in, can be used an opportunity to reflect and improve our teaching (Müller et al., 2021). Just as students across the world have become resilient when faced with the challenges forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors have become resilient as well (Rahiem, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted our lives across the globe, yet it can be viewed as a catalyst for moving e-learning forward at a pace that had never been seen in history—a change that is beneficial for learners of the technology era (Saha et al., 2021). Goal setting and institutional support for instructor technology-related skills, ability, and knowledge can facilitate instructor readiness for online teaching and improve learning outcomes (Dhawan, 2020; Kulikowski et al., 2021; Scherer et al., 2021). These skills are beneficial for the future for instructors to easily adapt to a new technique of teaching in the case of a natural disaster or future pandemic and to allow for equity in education across location or socioeconomic class (Dhawan, 2020; ElSaheli-Elhage, 2020).

Through this process of reflective practice, I have learned that a transition such as this, conducted in an extremely short period of time, is challenging for most university faculty. The discomforts I experienced were seen in teachers of all levels across the globe. Student engagement has

been shown to be difficult when first transitioning to this online synchronous e-learning platform, and students at all levels experienced distractions that were indirectly and directly related to the immediate transition to online synchronous e-learning. It takes time and effort to incorporate new techniques to engage students and decrease distractions while in the new format of learning. Technology takes time and effort to incorporate appropriately, and voice fatigue is a real issue impacting instructors. Prior to this reflective practice, I wondered if the effects I was experiencing in my classrooms were only affecting me. It is comforting to know others were struggling with the same situations and adapting daily, as was I. Because the online synchronous e-learning type of modality has been shown to provide flexibility for students in various circumstances, and it was determined these situations occurred regularly, it is imperative to continue research in this area to determine best practices in this modality.

There are numerous published articles suggesting tips for this modality. Engagement techniques suggestions include worksheets for lectures in which students may complete during the lecture; narrated, recorded lectures for students to view on their own time; live synchronous lectures with group activities; discussion boards; communication between student and instructor; utilizing white boards for students to annotate lecture material; and collaborative learning activities utilizing realistic scenarios (Brown, 2021; Müller et al., 2021; Ramo et al., 2021). Asking questions in a variety of manners, such as verbal, written, icons/reactions on Zoom, polling, and use of breakout rooms are all suggestions for improving engagement (Law & Lambie, 2020).

The incorporation of impactful e-learning is important as it provides flexibility for students in various circumstances, yet it must be implemented appropriately through a variety of techniques. Research found that the amount of time spent in virtual classes was significantly related to student success, but there was no difference found if this time was spent in a live synchronous class or if it was spent watching recorded lectures (Nieuwoudt, 2020). Multiple and varied activities have been proposed to allow for student flexibility in engaging with the material (Nieuwoudt, 2020). Hybrid learning and use of various asynchronous activities have been shown to be effective to allow students

opportunity to adapt to distractions (Müller et al., 2021; Nieuwoudt, 2020). Müller et al. (2021) found that students preferred hybrid learning with synchronous and asynchronous activities. Tips include recording lectures to allow flexibility for all students, especially students with connectivity issues (Mukhter & Chowdhary, 2020). This allows for an increase in learner independence where the student may choose when and where to learn (Müller et al., 2021). Müller et al. (2021) suggest induction sessions and materials to guide students in self-directed learning. All ancillary materials and activities take time to produce, impacting the instructor's time commitment for preparation of a TOS class.

Since many university professors are not as adept at technology as others, many have adapted a concept of reverse-mentoring in which graduate students mentor professors on technology. This technique may offer college students the opportunity to practice their communication skills and apply their skills of sharing knowledge to influence the lives of others (Frey, 2021). While there are many tips to improve this mode of delivery, future research might focus on empirically examining the effectiveness of such techniques. Other future research might focus on asking students about their experiences in the areas of student engagement and what might be done to help students control distractions. This type of research will inform what teachers do in future synchronous online e-learning courses.

Because many instructors felt unprepared, worried, and extremely stressed during this transition in education, a suggestion offered by faculty members of medical schools in the United States is appropriate for all instructors: remember to be forgiving of yourself (Sharp et al., 2021). Everyone is going to make mistakes as we navigate these extreme transitions, but it is important to make a change, assess it, and adapt it, when needed. This is the process for growth and learning. We teach our students to learn from mistakes and grow from them, as should we (Sharp et al., 2021). This is a summary of the process of reflective practice, a method of professional development I am continuing to improve.

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