

# 7 Locked down, but not isolated: Twitter collaboration among teachers in response to COVID-19

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## Abstract

This piece looks at the use of Twitter to share good practice among education professionals responding to the so-called ‘pivot online’: the sudden shift to online learning necessitated by the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. It presents a general overview on how Twitter provided a source of advice, ideas, and resources and how teachers shared their expertise at this time of need, focusing on my own experience as a Twitter user and online pedagogy expert.

**Keywords:** professional development, support, online learning, social media, Twitter, community of practice.

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“There’s a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all” (Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 5, Scene 2).

It was like Mount Vesuvius giving signs that it was about to erupt and the people of Pompeii thinking they had nothing to fear. Despite taking a number of weeks for the coronavirus to spread from the east to the west, everyone was unprepared. As a migrant who has been a long-time resident in the United Kingdom (UK), I felt that, even as it hit continental Europe and countries such as Italy and Spain went into lockdown, the UK Government acted as though

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Britons could somehow be immune to the virus. Still, the virus came, the country – eventually – went on lockdown, and (with the exception of some schools providing childcare for essential workers) all educational institutions shut their doors.

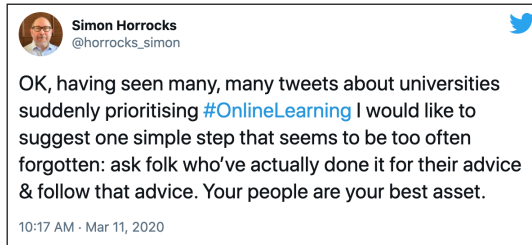
The obvious decision was to move all teaching online. After all, just about every school, college, and university has a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) – they may as well use it. But, hang on, were they not using it already? Well... yes. Sort of. Alas, despite the many collaborative tools that VLEs offer, many institutions were using them just as a place to publish timetables, class materials, and links to supplementary resources, not as teaching spaces. At best, ‘online learning’ in those institutions meant that students were being asked to undertake some sort of individual activity online to inform what happened in the face-to-face classroom, using a flipped learning approach.

One consequence of the COVID-19 lockdown was a considerable rise in the use of Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC) technologies for work and leisure purposes. Almost overnight, videoconferencing (Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, WhatsApp video) became the essential tool for staying in touch with family and friends, leading to an enormous acceleration in the normalisation process of this type of technology. From children to grandparents, meeting online became ‘The New Normal’. However, knowing how to use a technology for a work meeting or hosting a quiz night does not equate to knowing how to use it for pedagogical purposes.

The directive from management was clear: “move all teaching online”. Teachers who had never taught a lesson outside a physical classroom had to learn how to use SCMC tools such as Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, or Big Blue Button for live sessions with students. In many cases, institutions provided some instructions on how to use the technology, but little or no training on the best pedagogical practices in such environments. As a consequence, many teachers turned to social media to find how best to use these tools, leading to hashtags such as #onlinepivot and #onlinelearning becoming very popular in educators’ timelines.

Some very useful advice came from experts in online pedagogy. Simon Horrocks (@horrocks\_simon) was one of those experts leading the way, suggesting that institutions follow the advice of those who had taught online before (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Tweet by Simon Horrocks on 11/03/2020<sup>2</sup>



It is often assumed that students own a laptop or computer, and that they have an internet connection. Neil Mosley (@neilmosley5) made the point of not making assumptions about this (Figure 2). In my own experience, the students I was teaching (third year undergraduate and master’s students at a traditional face-to-face university) did not own such devices. They normally used the many pieces of equipment and wi-fi available on campus, and their only device was a smartphone with limited data available on their phone contracts. This had a huge effect on what software they could use and for how long.

My own response to the plea from many teachers in my Twitter network for help with teaching online was to record a series of 13 short videos giving advice on how to manage SCMC environments for teaching (see Figure 3 for the first tweet in the thread). Having worked at a distance learning university for nearly 18 years before moving to a face-to-face university, I have both taught and trained many teachers to teach online, and I wanted to share the knowledge I had gained in that time in the hope that it would help teachers unfamiliar with synchronous online teaching. Knowing that the attention span for social media videos tends to lower significantly after one or two minutes, I aimed to keep the maximum length at 60 seconds.

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2. [https://twitter.com/horrocks\\_simon/status/1237668898901831680](https://twitter.com/horrocks_simon/status/1237668898901831680)

Figure 2. Tweet by Neil Mosley on 16/03/2020<sup>3</sup>

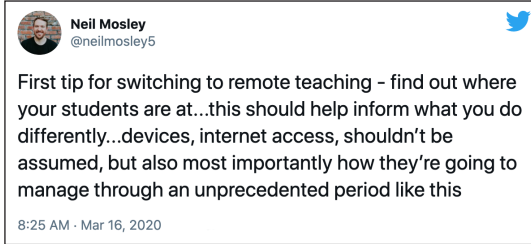
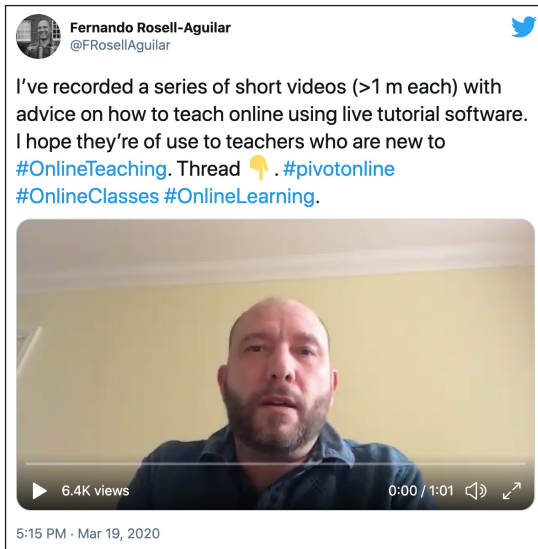


Figure 3. Tweet by Fernando Rosell-Aguilar on 19/03/2020<sup>4</sup>



My first piece of advice was to avoid the temptation to have everyone's cameras on. As is the case with so many online tools, just because you can use it, does not mean you should. Online video consumes a lot of bandwidth, and can affect the quality of the audio for participants with weaker connections, so, after a

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3. <https://twitter.com/neilmosley5/status/1239452832400576512>

4. <https://twitter.com/FRosellAguilar/status/1240673255549292545?s=20>

couple of minutes for greetings, checking that everyone can hear, and fostering the sense of community that seeing one another provides (particularly in the middle of a health crisis), my advice is to turn it off. This is also for pedagogical reasons, as online video can be incredibly distracting in a lesson; participants can be easily distracted by something in the background, movement, or the facial expressions of others.

The following four videos focused on the fact that the learning experience online is not the same as face-to-face, and therefore teachers should not aim to replicate what they normally do, but think about how technology can help them meet their learning outcomes. Part of this involves ‘classroom’ management; arranging groups or giving instructions takes longer in the online environment, and this should be taken into account during lesson planning. Instructions should be very clear and, if possible, presented on screen. I also suggested that any lecture-type content should be pre-recorded and made available prior to synchronous contact time, which should be the time for interaction among teacher and students or for students among themselves. Another piece of advice was to make sessions relatively short, as online teaching is very tiring.

The next three videos focused on the use of the SCMC technology. First of all, I suggested being upfront with learners about the fact that a teacher may be new to online learning. I also recommended establishing a procedure for what to do in case of connection problems, and not letting an individual participant’s technical problems take up everyone else’s time.

Because many teachers feel pressure to get everything right – a tall order in any situation – I decided to post some of the ‘bloopers’ and mistakes I had made whilst recording the videos. When people watch a video, they rarely think about how many attempts it may have taken to get to the piece they are watching. I wanted to show that I also get things wrong, and that is OK.

The response to the series of tweets was very positive, with thousands of video views and many replies expressing thanks for the advice. Receiving ‘likes’ and being retweeted by fellow teachers, professors, and organisations, such

as the University Council for Modern Languages, was pleasing, but the most rewarding response was from teachers letting me know that they actually had implemented the advice I had given, and it had improved their experience of online teaching.

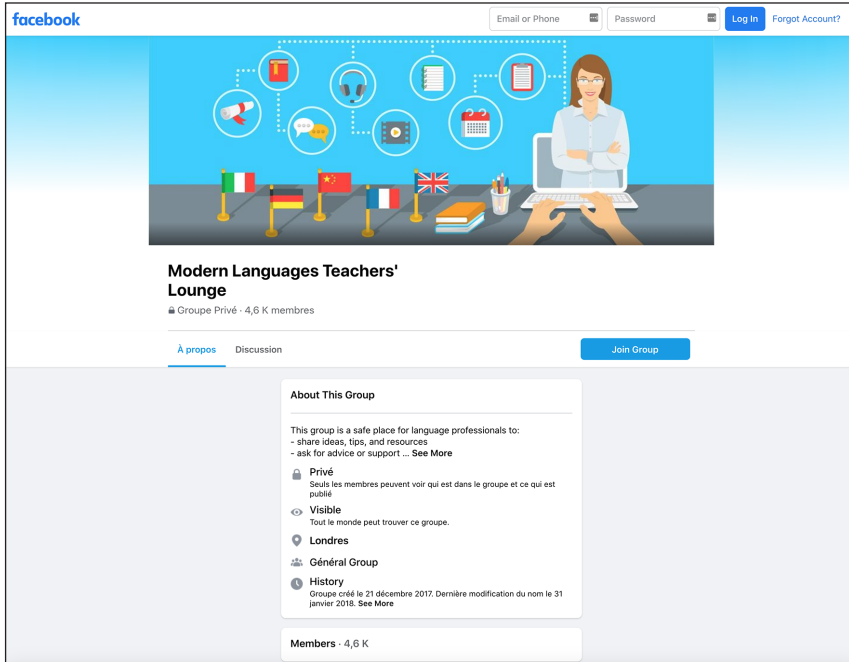
The tweets were also picked up outside the UK. As a result of the thread, I was interviewed for the US-based *Teacher Talking Time* podcast, which gave me an opportunity to discuss the points I had made more in-depth.

My advice was not only for teachers, though. In a separate thread, I also advised universities to invest in pedagogical training of their staff and to also train their students on issues such as time management, motivation, community development, peer support, and coping with isolation.

Of course, I was not the only one providing advice. I have, in the past, written about teacher use of hashtags providing opportunities for the creation of communities of practice where ideas, advice, and resources are shared. The #MFLTwitterari community responded actively, and shared many resources, both on Twitter and on Facebook (the Modern Languages Teachers' Lounge provided a repository for many of these – see [Figure 4](#)).

In a time of need, social media provided an environment for just-in-time professional development, and I was happy to be part of the many teachers who shared their expertise. However, this does not make up for the fact that the government and most institutions were not ready for the shift to online learning. We simply do not know how long restrictions related to COVID-19 will be in place for or when the next pandemic will come. It is too soon to tell how the lockdown teaching experience will affect tutorial provision in schools or higher education. It is unlikely that schools will adopt it in the long term, but higher education institutions have seen that their teachers and students can, for the most part, adapt to the online environment. This rise in online teaching beyond distance learning institutions may well lead to an increase in blended or full distance learning from institutions that did not provide such options before for a number of reasons, including cost and health safety.

Figure 4. The Modern Languages Teachers' Lounge on Facebook<sup>5</sup>



Training teachers to teach online has long been advocated, but it is now a necessity. This must be reflected in the curricula of teacher training programmes, so that everyone is ready for it. *The readiness is all.*

## Acknowledgements

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5. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/modernlanguageteacherslounge>



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