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"A More Personal Way to Learn During Such an Isolating Time": The Value of Live Lectures in Online Teaching. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a shift to online teaching, which has dramatically affected all facets of the student experience. In this practice report, we reflect on the synchronous delivery of a popular final-year module "Face Perception" in a United Kingdom (UK) psychology undergraduate degree. In the module, students learned via live lectures hosted on the virtual learning environment and content was consolidated interactively using online polls and small group discussions. We collected students' qualitative feedback on the live lecture delivery (n=28), from which we observed three core themes: *technology-enhanced engagement*, *logistical barriers*, and *togetherness in live lectures*. Taken together, this feedback suggests that whilst there are additional technological and logistical challenges that must be navigated in the delivery of "live" online lectures, they can be useful in instilling a sense of togetherness online. This is particularly important, given the threats to student success and engagement that COVID-19 poses.

***Keywords**:* Online teaching; COVID-19; student engagement; qualitative methodology; synchronous lectures.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted a reappraisal of all facets of the student experience, particularly given the rapid pivot to online teaching during the 2020-21 academic year. In response to this, an emerging body of research has begun to consider what 'best practice' in online teaching may look like, whilst also noting the distinct challenges that the online environment poses (e.g., Crawford et al., 2020; Flynn & Noonan, 2020). For example, Nordmann et al. (2020) provided a set of useful guidelines for effective delivery of online teaching and learning, noting that student support, success, and engagement must be approached differently in an online context. In response to this, a wide variety of pedagogical approaches have been employed during the early stages of the 2020-21 academic year (see a compendium of practice by Sandars et al., 2020). As the first semester of online teaching drew to a close, this provided a useful opportunity to reflect upon the various strategies that higher education teachers have implemented, considering their effectiveness and impact on student engagement and success. Here, we reflect on and evaluate the synchronous online delivery of a popular final-year module in a United Kingdom (UK) Bachelor of Science Psychology undergraduate programme.

Pre-COVID, teaching in the module "Face Perception," was designed around interactive lectures and flipped-classroom group-based teaching sessions in the University's collaborative teaching spaces. In these face-to-face, group-based teaching sessions, students worked together in groups of five or six to complete an activity designed both to help consolidate the module content and challenge their understanding. This group work was predominately afforded through the use of in-person collaborative

teaching spaces. Therefore, the emergency shift to online teaching was particularly challenging for the Face Perception module, as its innovative use of face-to-face teaching tools and group-based teaching sessions typically receives overwhelmingly positive feedback. For example, in 2019-20, all students on the module agreed that it was of a high standard and intellectually stimulating. Our challenge as educators, therefore, was to maintain high levels of student success and engagement, whilst also delivering the content with a similarly engaging and interactive approach.

Our first challenge in pivoting this module online was the decision whether to deliver "live" synchronous lectures, or whether to pre-record content and provide it asynchronously. A discussion surrounding the pedagogic benefits of each of these approaches has emerged recently; some scholars have provided early evidence to suggest that attendance of synchronous sessions improves student success (e.g., Guo, 2020), whereas others have found no effect (e.g., Nieuwoudt, 2020). Therefore, the literature suggests that a nuanced and flexible approach to education provision during this turbulent time may be most appropriate.

This is broadly in alignment with recommendations in the literature. In a pre-COVID context, for example, Beyth-Marom et al. (2005) advocated for nuanced online teaching provision, noting how preference for asynchronous or synchronous sessions depends on students' learning habits and their approach to education. Beyth-Maron et al. (2005) found that students who valued interactions with staff valued live sessions. In this sense, the synchronous content provided an important chance for staff and students to work together and build rapport. Indeed, Glazier (2016) identified "rapport building" as a crucial factor in bolstering student success in an online teaching context. This is also largely echoed throughout Puhr's (2020) recent compendium of practice in online delivery, which reported that "students loved the messy but authentic recordings of live sessions" as a means to engage in content and build relationships with others (p. 8).

With this in mind, we decided to deliver our final-year module Face Perception entirely live, using learning technology tools to embed a sense of interactivity. We redesigned the module for the 2020-21 academic year to include lecture content and group-sessions that were integrated and delivered live on the virtual learning environment, Blackboard Collaborate. Students received a short lecture, followed by a related group-task that they completed in breakout rooms, before returning to the main room for discussion. The lecturer was able to visit each breakout room, allowing discussion with each small group of students, encouraging them to reflect on the activity and its relationship with the module content. This live delivery also allowed for the use of interactive tools such as polls and for students to ask questions using an electronic chat function. We were concerned that technological issues such as internet connection quality might prevent some students from attending the live teaching sessions, and so sessions were also recorded.

Whilst we are using the term "online teaching" here, this module was rapidly and unexpectedly pivoted online and, therefore, our module design was not afforded the benefit of other pedagogically informed online teaching approaches. As Hodges et al. (2020) noted, we are reporting the findings from an emergency online pivot rather than a module that was designed initially to be delivered online. Our main task was to successfully *adapt* the previous module design during the temporary pivot to online teaching.

Evaluation

In order to assess the success of the adapted Face Perception module, metrics such as student attendance at online sessions were recorded. These metrics indicated that our approach worked well; approximately 60% of those signed-up to the module attended the live sessions and both the students and the lecturer found that students engaged well in breakout groups. Then, to explore further students' experiences of learning in this way, we collected qualitative student feedback via an online questionnaire, which was granted approval by the local Ethical Committee (Reference: PSYC-109, granted on 20th October 2020).

Of the 83 students enrolled in the module, 28 provided qualitative feedback on the Face Perception module. This data collection formed part of a wider survey on various aspects of the student experience in an online context. Data collection occurred during the early part of November 2020, at which point all teaching in the school was conducted online and England was approaching a national COVID-19 lockdown. In the online survey, we asked students two questions. The first was if they enjoyed the live, interactive lectures in the Face Perception module, with a prompt to explain their answer. The second question asked for any additional feedback related to the module lectures.

We conducted a thematic analysis of students' written responses, using Braun and Clark's (2006) guidelines. This involved a thorough read of the data, before identifying unique codes and, later, overarching themes. From this thematic analysis, we observed three core themes in students' responses across the two questions. These were: *technology-enhanced engagement*, *logistical barriers*, and *togetherness in live lectures*, which are defined and described below.

Technology-Enhanced Engagement

Many students in our evaluation spoke positively about the Face Perception module, noting that the use of technology facilitated their learning. In particular, the use of technology in live lectures was commended for its ability to engage students and minimise distractions often present when learning from home. For example, one student noted that:

> The face perception module is my favourite one I am doing as I feel like [the lecturer] makes good use on the technology and is very interactive. I feel like the live lectures feel more realistic to what we would normally have and I don't feel distracted or check my phone during them like I do with my prerecorded lecture.

Some students also spoke explicitly about the use of "breakout rooms" as a means of prompting engagement and discussion about the content. For example, one student noted that, "being put into breakout rooms basically forces us to engage with the content making it easier to follow and learn."

Similarly, the use of group polls, whereby the whole cohort was asked to indicate their understanding via short multiple choice question polls throughout the lecture, was also noted as an engaging and useful addition to the module. For example, one student commented how "group polls on lectures are good and engaging."

Generally, throughout the data, students spoke highly about the module's use of specific innovative learning technologies as a way of increasing engagement and application of subject-specific content.

Logistical Barriers

However, although engagement was generally positive throughout the module, some students did face distinct logistical challenges in accessing the live lecture content that they may not have faced with asynchronous delivery. These barriers were typically beyond the control of both students and staff and related to, for example, internet connectivity issues. For example, one student reported that:

> My enjoyment is affected by my inconsistent internet. As I'm sure is the case for many students, WiFi isn't always up to the task and I have had countless issues with dipping audio, rare and freezing visuals which I know are more down to my end than the lecturer.

Beyond connectivity issues, some students also noted that they struggled with the logistics of live lectures, which meant that they were unable to "pause" the lectures in real-time, as they would with pre-recorded lectures. For example, a student noted that, "it is sometimes annoying that I can't pause the content if I need time to write things down,"

However, other students acknowledged that this inability to pause or stop lectures as they are happening reflected more closely face-to-face teaching. For example, one student likened live online teaching with "normal" in person teaching: "like with face-to-face teaching, you don't have the option to pause or process information as you're given it."

Togetherness in Live Lectures

Importantly, students who provided textual feedback also noted how the live lectures served to unite students and instil a sense of normality in the otherwise turbulent teaching context. This was perhaps a reflection on the need for more personal connectivity, particularly given the context of English national lockdown during the phase of data collection. This was echoed throughout the textual data. For example, one student commented on how live lectures in the module "maintain some level of 'normality' - chance to interact with others."

Students also spoke positively about how the presentation style fostered a sense of togetherness and 'realness' in the online teaching context:

> Engaging methods such as putting us into break out rooms, and the way [the lecturer] presents the lecture makes me feel like he is in my living room!
>
> I think [the lecturer] has made the most of the technology and is making it feel more like real life.

Some students went a step further, noting that the live lectures were particularly welcome because they offered solace from isolation prompted by COVID-19 and online teaching. For example, one student in the sample noted that "[live lectures] are a more personal way to learn during such an isolating time."

This suggests that live lectures can offer students important access to personal connectivity and interactivity that they are otherwise currently deprived of, particularly during the English national lockdown. In discussions of online teaching during COVID-19, other scholars have noted the importance of recognising the capacity for online teaching to fulfil these functions for students. For example, Rapanta et al. (2020, p. 931) summarised this well, noting that, "successful online teaching means not feeling alone and not forgetting that learning is social." The student feedback reported here suggests that live lectures may have the capacity to promote the concept of "learning as social", while engaging students in the subject content.

Discussion

In this practice report, we have provided reflections and insight from delivery of a final-year psychology module via live synchronous, interactive lectures. This has been contextualised by qualitative student feedback, which demonstrated that whilst live lectures bring with them additional technological and logistical challenges, they can be pivotal in instilling a sense of togetherness and personal connectivity, particularly when learning technologies are used appropriately to promote interaction. Whilst our results suggest that live lectures may serve important functions for students, this does not necessarily mean that live lectures are more pedagogically appropriate compared with asynchronous content.

Recent "best practice" guidelines from experts have corroborated this, noting how a varied and diverse student education provision allows more students to participate and succeed online. For example, Nordmann et al. (2020) recommend the provision of a mixture of live synchronous and recorded asynchronous content, in the context of the online pivot prompted by COVID-19. Nordmann and colleagues particularly stress that pre-recorded asynchronous content is useful because it "allow[s] students to engage with their studies flexibly," which live lectures do not (p. 5). Therefore, it may not be useful to pit live and asynchronous lecture modalities against each other, but rather to identify the specific pedagogic functions that each delivery mode can offer students. Holistic consideration should be made of the overall student experience, rather than focusing on distinct aspects of their course.

Overall, live lectures may be particularly valuable in ensuring an appropriate level of "teacher-presence" in online teaching. Throughout the student success literature, "teacher-presence" emerges as a crucial factor in online teaching (e.g., Stone, 2019). Here, our analysis indicates that the live teacher presence afforded through live lectures online allows students to feel more connected to their lecturers, which can promote student success and engagement.

However, the notion that some students struggled to access the live lectures due to logistical barriers, such as internet access, should not be overlooked in future online teaching practice. The accessibility of online teaching is an important concern for teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Parsons (2017) noted, course design should be respectful of students' circumstances and individual needs as learners, to ensure an accessible and equal provision of online teaching. In a discussion of effective pedagogy in online teaching prompted by COVID-19, Dhawan (2020, p. 16) stresses that "digital equity" should be promoted by teachers, to ensure that students are not unfairly disadvantaged on account of their digital access, which may intersect with students' personal circumstances. Therefore, while our practice report suggests that live lectures may be a promising tool online teaching, there are distinct concerns of equality and accessibility that must also be considered.

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