

Virtual Teaching Experience Amidst the Pandemic: A Perspective from the Middle East

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Abstract

The novel coronavirus pandemic has disrupted almost all industries across the globe. The higher education sector in the Middle East too witnessed drastic changes in the teaching and learning process. Digital education, which authorities contemplated would take years to implement, was enforced overnight in the region. However, transformation to the online mode of learning posed many obstacles. As a finance educator in the region, I narrate here my experiences with respect to the challenges faced in managing the disruption, methods adopted to engage students, and the different techniques used for online assessments & student feedback. Finally, a reflection on factors which resulted in the successful delivery of the module is also provided.

Keywords

Online learning/e-learning challenges, student engagement, student assessment, student feedback, undergraduate students

JEL Codes: A2, I2

The higher education landscape in the Middle East has seen a sea change during the last year. With the pandemic accelerating digital education in the region, both lecturers and learners faced challenges going online. I am currently working as a finance lecturer for a UK-based partner university in the Middle East. In this article, I would like to provide an overview of my experiences in handling a finance module for a group of 15 first-year undergraduate students via the virtual classroom during the last academic year (2020–2021).

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What were the Challenges that I faced?

Most of the challenges revolved around change, pace, technology, competencies, and availability of gadgets. With regards to change, the biggest challenge was to face the camera. I had to upskill and adapt myself within a short period.

Another hurdle was related to the speed of delivery. In comparison to the face-to-face mode of teaching, the online mode of delivery tended to be slow as I had to take pauses in between to check whether the students were grasping the subject. There were further challenges like students complaining about connectivity issues. This module was based on advanced financial data analysis using Microsoft Excel and there were a few students who found themselves in the double jeopardy of not having sufficient data package and relevant software installed in their devices. Often, both my students and I found our devices stalling while switching between various applications such as Word, PowerPoint and Excel.

Keeping the students engaged and focused was another major challenge. Lack of technical competencies within the cohort complicated the issue. We were using Microsoft TEAMS app predominantly and a few students did not know how to share their screens or type a message. There were some instances of students getting removed by their peers during the class/meeting. The appearances of family members, pets and unexpected background noises (doorbell ringing!) were also noticed during some sessions. I remember an instance when a student requested if he could go and open the door while the lecture was going on, as he was the only person in the house at that time! In another instance, a student mentioned that a pigeon was caught up in the exhaust fan and was creating noise in the background. It is worthwhile to mention here that contemporary researchers have also pointed out most of these difficulties albeit in a different manner (Kopp et al., 2019).

How did I Address Them?

My camera resistance faded away after a few weeks. However, that was not the case with my students. Most of them were reluctant to switch on the cameras. A few of them were hesitant to come in front of the camera due to socio-cultural issues. For those who were available on the camera, some were not properly dressed up as would have been the case if it was a face-to-face session.

All the lectures and most of the tutorials were conducted as synchronous live sessions using the TEAMS app (Hrastinski, 2008). After a couple of preliminary sessions, one special session was conducted on, 'how to use TEAMS application in a classroom environment'. Apart from that, students who faced difficulty in getting the relevant gadgets and software were directed to seek help from the university's IT department.

Almost all my colleagues and I traveled to the college campus every day and took these online classes from empty classrooms to ensure that there's no connectivity issues and other disturbances. The students were given the flexibility to record the sessions. As the lectures predominantly involved switching/sharing between applications as aforementioned, students were not too compelled to switch on the camera. Moreover, a digital writing pad was used for explaining the steps on the screen and for illustrations purposes. Often questions were asked by calling out the names of students at regular intervals to see whether the class was attentive. Moreover, towards the end, while taking attendance, everyone was asked to switch on the cameras.

Students were instructed to maintain discipline and decorum in the virtual classroom. In addition, before the start of each session, the organizer settings available within TEAMS too were set up to control the activities of the learners.

How did I Engage the Students?

Many scholars have noted that keeping students engaged in an online environment is of paramount significance as compared to the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom. With the current scenario disrupting the business models within the education industry, achieving student engagement is vital for the university's future too (Meyer, 2014). Hence, my objective was to design and plan learning activities to keep the students engaged and thus to ensure learning.

The concepts based on each learning outcome were driven through scaffolding (Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007). So, the instructional delivery was carefully planned with discussions, problem-solving and group exercises to involve students.

Another assumption in my mind was that, due to the varying needs of learners, some may find it difficult to make connections with the teacher as they often can, in a face-to-face setting. Consequently, a mix of approaches was adopted to suit the varying needs of the learners. This included interactions using dialogue, feedbacks, drop-in-sessions via TEAMS and a slow pace of delivery with repetitions.

Every class started with a set of review questions to assess learners' prior knowledge. This was followed by a brief repetition of topics covered in the previous lecture. Through student feedback, I came to know that these reviews helped them to understand the concepts better and provided an opportunity to raise their doubts. Students who missed the sessions also found this beneficial as it gave them some continuity. Once a week, students were randomly put into sub-groups to solve problems or analyse case studies using the break-out rooms. This was to ensure collaborative learning of students and thus to enhance student engagement (Fredrickson, 2015).

Furthermore, students were asked questions at regular intervals, and they had to provide answers through chat windows. I also encouraged the use of various emoticons and emojis available in TEAMS to keep the learners motivated. Moreover, towards the end of each session, a few students were called randomly to summarize the contents discussed. This also allowed them to provide their opinion about the lecture, raise questions and clarify doubts. Students had the flexibility of asking doubts at any point during the lecture by 'Raising Hands' in TEAMS. A recent discussion paper by Kennedy (2020), claims that dialogues enable learner-instructor interaction, learner-learner interaction, and learner-content interaction.

What were the Assessment Techniques?

With regards to assessment and evaluation, there were no changes in the pattern as these were predesigned by the module coordinators at the parent campus in the UK. Most of the modules that I took had two components. This module had an individual assignment as the formative assessment (class test) with 40% weightage and an end-term examination with 60% weightage as the summative assessment. Earlier, these tests were proctored inside the campus as pen and paper tests. However, due to emergency remote teaching, both were conducted online using the CANVAS application.

The first assessment was conducted 5 weeks after the start of the session and covered half of the module. The final summative assessment was taken during the 12th week, and it covered the entire module. These assessments were scheduled via the learning management system (CANVAS) as per the exam calendar and the students were given a 12-hour window to complete the 1 hr assignment test and a 24-hour window to complete the 3 hours end-term exam. For both these assessments, they had to perform data analyses and answer a set of questions. Separate real-time datasets were allocated to each of these students to prevent any possible malpractices.

Soon after the first assessment, general feedback was provided to the entire class. Additionally, customized feedbacks were given later. For the final exam, individual feedback was provided using comments through CANVAS.

How did it go?

A feedback survey was run through CANVAS during the middle of the semester. From the responses, we came to know that they feel connected with the staff as well as other students, almost all are effectively engaged and they are aware of the assessment methods. Furthermore, during the Student Staff Feedback Committee (SSFC) meeting, the module representatives commented that they did not feel it was an online class; the sessions were akin to face-to-face sessions and the students got a classroom-like experience. Moreover, they also mentioned that all students were able to follow the module sessions and the method of teaching. Even more, all of them appreciated the opportunity that they got to work with real-time data for their tutorials as well as the assessments.

This was evidenced by their performance in the exam and the final grades as well. All the students passed the exam and about 45% of the class scored a distinction grade. In short, I can affirm with confidence that the online method of learning and teaching was highly effective for this module.

What do I Conclude?

As the higher education sector is quickly getting revamped with the changing needs of society, I believe that tech-centric education models are here to stay. I would like to sum up a list of things that led to the successful delivery of this module online. First and foremost, I must say that most of the students in this batch were intrinsically motivated, which made my job easier. Second, this was a problem-based module. Third, the batch size was small—only 15 students. Fourth, I was taking this module for the second time. I had also taken an advanced module for post-graduate students multiple times, which worked to my advantage. Finally, early technical adoption by the university in terms of learning management systems like CANVAS, availability of teaching materials and other resources through it, technically proficient IT staff in the college campus and high-speed broadband connectivity available across the country made seamless infrastructure access to both students and teachers alike.

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