Back to face-to-face training

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Introduction

Nearly everybody has had to leave their comfort teaching/learning zones several times since the beginning of 2020. Such transitions seem to become a new routine. They might be challenging but rewording at the same time.

Challenges of shifting from face-to face learning and teaching activities to online ones have been widely discussed [1, 2, 3].They were also addressed at a WMO Global Campus Event "Responding to Challenges beyond the New Normal" in January 2021.

However, heading back to face-to-face classes also can be quite challenging or even a little bit disappointing for some. This paper presents several ways how to smooth changing teaching/learning modes and how to make the best of online teaching work in an offline mode. It is done based both on my own experience and some sage advice from the educators who are undergoing the transformation from remote to face-to-face mode or have already gone through it [4, 5, 6].

1 Offer lots of choice

Many students were not ready for a more independent online self-education. It took them some time to develop new learning skills. It is believed that after some time spent learning online students become more independent and can use numerous online resources and tools offered by teachers. Very often, the range of face-to-face educational techniques, tools and resources is more limited. Many teachers are happy to return to their comfort zones, quickly forget the new findings and feel quite happy being nearly the only source of knowledge.

Getting back to a sense of routine and structure can be rather tough and disappointing. So, it is important to keep on offering lots of choices to students [4]. This can be quite rewarding both for them and for teachers.

2 Pull out the best tools

Even though distance learning was not something new for most of educators, we have managed to learn brand new technologies in the last two years. It was not easy to choose the best ones. Best tools and practices must be applied in face-to-face mode as wide as possible. However, sometimes poor facilities do not allow doing this. This restriction is hard to overcome.

3 Continue wide use of LMS

During the pandemic, teachers relied on their learning management systems (LMS) more than ever. But a lot of them realized that their LMS was a mess! The need to use these LMS motivated educators to refresh and better organize them [5].

Courses delivered through these systems were likely highly improved and students got used to them. They should be constantly advised to refer to LMS. It will help support students' independence/autonomy that they developed during rather long periods of learning online.

4 Keep on thorough planning

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: "Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable." Online lessons are very intense and require detailed planning and modeling. Educators had to put more efforts in planning online teaching, as it was rather new for many of them. It is important to maintain this practice and not to feel overconfident or relaxed after returning to well familiar face-to-face classes. Documenting, revising and planning of a teaching process are a must have. However, proper planning needs methodological support.

5 Interact

During remote teaching, lots of teachers worried about building relationships between students, as well as teachers and students and their students' social-emotional health. Communication and collaboration are two of the seven essential 21st century skills students must develop to be successful [7]. Of course, there are various effective online tools to facilitate students' interaction; however none of them could fully replace live communication.

When students and teachers are back at their Universities, here are those social interactions again! It is important to keep on talking to one another, to plan and include more interaction and collaboration in our lessons to create a friendly learning environment. It helps students to notice how their peers think and feel and allows building their social skills.

6 Better relationships and more feedback

All students and educators have suffered from the pandemic in a lot of ways. In fact, there are always troubles around us, visible or not, which can affect teaching/learning and are difficult to detect and address. Regular feedback will help a lot.

Collecting feedback, voting and questionnaires are easily carried out online with numerous apps and sites. Among them are Google forms, Mentimeter, Turning point and many other free or low-cost tools. However, after having returned to class, many teachers nearly forget them. They are sure that watching/observing students is enough to understand their feelings and attitudes. Even though it works, collecting regular anonymous feedback should not be neglected while planning face-to-face classes.

7 Build in more breaks

Many studies have found that pausing for a moment or regular breaks to relax and reboot are essential for boosting/enhancing their productivity. This is especially true for students who spend hours huddled in front of a computer. However, there are both effective and ineffective ways to reboot.

Unfortunately, most students spend their breaks hopping online. A recent study from Princeton University suggests that some good, old-fashioned exercise is a great alternative [8]. Taking some time to stretch legs will be helpful for students' and teachers' bodies and minds.

During a section discussion at the WMO Global Campus Event in January, 2021 several participants suggested to have longer online breaks, since such a mode requires more attention and efforts than offline one. The breaks might be as usual but just more active: simple exercises, dancing (with the music that is offered by students), funny online activities ("ice-breakers"). Many teachers, who practiced active breaks during online classes, think that they should be embedded in face-to-face classes in a suitable form. Let us not keep students always sitting. Even though a student comes to a teacher or to a peer to ask a question, or to the blackboard to write on it then he/she has a more effective break than hopping online.

8 Have fun

A smile can make a memory and make learning stick. Some of us encouraged students to use online emojis, in Zoom, for example. They are a kind of non-verbal feedback and communication. Besides they are funny sometimes. Another tool to make fun is "ice-breakers".
It is important to keep a balance between jokes, fun and serious activities.

9 Share experiences

In fact, in March 2020 few educators were ready to deliver online teaching efficiently. Online platforms, pedagogical design, communication and other things were discussed. However, there was little confidence in what was worth using. So sharing experiences was not active.

Luckily, the COMET Program has assisted in the transition to distance learning by sharing best practices and tools for connecting and engaging learners online. At the very beginning of the pandemic time COMET hosted a webinar "How to Be Alone Together…Teaching Geosciences in

Quarantine". Experts demonstrated several tools to make ZOOM classes more interactive and let the participants test them online. It was definitely the right thing in the right time.

It seems that collaboration, sharing experiences and common attitudes to teaching are essential for successful education. John Hattie and his team have presented Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) as the "new number one" influence related to student achievement several times since 2016. Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) is the belief that teachers can more positively impact the learning of their students if they work as a team.

Hattie's latest published list of 195 effects in "The Applicability of Visible Learning to Higher Education" (2015) puts CTE in the second place with the effect size of d=1.57. It is more than two times bigger than that of feedback (d=0.72), and almost three times bigger than the effect of classroom management (d=0.52). The message seems to be clear: together teachers can achieve more, especially if they collectively believe that they can do so [9].

Conclusion

Shifting from one teaching environment to another changes educational approaches, as well as social behavior, communication, and students' learning styles. Many online tools and techniques are effective and help achieve learning goals.

Why do not all educators incorporate them in their face-to-face teaching? There can be several explanations:
1. The time of online teaching was not considered and used as a great opportunity to extend professional experience by learning and applying new approaches. It was just a time of waiting to return to a comfort zone with little place for anything new.
2. Poor management and methodological support.
3. The lack of collaboration and sharing experiences.
4. Offline facilities are not always good enough for effective use of online tools.

No doubt, teachers and students have to rebuild their teaching and learning habits both when transferring to online and back to offline. At the same time, teaching online and offline should not differ dramatically. When possible, educators must incorporate best online teaching practices into offline teaching, and vice-versa. It makes education consistent and improves it.

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