Teaching (and Learning) in the Time of Epidemics:
Reflection on Humanities Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract
During the global Covid-19 situation, there was a general shutdown of daily operations, including education. In Hong Kong, which was among the first locations to be hit by the epidemic, face to face teaching stopped early in February 2020, which was the beginning of the second semester of the academic year. The higher education sector was the first to respond to the situation by shifting to online teaching immediately, and finally extending to the end of the semester. The sudden shift to the eLearning mode posed a lot of challenges to both teaching and learning, including feasibility and effectiveness. This presentation is a sharing of my professional practice in Hong Kong higher education during this second half of the academic year 2019-2020. Although it was generally felt that the humanities subjects encountered fewer challenges shifting to the eLearning mode, the outcomes of this semester was a strong reminder to us to review the current practice in teaching and learning, and to rethink how to engage with the new generation of learners and new circumstances. It is hoped that the presentation can share some observations about the challenges of e-learning, and facilitate some new thinking about how to conduct eLearning in higher education, more specifically relevant to the Hong Kong's unique cultural environment.

Keywords: eLearning Feasibility, Humanities Teaching and Learning, Challenges to in-Class Interaction, International Exchange, Alternative Modes

Introduction

What I am to share in this presentation is a reflection upon an on-going situation in the higher education sector globally, the disruption of face-to-face teaching and learning, and various responses to this disruption. My location is Hong Kong, which shares similar inconveniences in many aspects of daily life such as restricted services both public and private, and the social distancing required for public health purposes. There are other factors which make Hong Kong unique in its experience of covid-19, including the months of social unrest that started in June 2019, and the subsequent feelings of vulnerability and isolation many young people felt since then. At the time of my writing this paper, Hong Kong had more than 6000 confirmed cases of covid-19 and over 100 deaths,[1] people had been wearing masks for prevention everyday for months, and social distancing policy had been in place for more than 10 months too. Although public services and private business sectors are generally operating, daily life does not look at all normal. Many of the usual entertainment and leisure activities that citizens enjoy are either closed or restricted in opening hours and size of attendance. Restaurants, a place for socializing while also providing daily sustenance, had been hit hard by different phases of Social Gathering Ban issued by the government – at the moment it is restricted to only 2-people gatherings and meals.[2]

Daily life continues, of course, in what some people referred to as the "new normal" way. In higher education, our new normal takes the form of e-learning occupying centre stage, with mixed-mode teaching and learning either as a transitional or compensatory measure before full face-to-face teaching and learning can be safely adopted again. In Hong Kong, eLearning was fully used in the universities to replace face-to-face teaching since early February 2020 because of the outbreak of covid-19. At the beginning of the new academic year in early September 2020, we were still fully using the eLearning mode, and only at the end of September did my university announced the adaptation of a mixed-mode teaching and learning. The more than 5-months eLearning experience had inspired us educators to reflect a lot about the way we used to teach, the way we designed assessment, and also the way we communicate with our students. This paper, although made at a time when many parts of the world are still in the throes of covid-19, is meant to be a reflective sharing of practice, in the hope that some positive thoughts can at least come out of the global pandemic.

Once Upon a Time, though Not That Long Ago

Hong Kong's experience of covid-19 has its own unique story, and to understand the approach and development of measures being used in higher education during this period, one has to look back a few more months to the time before the outbreak. In

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[1] At the time of the ACE conference, which was end of October 2020, the total number of confirmed cases in Hong Kong was just over 5000. By the time this paper was revised for the proceedings, it was the beginning of December, and the 4th wave of covid-19 attach in Hong Kong. The number of confirmed cases had risen to over 6000. The numbers were announced by the Centre for Health Number of cases according to Centre for Health Protection (CHP) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government.

[2] At different stages of the 10-month long epidemic, the HKSAR government had announced different measures in response to the seriousness of the covid-19 condition, and its impact on daily practices. Social distancing, banning large crowd gatherings, and work-from-home arrangements had been practiced.

mid-June the protest against the Extradition Bill[3] became increasingly forceful, and finally escalated to the point when roads in some areas were blocked and normal transportation was simply impossible. When the academic year 2019-2020 started in September, there were already talks of possible class boycott, and the University advised us to be as accommodating as possible when students could not make it to the classes. We began the first semester seeing most students in the classroom, but we also made audio recordings of the lectures and shared them on the eLearning platform for those who could not make it to the classes for various reasons. Disruptions to various aspects of life continued and escalated. Finally on 12 November 2019, our university announced the suspension of all face-to-face teaching and learning, and shifted to eLearning immediately until further notice. Students were asked not to come to campus, although staff who could travel were still allowed to work on campus. With that announcement, the semester concluded in eLearning in the final 3 weeks, the final examination was suspended and replaced by alternative forms of e-assessment. I did not even have a chance to say goodbye to my students, before a few of them left Hong Kong hurriedly back to their home countries.

Stepping into year 2020, different parts of the world had been thrown into confusion one after another with the outbreak of covid-19. Our second semester started on 13 January 2020 (until 28 May 2020), and two weeks later on 26 January 2020 we celebrated the Lunar New Year, followed by a week-long holiday. Just before the resumption of class after the holiday, the University announced the suspension of face-to-face classes on campus, until further notice. The rest of the story, as we all know, is still on-going. In Hong Kong, February to May were months of complete lockdown in the sense that WFH was the official mode,[4] schools across all levels were closed, even public examinations were postponed or cancelled,[5] and the street was so quiet that it was like a dream. Beginning in June, life resumed a quasi-normal appearance as we had maintained low number of cases during the months-long strict measures of containment. Early July saw a sudden surge of cases scattered over a number of districts in Hong Kong – our Centre for Health Protection announced officially that this was the most dangerous time since the beginning of the outbreak half a year ago – and this third-wave of outbreak lasted until the middle of August.[6] Universities started their academic year as usual in early September 2020, but the teaching and learning mode was fully online for most programmes. The mixed mode

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[3] Beginning in June 2019, there had been an Anti-Extradition Bill movement in HK. Protestors' action escalated to major disruptions of road traffic, and damages to some buildings. The scale of the disruption was such that for a period of time schools and universities were closed, and special arrangements for work had to be arranged with some employees. The protestors' action continued into the last months of 2019.

[4] Work-from-home was practiced in most public sectors to avoid gathering of crowds and to lower the risk of infection. In our University, the administrative units also practiced WFH, and seeing that the alternative mode of working and learning might have an impact on the progress, the second semester was extended for 4 weeks for academic programmes to complete the intended learning in alternative ways.

[5] The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) which was the annual public examination for university entrance, had been postponed for three weeks because the risk of infection was still high during the original schedule.

[6] Towards the middle of June, the daily confirmed cases had shown a decline, and the government announced a loosening of anti-infectious measures at the end of June. At the beginning of July there was a sudden upsurge of daily cases, which many people regarded as the direct result of the release of preventive measures.

teaching finally continued until the end of the semester in early December 2020 although there was a surge in number of confirmed cases – the 4th wave.

Looking back, teaching Humanities in an extended semester

Looking back, our experience of eLearning (replacing face-to-face classes) went through several stages. In mid-November when the university suddenly announced the suspension of face-to-face teaching, many of us were unprepared. One of the most commonly used methods then by academic colleagues was adding voice recordings to the PowerPoint slides we used, and put the PowerPoint with voice recording onto our eLearning platform Moodle. I remembered colleagues sharing tips of how best to present the lectures which are normally 2 hours long in our university. For those of us using PowerPoint with voice recordings, there was no real-time interaction with our students. We could only inform them that all the lectures were there, and invite them to ask questions by sending us emails, or make an appointment for real time interaction over the phone or other social media. The first phase of eLearning at the end of the first semester came about too suddenly for us to re-design the learning experience according to the situation. Even the end-of-semester final examination could not take place as usual, and we had to design an alternative assessment method – for us Humanities teachers, doing assessment online meant asking the students to submit a paper to the eLearning platform within a certain period.

The three weeks went by quickly, with us doing our best to cope with the situation, at the same time hoping that the social conditions would allow for a gradual return to normal so that teaching and learning in the second semester could be conducted in the way we were used to. As it turned out, we did start the semester normally, only to be hit by the outbreak of covid-19. This time when the university announced that online teaching and learning was to be fully implemented right after the Lunar New Year holiday, we were more prepared psychologically as well as availability of tools were concerned. The Zoom platform quickly became the choice of many colleagues, and in-house training workshops were organized to prepare everyone for this move to the virtual teaching and learning space completely. In hindsight, I think that the earlier experience of sudden movement to eLearning had become a rehearsal of some kind. We were still grappling with the features of Zoom at the beginning, but after the hurried implementation in the previous semester, we knew the most essential features to learn, and how to monitor not just teaching but also students' expectations, which was a very important component of the learning experience.

Virtual Teaching and Learning: Humanities via Zoom

When the second time our university suspended face-to-face teaching, it was beginning of February 2020. We had just completed two weeks of teaching – the first two weeks were the "add/drop period" when students could still decide to remain in a course they had already registered, or drop that and add another one that they found more appealing in their first two weeks of "course-shopping". In that sense, the basic preparation for the semester had been done, for all the course information and assessment requirements and so on were already explained and the class should be relatively stable after that. I thought that the only problem would be adjusting teaching material and in-class exercise given that students were no longer sharing the same physical space where I talked.

Very soon, however, I encountered the first problem in relation to the travel ban in many countries due to covid-19 outbreak. Every semester we have students going on exchange – joining a university overseas for one semester or a year – but due to travel restrictions and safety issues they could not start their journey in the foreseeable future. In order to ensure that they would still be able to graduate as originally planned, they were encouraged to cancel their exchange registration and take courses here at their home university together with the rest of the students.[7] Thus I had a number of students from various disciplines joining my course, which was a senior level major required course with loads of reading materials, in the third and even fourth week of the semester. These students had never met me, and had never taken any course from our department, their main reason for joining was simply that the course title sounds general and inclusive enough to look creditable on their transcript. Certainly I had had out-of-discipline students taking my courses in the past, but the lateness of their joining, and the circumstances of their "choice" made it very difficult for me to feel connected to everyone in my class in the way that I used to feel when I shared the same space with them.

The second difficulty had to do with the wifi connection, which was essential if classes were to be conducted according to the scheduled timeslots. At the time, most of our non-local students had already gone home, and the smoothness of their wifi connection varied. Some of our non-local students had a hard time getting connected, and maintaining a stable connection through the duration of the classes which were two hours normally. Some colleagues mentioned that it was impossible to show a video clip in the middle of the lesson, either the sound and the image did not match, or the video came out in a staccato sequence with distorted sound. (Actually a colleague who taught interpretation said it was almost impossible to teach it via Zoom, but it was not my own experience.) Many students who managed to logon at the scheduled time were reluctant to switch on the camera, for probably their domestic setting was not ideal for individual members to engage in academic interaction while the rest of the family were going about their daily business. For us the teachers too, the ideal setting to conduct Zoom classes was our own office, with all the materials handy, and the relatively stable University wifi network. Despite the government's encouragement that staff members should work from home, not everyone of us could do that and still maintain a reasonable level of effectiveness.

In a time such as this, clear and accurate communication, together with some flexibility, is the most important approach to overcoming those difficulties mentioned. Non-local students who had already gone home could still attend my classes via Zoom, and local students who were stranded and had to cancel their overseas exchange had to rely on the Moodle platform for getting course materials and information. Although we were advised to follow the original schedule to conduct classes via Zoom, I proposed to my students that I would pre-record all the lectures every week, and put the recording on Moodle two days in advance of the schedule. During the pre-scheduled lecture time, I would open the Zoom meeting room for tutorial discussion instead, and students were invited to ask any questions they had about the content of the pre-recorded lecture, or the reference materials. This

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[7] Students intending to go on exchange had to make their application in December every year, no matter whether they were going for one or two semesters. Those due to fly to their host university for the spring semester had already made their preparations in 2018 December, and not being able to go had completely unsettled their course planning, and in some cases graduation.

arrangement ensured that everyone could access the full content materials, including the non-local students, and that they had a chance to talk to me if they had questions. From the results of the assignments, and the final take home examination, I believed that it was an arrangement that maintained the quality of teaching and learning. Students welcomed this too, as they did not need to worry about turning on or not their cameras.

Having pre-recorded materials put on Moodle also helped to alleviate possible problems with wifi connection. In my course I had a number of films to be shown – instead of showing clips during the lecture, I found online sources for students so that they could see the movie in their own time before referring to the lectures. To mimic the real-time in-class interaction as much as possible, I broke up the 2-hour lecture into 20-minute sections, each one around one topic/focus. Therefore, instead of one recording of a 2-hour lecture, I made 5 or 6 recordings each around one topic, but all related to the main title of the lecture. It was similar to my lecture arrangement because during face-to-face interactions, I had in-class activities every 20 minutes or so to maintain student interest and attention. I believed it would be very difficult to ask any student today to sit at home and listen to a pre-recorded lecture for 120 minutes. Having short sections helped them grasp the focus of each section, and also made it easier for them to ask questions during the scheduled Zoom tutorials. In the end-of-semester teaching evaluation, students mentioned this as something most helpful to their learning despite the fact that almost the entire semester was eLearning.

The assessment was perhaps the most surprising aspect (for me) of the learning in this unusual semester. Normally I had three in-class quizzes, which contained direct short questions to test whether students had read the assigned text before coming to the lectures. Often half of the students came to the lectures without reading the materials and failed these simple quizzes of facts. Because of the arrangement of having pre-recorded lectures put on Moodle ahead of the actual schedule, I found that students actually read the materials before accessing the quizzes that I put online, and completed them satisfactorily on time. Since the entire purpose of the quizzes was to make sure that they prepared for class and read the materials, this online mode of teaching actually achieved one of the intended learning outcomes better than the face-to-face teaching mode. The group oral presentation, which was another standard assignment, had to be revised also because students no longer made the presentation in the same space. I asked them to prepare a detailed PowerPoint presentation with explanatory notes, to replace the oral delivery. Again, from the work delivered over the weeks, this teaching and learning mode actually encouraged the students to perform better, for various reasons.

The two biggest pieces of assignment were the individual Term Paper and the Final Examination, which was usually a real-time event in the examination hall. Asking students to submit their own term paper via Turnitin at Moodle was not very different from the usual practice, and I was careful to give instructions about the topics and content, so that it was not easy to final ready-made essays online. The overall performance of the students in the term paper had shown no significant difference from that of previous years. The only compromise I made was the final examination – instead of giving them a choice, I set compulsory questions and required the students to submit their work strictly within the timeframe I set. Most of the students submitted on time and again the overall performance did not show major difference from that of

the previous years. Having compulsory questions in the examination had never been my practice, but to reduce the possibility of plagiarism I wished to contain the topic areas, especially when students were given more time than the usual 2-hour written examination they attend. This was not an ideal replacement, but it served the purpose of assessing students' learning about those specific topics I included. Overall I found that acceptable.

Conclusion: And then …

At the time when this paper was written, we were in the throes of the 4th wave of the outbreak, and the semester ended in mixed-mode teaching, which is also the reason the ACE conference was held entirely online. International travel is still restricted, and because of that in our university we had to ensure that overseas students could continue their learning. Local students are welcomed to enter the campus again, we conduct our teaching in the classrooms which are all equipped with audio-visual recording facilities while non-local students or those who still do not feel safe enough to return to campus can access the lecture via Zoom at the same time. For the time being, we manage as best we can, although there are challenges about facing two different audiences (one sharing the same physical space, and one on the other end of the internet) at the same time. This mixed-mode interaction and related issues will be the subject of another discussion that should take place sometime later as the covid-19 situation develops and hopefully resolves in time.

What I have shared in this paper is a reflection mainly on how higher education in Hong Kong (with my own experience as an example) responded to the outbreak of covid-19 in the early months of 2020. Daily life in our city had been disrupted for months previous to the pandemic attack, and the psychological and emotional conditions of young people (in fact of all people) were still to be calmed and healed. Social distancing had meant reducing contact to an absolute minimum, which in many cases had deprived us of sources of emotional support such as our friends and even professionals. From my position as a teacher in higher education in Hong Kong, this experience has encouraged me to rethink not only the academic side of my professional duties, such as how to convert my face-to-face teaching into a learning experience that works in virtual reality, or to design assessment tools that can evaluate how much students have learned via this new experience. Right from the beginning of the covid-19 outbreak, when we could not meet our students on campus, the first question had to do with taking care of their feelings – how to ensure that they stay emotionally calm and psychologically healthy enough to maintain good communication with us. It is only when such a mutually trusting relationship has been established right at the beginning that we can work together to create the most suitable and reliable experience through such unusual experience.

Reference

Centre of Health Protection, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government
https://www.chp.gov.hk/tc/index.html

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