

Introduction

Course delivery and course enrollments have fluctuated over the years at the postsecondary level. This fluctuation has been due to both, sudden and developing events. In March 2020, the world underwent a sudden and unexpected change due to the worldwide health crisis that was caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time, no one had ever imagined the effects that such a virus would have in our lives. In time, our pandemic has shown a light on our society's inequities. It has impacted our lifestyle, economy, labour market, our healthcare system, and education. At the postsecondary level, students, professors, and administrators were pushed into unprecedented challenges. In this unique educational landscape, the new technology of remote learning replaced the traditional in-person delivery model.

Supported by research and interviews conducted with Dr. Anita Lam and Dr. Maria Joao Dodman of York University, this paper explores the manner in which COVID 19 has led to educational and administrative changes and concerns, which include the decline in enrollment. With a focus on modes of course delivery, it examines the challenges and strengths of teaching with Zoom and developing virtual learning environments that adhere to course and program learning outcomes and academic honesty. Finally, this publication considers the way in which the changes implemented by the pandemic may have created a space for possible long-term implementations. These include hybrid learning and modes of delivery intended to best address students' diverse learning preferences and backgrounds.

Background

According to Statistics Canada in 2013 there were 2,023,191 Canadian Students that were enrolled in postsecondary education with the main area of specialization being business and management (18.2%) followed by humanities (15.8%) (Moodie, 2016). Statistics also show that there was a decrease in humanities of 4.4% between 2012 and 2013 (Moodie, 2016, p. 116). Humanities enrollment has decreased for many different reasons. In our interview with Professor Maria Joao Dodman, Chair of York University's Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, we learned that two important factors contributed to such decline. Beginning with COVID-19, the transition from in-person to remote learning was abrupt and at times, chaotic. While professors were addressing the challenges that stemmed from a forced transition, students experienced frustration and anxieties of their own. They were not

primed to learn in isolation away from the collegial atmosphere of a live classroom where they could mix with friends and engage in the experience of 'live' learning - the model they had engaged with since childhood. This frustration, according to Professor Dodman, manifested itself in declining enrollments.

Yet, as stated by Dr. Dodman, there are also factors, apart from covid, affecting the declining enrollments in the Humanities. Many young people do not know which degree they want to pursue and feel pressured by society, peers, and parents to decide on a professional path. This pressure, continues Dr. Dodman, comes from a perceived capitalistic angle of our society that believes that you get a pot of gold if you take professions such as engineering, business, or science. Students who do not follow their hearts often choose careers that in their mind, will lead to a job and a good income. The problem, argues Dr. Dodman, is that many students are not getting the big picture: financial wealth is not the most crucial thing in terms of happiness. People need liberal arts training. Central to her discussion is how learning humanities provides a better understanding of human beings and the world around us, making us more tolerant and open-minded. Humanities also teach us valuable lessons in understanding other world viewpoints. It is no coincidence that many of the great leaders around the world have a humanities background. Justin Trudeau, our prime minister, as an example, graduated from university with a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature: He did not study business, engineering, nor science.

How Covid Changed the Educational Landscape

As university students, we are well aware of the changes and challenges imposed by the pandemic and how this health crisis propelled the implementation of synchronous and asynchronous remote learning. As highlighted in our interview with Dr. Anita Lam, Associate Dean of the Teaching and Learning at Faculty of Liberal Arts and Professional Studies, from May 2020 to April 2021 York University's faculty had 22,000 students in 4700 courses transitioned from in-person delivery to remote. Although some professors and students had previous technological knowledge; the challenges were immense. Instructors had to be trained to teach online and a small team for instructors to access within the Faculty of Arts and Professional Studies conducted a series of workshops and created a website tool kit for instructors to access templates.

The sudden change from in-person learning to remote learning serves as both a challenge and an opportunity. While online learning is not new, argues Dr. Dodman has served her department (blended and online formats have existed for several years), but remote learning has proven to have new demands which need to be met. At DLLL (Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics), some faculty members were experts when it came to teaching in the remote format, while some others needed support. Such support was provided through workshops focussed on the technical skills required to implement the technology. Other challenges included socialization issues and a focus on how students could interact with their peers in isolated spaces.

Learning via Zoom

Zoom is one of the most popular platforms that optimizes distance learning. A benefit to using this platform is that it allows for the courses to continue throughout the pandemic. With zoom, interruptions were kept at a minimum without risking course cancellations and student isolation. In postsecondary classrooms, Zoom, as argued by Lowenthal et al. (2020), has enabled virtual exchanges while improving social presence or community (p. 384). To address the pressing need for instructors to become proficient with the use of technology, bi-weekly zoom training workshops were implemented. However, as Dr. Lam explained, learning hypothetically how technology works in a workshop and delivering it live to a group of students who expect course directors and tutorial leaders to understand and teach remotely were two different beasts.

Needless to say, instructors and TAs were not the only ones that were faced with challenges. Students also needed to learn the zoom system. In addition, with campuses shut down, many had no access to computers or internet. Fortunately, universities solved this by providing laptops to those in need. Yet, what remained as a challenge was the unequal access to internet (Moodie, 2016. p. 285). Returning to Dr. Dodman's interview, she explained that while Zoom provided benefits for students and faculty members, it also presented some challenges. Remote learning, she argues, is not as effective when communicating and learning languages, because a significant component of language learning involves body language. Other two challenges presented with zoom were zoom fatigue and, for first year students, the limited opportunity to experience a sense of community by socializing and interact with both, instructors, and fellow students in person.

During her interview, Dr. Lam highlighted the frustrations and inevitable errors that stemmed from the pedagogical challenge of teaching remotely but from the technology itself. An example of such is how, in the first few months, Zoom sessions were held without the requirement of passwords. This caused some meetings to be disrupted by unwanted individuals called “zoom bombers” (Fudge & Williams, 2020, p. 197). This led to the pressing need to secure all classes from such hackers. The aim was to ensure classes ran without these unfortunate disruptions. In agreement with Dr. Lam, this was something no one ever encounters with in-person learning.

The Upside of Zoom

The benefits of Zoom learning were also highlighted in our interviews. As stated by Dr. Dodman, many students have legitimate reasons why they cannot attend on campus. These may include travel restrictions and high anxiety levels. Zoom and other platforms enable classes to be accessed remotely. These allow students who cannot attend in-person classes to enroll in the university. Aside from benefiting students, having remote access to courses may also increase student enrolment and thus, offset the problem of declining enrolments.

Moving forward, pilot projects are currently in place to allow student participation through both, in-person and remotely. Dr. Dodman mentions that hybrid classes where people have the choice of learning online and in-person is a way of reducing overhead while making classes easily accessible to foreign students. However, notes Dr. Dodman, every decision that the university makes is within adherence to public health policies, not just to increase revenues.

Towards the end of our interview, Dr. Dodman turned our attention to how students have learned from the changes imposed by our pandemic. Specifically, she highlighted how through this experience students began to appreciate more the process of learning itself and how challenging learning can be. Students have experienced how learning is a process of trial and error. From this experience, she continues, we come out with a better model.

Outlook for the Future

Although technological advances in educational settings are new, many colleges and universities are open to the idea of a specific new learning space in the form of synchronous hybrid or blended learning environment. Through both on-site and remote students can simultaneously attend learning activities (Raes et al., 2020, p. 3). Hybrid learning creates more synchronous hybrid learning, it enables a more flexible, engaging learning environment compared to fully online or fully on-site instruction. As the population in higher education becomes more diverse there is a growing need to connect with and accommodate students who may not be able to attend traditional classroom instruction because of their location, and/or, family or work commitments (Raes et al., 2020. p. 3). Within this context, digital technologies are often proposed as a possible answer to evolving changes in the educational landscape. Technology provides a more flexible and accessible learning experience involving a larger group of learners (Raes et al., 2020, p. 3).

When we asked which approach worked best, and how the university will plan to proceed moving forward, Dr. Lam stated that even though it is premature to draw rash conclusions, she believes that there will be an increase in online options for students. We did not have many online options prior to the pandemic, yet increasingly remote accessibility seems to be on the horizon, either in the form of synchronous (Zoom) or asynchronous (pre-recorded) courses and lessons. The primary driver for remote learning is that students do not have to travel to the school, making it very attractive and even more affordable for those living far from campus. A second benefit is that courses which are delivered asynchronously (pre-recorded) allow a degree of flexibility for students. With asynchronous learning, students may complete the lecture and work on their own schedule as opposed to having to adhere to a specific time and place that may conflict with their home and work schedules. That being said, let us remember that not all courses are best taught online. The bottom line, as pointed out, traditional, in-person and online delivery modes are two very different modes of teaching and learning, hence what works in person may not always translate that well into an online format.

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