

Teaching As Orchestration

A Self-Study of Adapting to Forced Change

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Self-Study

Teaching

Orchestration

Online-teaching

In this chapter we use the metaphor of orchestration to explore the dynamic nature of teaching. While we focus specifically on our experiences of emergency remote teaching (ERT), such moments offered an opportunity to experience online teaching, assess its pedagogical value and associated issues more generally. Sources of data were generated via personal journals, group meetings and digital communications (e.g., email, messenger). Among the themes that emerged from our analysis was the need to acknowledge that we were creating lessons within a highly uncertain, changing and ambiguous environment. We settled on the metaphor of orchestration as a good way of capturing how we were organising our teaching and trying to provide stability within an inherently dynamic context. In our discussion of the outcomes, we focus on three themes. Firstly, we felt constrained by the limitations in the online environment which often forced us into transmission styles of teaching. Secondly, the lack of visibility and presence of our students in an online mode often left us unable to manage and adjust the learning activity of the lesson. Thirdly, the plethora of online tools available to us necessitated both the time to learn, and a design sensibility in order to be effective.

Introduction

The complexity of teaching is fascinating, illusive, and frustrating. While the concept of complexity is simultaneously difficult to grasp and conceptualize, it also has real presence that needs to be managed when teaching. In this chapter we use the metaphor of orchestration to explore the dynamic nature of teaching and use it to discuss how we work to provide some order to pedagogical situations that are dynamic, volatile and ambiguous. The concept of orchestration derives from research on educational complexity and conceptualises teaching as a relational and interactive process in which the teacher is steering or guiding, as opposed to controlling, a dynamic interactive process (Hordvik et al., 2020). While we suggest that teaching is always evolving and complex, we have experienced this to a much higher degree over the past three years as we have had to adapt and manage our teaching in response to the public safety measures introduced by the government to mitigate the risks of COVID-19. Through self-study, we sought to enact a collective project in which we interrogated, problematized, and expanded our own assumptions of teaching. Our aim is to develop a shared understanding and resourcefulness for teaching in an age where pedagogy in a university setting is an increasingly complex and novel problem. Our long-term goal is to ensure that high quality student learning remains the key outcome in rapidly changing contexts with a specific focus on examining how we can exploit the affordances offered by the possibility of blended and flexible learning formats.

In this chapter we focus specifically on our experiences of emergency remote teaching (ERT) where we shifted several times from on-campus classroom-based teaching to exclusively online delivery and online assessment. While we are aware that historical events like the COVID pandemic are unusual and have the potential to date quickly, its value lies in the way it interrupted and contrasted strongly with the status quo. These moments offered a valuable opportunity to experience online teaching, assess its pedagogical value and associated issues, and contribute to the growing research base that explores the transition to online and emergency remote teaching (e.g. Godber & Atkins, 2021; Luguetti et al., 2021; Moustakas & Robrade, 2022; O'Brien et al., 2020; Varea & González-Calvo, 2021). Through the dialogical approach enabled by the self-study, we have been able to describe the key challenges we have experienced and identify within these some of the key assumptions that underpin our practices as teachers in a university setting

Context

All three authors teach in a three-year undergraduate degree in Sport, Health and Physical Education, and two of us contribute to graduate courses in teacher education^[1]. The relatively small cohort of approximately 120 students across the three-year programme provides us with the agency to draw on a range of modes of instruction. While many issues are influencing the evolving nature of pedagogy in our university setting, the biggest challenge to our teaching over the past two years has been the need to adapt to the public safety measures introduced by the government to mitigate the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic. These have included a range of measures, such as the compulsory wearing of masks, the need for social distancing, campus closures, adopting hybrid teaching and fully online remote teaching (which includes both synchronous and asynchronous forms of teaching). In reality, this has essentially meant that within a semester, a course could move between two contrasting modes of teaching; either on-campus, where courses were designed for in-person, real-time interaction, or ERT, where courses are forced into online formats that were not part of their original design (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Hodges, 2021).

Over the past two years we have experienced large changes in our teaching. In 2020, the city of Auckland experienced two short lockdowns^[2] that resulted in moving to ERT mode and necessitated all examinations to be conducted in an online format. In 2021 we started the academic year^[3] with two weeks of ERT, returned to on-campus teaching, and then went into full lockdown again for 12 weeks following the first community case of the Delta variant being identified in August. At this point, all remaining teaching in Semester 2 moved back to an ERT mode. At the start of 2022, the campus continued to be closed for the first term and all teaching continued in ERT mode. By the second term, the campus was open again and there was an option of moving courses back to an on-campus mode provided students wore masks and that a hybrid option for students was available. By semester 2, our courses were back to an on-campus mode again. This meant that all the courses were taught in both modes. It is the ability to contrast our experiences of the different modes that allow us, in this study, to reflect on our teaching, and reflect on how best to evolve our pedagogies to the affordances offered by digital and online technologies.

Teaching As Orchestration

In order to understand how our personal pedagogies adapt and evolve in university settings, we argue there is a necessity view the university as an ecosystem that is both a system and systemic (Ovens & Butler, 2016). That is, it is simultaneously a system that is made up of elements that work together as parts of an interconnecting network and systemic in the sense that any change in one part of the system ripples through and affects all parts of the system (Davis & Sumara, 2014; Ovens et al., 2014). As a complex ecosystem, its structure, purpose, values, and functioning are interdependent with, affected by, and coevolve alongside, its constituent elements (e.g., government policy, trade unions, student enrolments, technology, etcetera).

The metaphor of orchestration offers a way to think about and theorize teaching as a practice within this complex ecosystem (Hordvik et al., 2020; Hordvik et al., 2021). Orchestration promotes an image of the teacher as stage manager, unobtrusively steering an evolving and dynamic situation over which they have only limited control. It acknowledges that the elements in any setting, including the student and teacher, emerge from the social-cultural-material environments in which they are situated (Wallace, 2003). As a way of thinking, it shifts attention from teaching being a wholly rational activity to instead acknowledge the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the process (Jones &

Ronglan, 2018). Teachers are positioned as actors in a web of relations who act intentionally to bring order to the complexity, unpredictability, and uncontrollability of student learning.

Viewing teaching as an act of orchestration helps us to frame teaching as a constant negotiation between teachers and students as they respond to evolving and ambiguous circumstances. This occurs in two ways. Firstly, the teacher plays a role in designing a course ecosystem that enables students to achieve the course aims and purpose. This involves decisions about course mode (face-to-face, online, blended, synchronous, etc), learning content and activities, use of media and technology, and design of assessment activities. However, teachers never have complete agency over such decisions since they are always made within the institutional and programme constraints. Secondly, teaching involves the teacher actively participating in the course ecosystem, orchestrating lesson activity and skilfully shifting between different teacherly roles as appropriate.

Methodology

This research uses collaborative self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) methodology (LaBoskey, 2004). Core to self-study is the idea that turning the critical gaze on oneself enacts a disposition of desire, particularly in the sense that it “reflects a desire to be more, to improve, to better understand” (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p.7). In other words, the underlying common purpose in self-studies is to become more fully informed about our process(es) of enacting practice and to explore and build on these “learnings” in public ways (Loughran, 2007). To enact this aim we embraced what Snaza (2010) refers to as the perspective of ‘dwelling.’ That is, situated as researchers turning inquiry on our own selves-in-practice, we enacted a constant questioning through collaborative dialogue as we reflected on our unfolding identities within the performances of our teaching.

We acted as critical friends to each other to create an intellectually safe and supportive community in which each researcher sought to improve their practice through critical collaborative inquiry (Samaras, 2010). The process was iterative and entailed cycles of simultaneous data generation and analysis, where analysis informs and supports new sets of experiences and data generation (Lingard et al., 2008). It involved a willingness to open one’s practice to critique and becoming mutually vulnerable (Richards & Ressler, 2016). Sources of data were generated during the longest period of ERT in the second semester in 2021. These include 36 weekly personal journals from each lecturer, recordings of six support and analytical meetings of 60-90 minutes duration (held approximately every 2-3 weeks) and digital communications (eg, email, messenger).

Our method of analysis was dialogic in the sense that we used group meetings to foreground and challenge the patterns, structures, and assumptions inherent our data in order to develop new understandings and ways of performing as teachers (Placier et al., 2005). The aim was to identify key issues or highlights from our teaching, which generally tended towards one person tabling a key issue or event that became the main focus for that meeting. We then shared and challenged our interpretations through discussion, often providing elaboration, explanation, comparison and theorisation. Among the themes that emerged was the need to acknowledge that we were creating lessons within a highly uncertain, changing and ambiguous environment. In trying to find ways to discuss this, we settled on the metaphor of orchestration as a good way of capturing how we were organising our teaching and trying to provide stability within an inherently dynamic context. In the discussion that follows, we reflect on our practices and experiences and focus on issues that emerged within our analysis of the data related to enabling good pedagogy in our situation.

Outcomes

Drawing on the metaphor of orchestration, where we view teaching as a constant negotiation between teachers and students, we focus on three themes that emerged from our analysis. Firstly, we felt constrained by the limitations in the online environment which often forced us into transmission styles of teaching. Secondly, the lack of visibility and presence of our students in an online mode often left us unable to manage and adjust the learning activity of the lesson. Thirdly, the plethora of online tools available to us necessitated both the time to learn, and a design sensibility in order to be effective.

Constrained by Technology

Moving to an online mode of teaching challenged not only our ability to structure and support learning activity, but it also contrasted with and challenged our beliefs about the importance of embodied, practical experiences. For example, Blake initially designed his coaching course to have students working with pupils from a local school. In this way, his students could experience coaching in an applied setting where the knowledge they were learning could be enacted as part of the decision-making involved in the act of coaching. Blake's role was one of setting up the situation for the students, coordinating and monitoring the activity, and probing with questions to encourage reflection on their coaching efforts. Moving online meant a complete change, with Blake focusing more on content knowledge for coaching by uploading pre-recorded videos and content, as well as facilitating more of a discussion style of lesson.

Similarly, Rod's service-learning course was designed to give students experience in a professional work setting. Pedagogically, student learning was situated and contextualised in authentic work-place problems. Students could observe experienced professionals and get a sense of what and how knowledge was used in their chosen field. For Rod, the dilemma confronting his orchestration of the course can be seen in his journaling, "A synchronistic lecture at the same time is easy....but how do we do a 60 hour service learning online" (Rod, personal journal, 17/8/21) Pivoting to online delivery was possible (and necessary) but it also meant a change to the content and assessment tasks of the course.

The key point here is that moving online was not simply a case of teaching with digital tools on platforms like zoom. Rather it required a change in pedagogical approach in which the tools that we had most readily available to us were more suited to the transmission and distribution of information than the situated and embodied experiences we preferred. This meant that the initial tendency was to adjust courses to become oriented around simple transactional exchanges of information. We struggled to find ways to engage students in meaningful and deep learning. The challenge was to utilise tools and pedagogical designs that fostered higher-order learning, especially in courses focussed on developing the dispositions and decision-making skills involved in complex situations where professionals work.

Student Presence

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of our changing pedagogy in relation to teaching online was how we sustained and shaped learning activity for the students. We found that synchronistic, collaborative activities maintained student connectivity, enabled problem posing and voicing of students' perspectives. However these activities are difficult to access for students who are also parents, essential workers and who have limited access to computers and high quality Wifi. In this sense, we found the issue of student visibility and presence difficult to manage. We are referring here to the way our pedagogical activity as teachers impacts on students' cognitive, social, and emotional presence. In our journals and discussions, we often highlighted the fact that during on-campus teaching we can see students and how they engage with the learning activities. We see what their attention level is, and we see if they are confused, distracted or bored. This visibility is core to how we sense, respond, and manage student learning in the lesson. Moving online fundamentally interrupts and transforms the nature of student visibility. Student presence now becomes mediated via online video or LMS metrics.

One of the biggest issues we encountered with teaching online was the reluctance of students to have their cameras on. In the first weeks of the ERT, Blake noted, "when their camera's are off, it's like talking to yourself...who am I actually talking to?" (Blake, personal journal, 11/08/21). We were highly aware that the students' choice to turn their cameras off may be linked to their desire to keep their home life private. We understood how the lockdown had changed the life situation for many of the students. While some could continue largely unaffected, we also had students who now needed to care for children full time, squeeze in additional employment, attempt to study in crowded homes, share their technology with siblings, and/or cope with poor internet connectivity. We understood that this changed situation limited the ability of students to engage with each course, and our desire to respect their right to privacy was behind not insisting that the students turn their cameras on.

The key point here is that our lived experiences in face-to-face teaching have made us attuned to student engagement. We can read the classroom and recognise who is uncertain, who is off task, who is struggling. This limited our ability to

make informed decisions about adjusting delivery style, using collaboration and group work, choosing where to provide support and encouragement, and use humour to lift the mood in the lesson. Our well-honed instincts based on years of classroom practice, our ability to 'hover', interject, challenge, and respond are no longer possible to do in the same way. Without the ability to observe students' expressions, body language, and other cues that might suggest issues related to boredom, not understanding content, etcetera, that are normally available in the on-campus classroom environment, we each became challenged as to how best to adjust our pedagogy accordingly.

Changed Pedagogical Competencies

Our experiences of moving online highlighted the competencies needed to design effective online resources and lessons. While the ability to present information as text, images, video, music, and interactive elements holds out the promise for enhancing learning for our students, we also found that it requires set of competencies to produce that content. As other self-studies have highlighted (e.g., Tolosa et al., 2017), becoming proficient with new technologies is both time consuming and requires a design sense to ensure teaching resources are interesting and engaging. We have found this unsettling because time is such a valuable commodity, particularly in university contexts where research productivity is a high priority. In this sense, and to varying degrees, the change in context (to online delivery) and the inclusion of digital technologies has highlighted the need for improved abilities to design and use digital learning resources.

In response to being forced online, both Alan and Blake spent a number of hours making videos to upload to their course LMS. In addition to recording lectures, these videos were accompanied by scripts, quality audio clips, and attention to details such as fonts used, animations, superimposed images, background music, sound effects, and 'B-roll' footage. Both Alan and Blake intended to create courses that were flexible in nature (allowing asynchronous learning opportunities), supported by videos and the opportunity to 'unpack' unpack this via a Zoom lesson. However, both had the reservation that their pedagogical efforts were not working as intended. Alan captures these frustrations when he states, "I really wish that I could be in the gym ... this just feels like such superficial learning going on at the moment." (Alan, personal journal, 6/10/21).

This theme highlights how learning is an ongoing aspect of the orchestration of course ecosystems. Even though we were experienced lecturers teaching content we know well, we were neophytes in the online context. Although Zoom has been a well-used tool by all three lecturers for meetings, its use as a presentation tool has only come to fruition since our first COVID-19 enforced lockdown. Our ability to show slides, show video, enhance sound quality, draw, and highlight have been learned over the last 24 months. This learning has been time consuming and because of mistakes that we continue to make - it is very common to have at least two attempts at recording a lecture. Orchestration, particularly in the sense of being able to adapt to and utilise a diversity of technologies, must also accommodate the idea that our competencies to effectively utilise those technologies also change. Moving online required us to respond to a quickly evolving environment and orchestrate learning in a context where many of our fine-tuned teaching instruments were unavailable.

Although digital technologies abound and, as Toquero (2020) recently asserted, the potential exists for universities to scale up training for educators and upgrading emerging technologies to enable innovative teaching that moves beyond transmission pedagogies, the demand on academics to return to the neophyte stage and relearn what we already felt confident doing – alongside the everyday demand of broader role as an academic – is at best daunting, and at worst compromising. Heeding Calderon et al. (2020) who cautioned that student-centred digital technology approaches may have the most positive response from students when they are new, we are aware that the most effective use of novel digital tools may therefore be the domain of the early adopters, with a never-ending cycle of the learning of new technologies needed to motivate students. However, while this may serve the needs of students, it is likely to be untenable for research active academics.

Conclusion

The forced transition to virtual platforms in response to COVID-19 has been rapid, reactive, and has created a number of challenges for education systems as a whole, and for individuals situated within these systems in particular (Godber & Atkins, 2021; Moustakas & Robrade, 2022). As our experiences highlight, it would be a mistake to see these challenges

as simply ensuring teachers and students have the technology, connectivity, study space and support to continue with their teaching and learning. Moving to online teaching changes the very nature of teaching and learning as well as the forms of learning culture and outcomes that result. It demands that we adapt to and manage the ambiguity and volatility of the learning ecosystem as a core part of being effective teachers.

Understanding teaching as a form of orchestration offers a number of insights about our experiences of moving between on-campus teaching and Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Firstly, our experience of the complexity of moving between different teaching modes supports the view that teaching is a process of steering rather than controlling learning. In the on-campus mode, we acknowledge that we are all skilful in managing the learning environment of the classroom or gymnasium. We feel confident and competent interacting with students in this mode. However, the move to ERT highlighted the need for a different set of competencies (Jääskelä et al., 2017). Secondly, the move ERT often was not coherent with the initial course design. The first response of lecturers to ERT might be to establish conditions with students under which online learning and assessment can take place (Luguetti et al., 2021), rather than assuming the courses are continuing as 'business as usual'. Thirdly, ERT often offers unprecedented agency for lecturers to explore both new directions and old assumptions embedded in their pedagogical work (Godber & Atkins, 2021; Toquero, 2020). Although the online context may be easiest to negotiate through asynchronistic recorded lectures, increasingly there are examples of synchronistic collaborative learning experiences that foster student interaction and align with principles of constructivist learning, and that do not require a high level of pre-lecture production skills. Indeed, higher educators will need to consider the resources of their own student cohort to find equitable solutions that meet the needs of their students and preserve their own wellbeing.

The past two years has provided rich opportunities to study our teaching as the COVID-19 pandemic has meant us teaching on contrasting modes. In this paper, we have reported on our experiences using online teaching in ERT, where we were not able to blend them in any meaningful way with other face-to-face pedagogical approaches. The contrasting experiences have enabled us to reflect on our own lived experiences as lecturers. Our concerns about not seeing students and being constrained by both the pedagogical choices available online and our own skills may not be shared by students. There remains a lack of research on the relationship between the use of digital technology, engagement, and subsequent learning (Calderon et al., 2020).

ERT has expedited a 'trial' of a 'virtual' university experience for students and highlighted the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and dynamism of good teaching even when it is not in an ERT mode. By using the metaphor of orchestration to frame our actions as teachers, we are better able to acknowledge how we assemble lessons and steer student engagement to facilitate learning, while also challenging the idea that there is "one best way" to do this. However, for orchestration to be accepted and viewed as a mature social theory of teaching requires more work, both philosophical and empirical. Nevertheless, we hope that the findings presented in this chapter goes some way to provide a fuller, more realistic, examination of the potential of framing teaching as a process of orchestration.

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[1] In this chapter we refer to a programme as being a set of courses that lead to a qualification, such as a degree, while a course is a semester-long class that students enrol in to complete their programme.

[2] The New Zealand Government introduced a 4-tiered Alert Level system to help combat COVID-19. Level 4 was termed “lockdown” because people were expected stay and work from home, limit all unnecessary travel, and restrict all social contact to a small family “bubble” (See NZ Ministry of Health, 2022)

[3] The New Zealand academic year runs from March to November



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