

Applying Course Design for Online Instruction to Face-to-Face Lessons

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Abstract

After a year and a half, many courses at Rikkyo University moved from the online format that had been adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic back to regular face-to-face classes during the Fall 2021 semester. Online teaching had forced teachers to rethink the way classes were conducted and to rapidly learn to utilize technology for instruction. As a result, courses were redesigned and innovative solutions emerged in order to allow for the instruction of courses that were previously intended to be conducted in physical classrooms. At Rikkyo University, two such classes were English Debate and English Presentation, both mandatory fall semester classes for first year students. However, once face-to-face instruction resumed, there was concern not only about health issues and teaching with infection countermeasures, but also about the loss of effective course design and practices that had been born out of the transition to online classes. This paper discusses some of the positive teaching approaches used for online instruction for English Debate and English Presentation, and how those were implemented once classes returned to face-to-face instruction in order to reduce the risk of infection or maintain the quality of classes that had been possible online.

Keywords: face-to-face instruction, course design, technology

Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020 forced many educational institutions around the world to switch to online classes. Teachers everywhere had to quickly adapt to online teaching in order to protect the health of staff and students. It was a challenging time for educators who were required to learn new technology, rethink their teaching styles, and adapt lessons to a web-based format. With the help of virtual meeting software, cloud technology, and online tools teachers explored new ways to deliver the best education possible under the circumstances. As teachers became accustomed to conducting courses online, it became easier to take advantage of the medium to do things that would not have been possible otherwise, such as teach students new software and partition classes into different breakout rooms to run various activities simultaneously.

At Rikkyo University, classes had largely been online since the spring semester of 2020. Face-to-face classes had briefly resumed for a short period of time at the beginning of the 2021 spring semester, but as the number of COVID-19 infections in Tokyo increased and the prefecture implemented a continuation of restrictions intended to reduce the risk of infection, classes once again returned online. However, with daily infection numbers falling a few weeks into the fall semester of 2021, these restrictions were lifted and Rikkyo University soon returned many of its classes to the face-to-face teaching format, including two mandatory first year English courses: English Debate and English Presentation, both of which have about 20 students per class. While at first it had been challenging to transition to online teaching as both educators and students had to learn new technologies and get accustomed to the format, a new set of issues presented themselves with the recommencement of teaching in physical classrooms.

Even though both English Debate and English Presentation returned to being taught on

campus, teachers and students still had to follow a strict set of rules in order to minimize the risk of infection during classes. First among these was of course that wearing facial masks was mandatory while on campus. While this rule did not directly interfere with the usual way either of these classes were conducted, many of the other restrictions made the typical way classes were managed somewhat problematic. English Debate and English Presentation are designed around having students share ideas with each other. However, since the threat of COVID-19 infection remained with face-to-face classes, teachers were asked to follow a set of guidelines to reduce the risk of the disease spreading. These included limiting the amount of students who were talking at once, limiting the overall amount of time students talked during a lesson, and limiting the number of people a student interacted with during a lesson. Students also had to sit at a distance from one another, and teachers were asked to stay at the front of the classroom and not walk around to students. All of these restrictions made conducting face-to-face classes very different from what would have been possible had there been no coronavirus pandemic, but also very different from what had become the standard for online classes. As a consequence of these restrictions, students were limited to the number of people with whom they could share ideas during a single English Debate class, or the number of people who could offer them feedback during a single Presentation class. With online classes using Zoom this had not been a concern, and it had been possible to frequently arrange students into various groups so that they could gain further perspectives. Previously in online classes, students had been able to freely interact with one another, but a limit on the number of students in a group speaking at once meant that their interactions had to be more regulated once we returned to the physical classroom. As a teacher, I also could not engage with students as closely as I had been able to with online classes, since I was not supposed to directly approach groups in the classroom, whereas before I had been able to visit individual breakout rooms in Zoom and so could speak with students much more easily.

Discussion

All these guidelines meant to reduce the potential spread of COVID-19 presented new challenges for teachers of English Debate and English Presentation once these courses returned to campus. Conversely, the online format of instruction had given teachers and students many useful tools for the classroom and brought about creative course design measures. This paper considers the application of some online classroom innovations to overcome these challenges and improve the overall quality of instruction with regards to creating a “partitioned” classroom, putting more emphasis on students, and giving feedback to students.

Maintaining a Partitioned Classroom

During online lessons over Zoom, it is possible to partition a class into separate breakout rooms where students can work on different activities. When conducting my English Presentation and English Debate classes online, I found this useful in allowing my students to make full use of the class time to be productive. For example, in English Debate classes, a group of students who finished preparing their team speech more quickly than other groups could rehearse their delivery without disrupting other students. And in English Presentation classes, students in one group could give presentations while students in another group worked on another activity. I believed there would be diminishing returns for students to watch too many presentations, so instead I had students give presentations in breakout rooms while I was present. I would then give feedback before moving onto

the next group to listen to their presentations. After I left, the group that had given me their presentations would do a peer feedback and discussion activity. Meanwhile, the groups that were waiting for me to arrive could do activities from the textbook and prepare for a future presentation. In this way, students could use the class time effectively and be productive throughout the lesson. Had I asked students to present in front of the class in a single Zoom meeting room, I would have worried about students disengaging from online lessons either before or after their presentation, so I also felt this approach kept students honest.

When classes resumed on campus, I still wanted students to give frequent practice presentations, as they had done online, but I did not want them to watch 19 other presentations while having nothing else to do, as I thought this would not be a good use of class time. I wanted students to utilize class time productively by practicing presentations with each other, learning new presentation skills by doing exercises from the textbook, discussing with each other questions related to the theme of the upcoming presentation and then commencing work on it, all while I gave feedback on the content or delivery of other students' presentations. However, the social distancing guidelines made this somewhat difficult, as I was not supposed to leave from the front of the class. To overcome this, I had students do all tasks that required pair or group work at the beginning of class, and then use the remainder of the time to work quietly on a future presentation by writing the script, creating the slide show, and memorizing their presentation for the remainder of the class. And while the class worked quietly, I could ask students from one group at a time to give me their presentations, with other members of the same group listening in to provide feedback afterwards. In this way, I maintained the same level of productivity in my presentation classes that had benefited my students in our online lessons.

Greater Emphasis on Students

When classes were online, I employed active learning approaches as much as possible. Waluyo (2020) reported that active learning strategies increased student outcomes when combined with e-learning approaches, so by using various online tools and involving students in the learning process it is possible to improve student results. The nature of online courses using video conferencing software can make it very easy for students to disengage from a lesson by doing other things on their computer or phone instead of paying attention to a lecture. To avoid this problem, I had tried to limit the amount of time I lectured during online lessons. Instead, I gave students activities to do in small groups using their textbooks. Al-Shalibi (2015) reported that student engagement was crucial to learning outcomes, and that careful lesson planning and varying teaching strategies helped improve student engagement.

For my English Presentation classes, I used *Ready to Present* (Bartelen & Kostiuk, 2019) as a textbook, which contains many exercises students can do in pairs or small groups that introduce students to various presentation skills such as gesturing, making eye-contact, and emphasizing words. I combined these exercises with questions I had made that required students to reflect on the importance of these skills so that students would both understand how and why they were important to use in presentations. Previously, with classes online and students using computers, they could check the answers to the textbook exercises online by watching videos or listening to audio tracks from the textbook's website. Following this, we would check the answers to the questions I had created together in the main Zoom meeting room.

When classes returned to campus, not all students brought their laptops, so using the textbook's

website to check the answers to activities may have proven difficult. Furthermore, I felt that having students watch videos on gestures or listen to audio tracks of sentences with word emphasis to check their answers using the media available on the textbook's website would be problematic if all students did not finish at the same time. Just as I had tried to have students take on more active roles in my online classes, I realized that the same could be done in the physical classroom. Therefore, instead of having the students rely on the textbook's webpage to check their answers or me giving them the answer, I had students provide the answers themselves to activities that required matching sentences to appropriate gestures, or read a sentence aloud while emphasising the necessary words.

I employed similar methods in my English Debate classes. I felt the *Up for Debate* (Mishima *et al.*, 2021) textbook had many sections that were teacher centered, and so to counteract this, I again made questions for students to answer in groups during our online lessons. Using the textbook, students would find the answers and we would take them up together as a class. In this way, students would explain key elements from the debate textbook, such as the structure of a debate or the function of various expressions. These same approaches to teaching students which I had devised to prevent students from disengaging during online lessons worked well once we returned to campus.

Giving Feedback

Monitoring students and providing feedback that is personalized is a central part of English Presentation and English Debate. Hattie and Timperley (2007) go over ways feedback can be effective, and note that feedback on student tasks in relation to overall goals is important to improving student outcomes. In English presentation classes, how a student delivers their presentation, such as the volume of their voice, the way they emphasize words and use hand gestures, and their eye-contact, is of great importance and one of the central focusses of the class. With online classes, it was possible to watch students closely using video conferencing software, and in turn provide constructive advice students could use to improve with each practice presentation. However, the ability to monitor students so closely was reduced once classes returned to face-to-face because teachers could not move freely around classrooms due the anti-infection guidelines requiring teachers to remain at the front of the classroom. These same guidelines also made it more difficult to check in with groups during debate class as they prepared for various parts of their debates. During online classes, a teacher could visit each group and hear their ideas. If students were struggling to make reasons or find evidence, the teacher could offer hints and advice. Again though, this level of monitoring became difficult once lessons returned to the classroom. This inability to give immediate feedback easily was potentially damaging to student productivity, especially among lower-level students who perhaps need more guidance from instructors.

As a way around this, I asked students to submit their written scripts for presentations and debate classes electronically. When classes were held online, this was the norm for checking student work, since it was not possible for students to submit physical copies of assignments. Both the *English Debate* textbook and the *English Presentation* textbook I used had spaces for writing segments of debates or presentation scripts, so in a normal teaching environment, it is likely that I would have been checking physical versions of student work that they completed during class. However, Rikkyo University's guidelines for reducing the risk of infection limited the sharing of physical papers and handouts between students and teachers, so once we returned to teaching on campus, I could not check students' work in the textbooks as I would have if there had been no pandemic.

Using Blackboard, I made forums where students could submit relevant work for me to check. By using Blackboard or shared Google Documents, it is possible for instructors to check the contents and structure of debate speeches and presentations. In debate classes, this can enable instructors to ensure that student ideas are relevant to the topic and that they have supported their ideas well. Teachers can also verify that team speeches and other parts of a debate follow the proper format, reference sources correctly, and so on. For presentation classes, teachers can make sure students have a proper introduction, body, and conclusion to their presentations and that each is developed adequately and the presentation looks to be the appropriate length. And by annotating comments directly into shared Google documents, teachers can provide feedback to students that they can use to make adjustments to the contents of their presentations and debate speeches. I found this a useful way to check student work, since due to the anti-infection measures we were asked to follow, I was not supposed to take and return physical papers to students. Using email submissions would have made organizing things difficult as well due to the number of students per class, so it was very convenient to be able to upload shared Google documents to Blackboard for students to write their debate speeches, or ask English Presentation classes to submit their material to a forum on Blackboard. To ensure that students knew how to enable sharing and editing on Google Documents, I demonstrated in class using my own computer and the class projector. If teachers want to make sure that students are able to use a technology or application in the intended way, it is important to walk them through the necessary steps.

In addition to focusing on content and structure, presentation classes also focused on the delivery of the presentation. When classes had been online, I had watched students take turns giving their practice presentations, and the same was possible once we returned to teaching on campus due to the way I partitioned the class. This allowed me to give direct feedback to students during practice presentations. To supplement this, I also asked group members to watch each others' presentations and complete an online Google form checklist and then use it to give each other feedback. I had used the same approach in online lessons, because peer feedback has positive learning outcomes for learners (Saito, 2013) and wanted to bring the same system into the physical classroom. By creating a check-sheet in google forms that focussed on five to six aspects of a presentations delivery at a time, students could give partners or practice group members advice on items such as eye-contact, voice volume, use of gestures, and word emphasis during practice rounds for their presentations. This type of feedback on the delivery of presentations could be used immediately by students to improve their delivery between presentations. In addition to this, I could also give comments on the overall class results of the anonymously submitted Google form checksheets, telling the class that as a whole certain aspects of their delivery were good, while others needed improvement before suggesting ways to improve.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic disrupted education institutions around the world and required teachers to adapt to online instruction. Online instruction itself brought creative approaches to lesson design and a greater incorporation of technology into the classroom. For teachers, many things became easier due to video conferencing software, such as making groups, checking attendance, and quickly sharing digital information with students. For students, researching things for a presentation or a debate was easier than it otherwise would have been on campus in a classroom without computers. So while the transition to online teaching certainly presented many challenges

initially, it was also found to have various benefits.

Teaching online made it easier to design lessons so that students could be productive throughout the class, because separate breakout rooms meant that groups did not disrupt each other and could be doing different things simultaneously. Though impossible to make separate rooms in an actual classroom, the principle of having groups of students work on different activities at the same time was still beneficial to apply to teaching in a physical classroom, as it allows students to use the class time productively without disrupting others.

By designing activities to keep students engaged in online lessons and prevent them from becoming detached from the lesson, I could make sure that students were staying on task. These same activities were still useful once we returned to campus, and I was able to further emphasize student agency in the learning process by having them provide model answers to certain activities in place of a textbook's videos.

Finally, the methods for providing feedback to students when classes were online still proved useful when classes resumed on campus. Asking students to submit assignments digitally allowed me to write comments onto their digital documents and avoid problems of assignments being forgotten or misplaced by students between classes. And creating Google form checksheets was a meaningful way for students to give feedback to each other and also a useful tool for me in providing advice to the whole class.

Necessity is said to lead to invention, and the coronavirus pandemic certainly required teachers to learn to teach online and make adjustments to their lesson plans. However, from these difficult times, many innovative ideas were born and many of those could translate back to the physical classroom well. This paper outlined some of the beneficial innovations that were products of online instruction, and how they were later ported over to the physical classroom once classes at Rikkyo University returned to campus. Some of these elements of course design helped overcome the difficulties posed by guidelines designed to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection, but all were useful in improving the quality of instruction and student learning.

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