

# Addressing the challenges of online learning in the SACE International programme: A personal experience

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the first lockdown, *Movement Control Order*, was imposed on *March 18, 2020*<sup>1</sup> to curb the spread of COVID-19 infection, I was challenged to shift my mode of teaching from *face-to-face* to an online platform. The pressure to push beyond the boundary of the four walls in a classroom was compounded by the fact that online teaching and learning is no longer an option and education institutions around the world began to focus on online learning platforms as the core transformation in this era of 'new normal' in education.<sup>2</sup> In view of this transformation, I had to make the paradigm shift and embrace the new norm in pedagogy. This caused plenty of apprehension as I was afraid that students would be short-changed and lose the actual essence in their learning experiences. However, I managed, not only to remove the apprehensions, but have gained so much personally that has made me a better reflective practitioner.

I taught three different intakes of students in 2020; namely, August 2019, March 2020 and August 2021 intakes. The August 2019 intakes started the course in 2019 with the normal *face-to-face* classroom interactions. However, the pandemic in March 2020 caused a dramatic shift in their learning. There were struggles to adjust to the shift in the mode of learning. On the contrary, both March 2020 and August 2020 intakes enrolled in the programme with an understanding that there will be fully online learning.

## 2.0 THE CHALLENGES

Being a novice in online teaching, I faced many challenges. There were trials and errors as I experimented with different online teaching & learning platforms- from *Discord*, Forum discussion in *TiMeS*, *Zoom*, *Cisco Webex* to *Microsoft Teams*.

In a broad sense, these were my main concerns:

- (i) How can I create more learner engagement in an online teaching approach?

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<sup>1</sup> New Straits Times, March 16 2020, *14-Day Movement Control Order begins nationwide on Wednesday* , accessed on December 4, 2020 , [www.nst.com.my](http://www.nst.com.my)

<sup>2</sup> Priyanka Gautam, "Advantages and disadvantages of online learning" (*eLearning Industry* Oct 10, 2020), accessed 4th Jan. 2021, <https://elearningindustry.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-online-learning>

- (ii) What can I do to provide effective guidance to the students in their continuous assessments in an online platform?
- (iii) To what extent would I need to redesign my lesson preparation to ensure effectiveness in an online platform?

## **2.1 The engagement of every student in an online learning platform.**

Engaging every student in an online learning platform has been one of my greatest concerns since the beginning of the transformation to an online pedagogy. In this context, the term ‘engagement’ refers to the cognitive engagement of the students. Research has shown that student’s engagement in learning is significant as it helps to provide a meaningful learning experience and sharpen their critical thinking skills.<sup>3</sup>

Many students choose to log in without switching on their video camera as this allows them to have better internet connection. This is a challenge as I am not able to determine whether every student who logged in is seated in front of the computer and is fully engaged.

In response to this challenge, I offer active learning opportunities for the students. For instance, questions are constantly posed throughout the lessons. Students are given time to reflect on the questions and respond in the online chat box. The students appear to enjoy such learning engagements. This is evident in their feedbacks.

For example,

“I like it when teacher randomly asks us questions on what she taught. I feel that it helps me to remember.”. (Student 1 feedback)

“The one thing that I like in Legal Studies online learning is when the teacher asks us questions varying from one topic to another”. (Student 2 feedback)

Both Piaget (1960) and Vgotsky (1978) had highlighted the significance and benefits of peer-based learning.<sup>4</sup> As such, peer feedback is also encouraged after their responses are posted in the chat box. The online platform provides a synergy that stimulates discussion. Students can reflect on the feedback given by their peers before providing their own feedback. I found that this allows students to articulate their thoughts with more depth. This is evident, even among the introverts. For instance, a 100% student engagement was seen in the March 20 intake tutorial classes as well as the August 19 intake classes. Beside constant questioning, I would also get the students to summarise the lessons. This helps me to identify their gaps and allows me to close the gaps before the end of the lesson.

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Hoffman, “Types of Learner Engagement in the Virtual Classroom” (*Insync training* April 6, 2017) accessed 4<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2021, <https://blog.insynctraining.com/types-of-learner-engagement-in-the-virtual-classroom>

<sup>4</sup> “What is student engagement in online learning ... and how do I know when it is there?” (University of Melbourne) Melbourne CSHE Discussion Paper, accessed 4<sup>th</sup> Jan. 2021, [https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/3362125/student-engagement-online-learning\\_final.pdf](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/3362125/student-engagement-online-learning_final.pdf)

## 2.2 Effective guidance of students' assignments in an online platform.

As the SACEi programme is based on a 70% coursework, I am concerned on how to provide effective guidance for the students in their assignments as I am not able to see the students *face-to-face* for consultation.

In response to this, I use scheduler log in *TIMEs* to enable students to book their slots for consultation with me. During the consultation via *Microsoft Teams*, students' gaps are addressed. I found that the online *one-to-one* consultation benefits the students as individual's needs could be met. In addition, in an online platform, students could replay the conversation that was recorded during the consultation. There is also better virtual communication as the screensharing facilitates the understanding of the students during the consultation. This is evident from the student's feedback.

For example,

"very attentive feedback on the folio task draft." (Student 3, Taylor's TES Score card)

In comparison to the earlier *take-home* assignment where there was fully *face-to face* consultation, the subsequent *take-home* assignments where all the consultations shifted to an online platform in my August 2019 students shows that there is no negative impact on their performance. In fact, there are evidences of improvement in the "A" band range. For instance, the percentage of A's for my August 2019 intakes saw an increase from 8.3% (Mid-Semester 2) to 12.5% (Semester 2).

## 2.3 Effective preparation of students for the external examination in an online platform.

The external exam in the *SACEi* programme is weighted at 30%.<sup>5</sup> This means that the student's work is marked externally, outside the school. This is to ensure that the Performance Standard<sup>6</sup> of each subject is consistently applied across the schools in the external exam.

The readiness of the students to perform within the duration prescribed in a supervised external examination is a major concern for me. The duration in an examination can put a lot of pressure on the students to perform well.<sup>7</sup> Mental unpreparedness is observed to be one of the roots of the problem. Poor academic performance of students is often associated with the negative mindset of the students.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the lack of ability to consolidate and apply the knowledge learnt throughout the course was also evident. The difficulty in retrieving the knowledge is mainly due to poor time-management.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> SACE Board of South Australia, accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 2021, <https://www.sace.sa.edu.au/>

<sup>6</sup> The Key Performance Standard is a guideline provided by SACE Board where the criteria for marking is established for each subject.

<sup>7</sup> "Top 15 Exam preparation Tips: Key To Success." Accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2021, <https://www.ozstudies.com/blog/australia-study-tips/top-exam-preparation-tips>

<sup>8</sup> S-Cool, "10 Tips to Mentally Prepare for Exam", accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2021, <https://www.s-cool.co.uk/articles/10-tips-to-mentally-prepare-for-exams>

<sup>9</sup> "Consolidate Your Learning", Heriot Watt University, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2021, <https://informs.hw.ac.uk/2015/09/28/consolidate-your-learning/>

Any examination requires knowledge, skills, practice and a positive attitude.<sup>10</sup> In the SACEi curriculum for Legal Studies, students must also display perceptive analysis and evaluation. In view of the criteria outlined in the Performance Standard, it is essential for teachers to guide the students in the preparation of the external examination.

The results of the external examination in 2020 clearly shows that the students were not prepared for the external examination. This includes the preparation in terms of content and skills as well as mental readiness. In response to this development, I am currently working on various ways to prepare the students for the external examination. For instance, I have prepared a revision checklist for all the topics to help students in the revision. Popular past year examinations are also posted in the revision checklist. During the revision period the checklist is used as a guide to ensure that all the past year exam questions are attempted by the students.

### **3.0 CONCLUSION**

The Covid19 pandemic has opened my eyes to new vistas in teaching and learning. I am forced to look beyond the four walls of a physical classroom to bring learning to the homes of every student, bearing in mind not to forget that I need to provide a sense of joy in learning. Even though some methods may prove successful for one cohort of students, it does not mean that it will also work on another cohort of students. I believe that as an educator, we need to be receptive to the learning profiles of the students so that we could bring the best into their learning, be it virtual or physical.

*“Being receptive, being able to listen openly and well, is a crucial skill for creative problem-solving.”*

-Paul A. Kaufman-

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<sup>10</sup> Deakin Life News “Preparing For Exam is the Key to Success-Writing Mentor Exam Tips.” (Deakin University), accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> Feb. 2021, <https://blogs.deakin.edu.au/deakinlife/2016/05/26/preparing-for-exams-is-the-key-to-success>

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