Tea or tears: online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT
This report describes two teachers’ challenges and coping strategies while teaching online following the suspension of face-to-face classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings shed light on proactive and passive agency. This study also provides an understanding of teachers’ ‘tea or tears’ in online teaching.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 outbreak has come as a shock to people worldwide. The education sector is responding to quarantine with a sudden shift to online teaching. Online teaching requires careful consideration of how instructors can adapt to this change along with deliberate thinking about their pedagogical practice (Moorhouse 2020). Instructors are scrambling to manage an array of new challenges. It is essential to explore teachers’ obstacles and coping strategies in adapting to this new educational landscape.

The study

This study focused on two teachers at a Hong Kong university. Liz (pseudonym) was in her first year of teaching, while Colin (pseudonym) was in his sixth. This paper presents data from interviews and teachers’ reflective journals. Thematic analysis was performed to identify these teachers’ challenges in adapting to virtual teaching.

Challenges and coping strategies

Liz: Who can understand my tears for online teaching?

Liz discussed having to grapple with unfamiliar technologies. For example, she was forced to retrofit or reinvent her lessons and seek new ways to complete routine tasks, such as grading homework. One such challenge involved the systems in her school. The nature of online teaching was also stressful in itself; she described it as ‘a massive and difficult change,’ during which she ‘lost the cues that [she] could pick up from seeing [her] students in person.’ During the interview, Liz stated that she truly wanted to ‘be there’ for her students. However, as she attempted to address students’ needs, she found it difficult
to manage her own coronavirus fears. In her reflective journal, she conceded, ‘I started to have a panic attack. I hadn’t slept. I was feeling like the walls were closing in on me.’

Liz also complained about the mental stress of launching her teaching career during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was required to assist the course team in developing assessments for online teaching. She complained, ‘I am a new teacher here and honestly I am on the edge of mental breakdown.’ The additional workload, such as answering emails, trouble-shooting technology, and planning lessons, burdened her. Liz struggled to balance teaching and administrative tasks. In her concluding remarks, Liz said, ‘The sudden shift to unskilled home teaching, the multi-task requirements, plus fears about coronavirus, piled up into an amount of exhaustion and stress for me. Who can understand my tears?’

*Colin: I try to enjoy this cup of tea*

Colin reported having bittersweet feelings about the sudden shift to online teaching. Colin found teaching online to be challenging because students in his Zoom classes were reluctant to activate their cameras and microphones. In his reflective journal, he mentioned, ‘I was doing a one-man show.’

In hopes of addressing this communication gap, Colin set out to talk to his students. He noted the face-sensitive culture that is characteristic of Confucian society. He also acknowledged students’ emotional turmoil related to the pandemic as well as the current living situation in Hong Kong. As Colin wrote in his journal, ‘I had an epiphany that many students shared a small house with their siblings. They may feel embarrassed about turning on the cameras.’ Colin tried to reassure his students that ‘positivity is a mindset that does not come to us when we need it, but it is something we must practice daily, especially in uncertain times like this.’ During class, he often used the group text chat function and breakout room function to help his students build a virtual sense of community.

Colin was highly interested in integrating technology with learning. He believed that teaching online does not merely involve transferring course materials into learning management systems. Colin attended online seminars to learn more about relevant pedagogical needs. In closing, Colin stressed that ‘Online teaching is like a cup of tea. It takes time to take in the scent, taste and calming effects that tea can bring.’

**Discussion and conclusion**

As a novice teacher, Liz found it difficult to adjust to virtual teaching and alleviate associated psychological pressure. She assumed passive agency. She also demonstrated low efficacy and little motivation to enact change when teaching online. By contrast, Colin demonstrated proactive agency as he pondered the problems. He searched for coping strategies to improve his online teaching methods. Proactive agency promotes teacher involvement, effectively affording teachers a sense of ownership in teaching (Teng 2019). As argued by Jenkins (2020), teachers adopt proactive agency when they plan for and initiate any changes as a personal choice. Teachers exercise passive agency when they have to succumb to the school leadership and passively resist a required curriculum change. A critical aspect of enhancing proactive and passive agency was to plan for the changes and reflect on the meaning as a teacher (Teng 2020).
Liz and Colin moved between proactive and passive agency, which meant professional teacher agency was neither static nor immobile under the particularly stressful COVID-19 situation. Future studies can further explore teachers’ proactive and passive agency in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. During times of crisis such as COVID-19, teachers need professional, collegial, and principal support to exercise agency to turn their tears into tea as they participate in online teaching.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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