

4 arguments about online teaching: can you change my mind?

1. Why live online lectures are rarely the best option

There's a certain logic to the tendency many academics had, and continue to have, for live, synchronous online lectures. This is the live going-through-slides, delivering-a-lecture approach many (understandably) assumed was the best response to this new need for enabling a remote education as it can be seen as the closest alternative to the live face to face lecture. Many a webinar tool has been used for the purpose. Just a quick note before I start to point out that the term is 'webinar' not 'wecture' for a reason. And there are reasons why this approach is NOT focal to the pedagogy of the big players whose students actually sign up for an education mediated online and at a distance.

A great lecture is of course a thing of beauty, transformative and a privilege to encounter. Not least because they are somewhat rarer than we might hope. I think it is unarguable to state that there are many long standing, pre-existing problems with the lecture as default teaching modality (tell me why I'm wrong though!) and that the live online lecture does no more than magnify the negative aspects. While we might be able to identify student x who came out of her shell when we switched online, the tendency is towards an exacerbation of issues such as disengagement and unresponsiveness.

When I was an undergrad I had 199 other students in lectures to look at and windows to gaze out of from my seat at the back. The proliferation of mobile devices is often seen as increasing the potential for distraction in live face to face lectures; think about everything else that may be a temptation in an uncontrolled environment. And it's not just temptation either; it's the very real distractions students (and often their lecturers too) have such as people and pets, conducive space or lack thereof and frustrations caused by bandwidth/ connectivity or device issues.

Looked at another way, a live session is a precious opportunity to interact and connect. The more a session feels like a lecture, the less likely most are to interact meaningfully. Use those occasions to connect, discuss, exchange. Think, too, about other reasons why asynchronous lectures are more convenient and useful: it enables the student to optimise suitable (even biorhythmic) times for study; to refer back; to pause, to skip sections, change the speed or decide to listen rather than sit and watch. Live online lectures are rarely the best option.

2. Why our intuitions about video length are often wrong

So, if I have convinced you not to lecture live online, you may conclude that the recorded lecture is the way forward and I'd agree...to a point. But before you start, how much 'content' needs 'delivering' in this format- what other media or modes could be exploited? By the way, if videos you have made are typically sub 15 minutes and you think that works you may want to skip ahead a bit as I'm arguing for precisely that. The problem for some of us is that when we come to the recorded lecture we tend to ignore some fundamental

principles of gaining and sustaining engagement that a growing body of evidence will reinforce. (research-based) advice will range from 6 minutes to 20 minutes for lecture style video but hour long recordings still proliferate. I have heard academics argue that students expect like for like, that they prefer fewer, longer recordings and 'what's wrong with using the pause button anyway?'. The logic is ostensibly compelling but 'like for like' is a fallacious argument given incomparable contexts, noticing such preferences may be a manifestation of confirmation bias and, as students- as humans- what we THINK we will do (watch, pause, watch a bit more) is not actually borne out by viewing data stats.

The 18 minute TED talk default is a deliberate strategy to exploit optimal concentration span (and, of course, these are polished, rehearsed, finely scripted, experts talking about their absolute favourite things), that can be viewed in the time it might take to drink a coffee. The deliberate design pushes the experts to really fine tune their arguments and isolate the threshold concepts. Given we tend not have the multiple cameras, great mics and every-week-its-my-favourite-topic this is all the more reason to keep things shorter. Guo and colleagues' analysis of viewing stats of 6.9 Million MOOC videos concluded that 6 minutes is optimal in those contexts so that window between 6 minutes and 18 minutes should increase viewing engagement. This doesn't mean a 1 hour lecture needs 10x 6 minutes or 3x18 minutes either. Pace can faster than a face to face lecture, interactions (other than pauses for thought maybe) and extraneous detail are unnecessary and the focus on threshold concepts should enable most 'hours' to be covered in something like 2 x10 mins for example. Less is more.

3. Cameras off or cameras on? Why this misses the point

So you're not lecturing online, you're recording shorter videos and you're meeting your students online. The least they can do is turn their cameras on right? I get this. Talking to blank screens or a noughts and crosses board of initials is hard. Do I not bounce off non verbal cues and adapt accordingly? But, hang on, didn't I say earlier that lecturing online is a flawed approach? Why am I doing all this talking into the ether? What am I using to reinforce any points I am making or questions I am using to frame discussions? Slides, Mentimeter type interactions? That's enough to focus on anyway so no need for cameras. Still, early in the 'pivot' period I heard a lot of academics arguing for (or simply imposing) a cameras on rule. Many schools did this too. Some even using it as an opportunity to enforce uniform and shoe wearing! As time moved on there was a general acceptance that there are many reasons, including safeguarding concerns, why it may be inappropriate to insist on this, even with widespread availability of blurring or background images. In a discussion it's great if cameras come on willingly as comfort grows but some people will not have the bandwidth (whether that's actual bandwidth, emotional bandwidth or cognitive bandwidth) to participate in that way so should not be seen as in deficit or side-lined as a consequence. Insisting (even asking) is framing the interaction around your needs as a teacher, not theirs. It is echoic of surveillance measures online proctoring tools utilise which is a manifestation of 'students are to be distrusted' narrative. This does nothing for relationship building, co-creation and students as partners! Finally, consider the major difference when talking in a webinar with your own camera on to talking in a face to face setting: you can see yourself- most of us can adapt to this as we have done it so much lately but for students the

discomfort of seeing yourself as you speak (or just listen) is in itself a distraction and impediment to clarity of thought.

4. Why compassion and community building must usurp the pre-eminence of 'content'

The final argument will be the shortest but not because it's the least important. Perhaps I should have started with this as it frames everything. We have all heard the phrase 'content is king, ... or queen, or president' and there's no doubt demands on our time and our curricula make us feel as though we have no time for anything but hammering out info (in whatever medium). Little wonder we leap directly into the content then. We do of course build in induction sessions to programmes but there seems to be little appetite for "wasting" time on community building, relationship forming, bonding and so on- and I'm not advocating that only at the start of a programme nor even at the start of a module or topic but to make it pre-eminent in every session- online it's additionally vital but there's no reason to not do it face to face either. Why? Because a comfortable, connected student is more likely to seek support, to get and give support to peers and to be engaged. UCL's education framework is underpinned by this principle but it's not something that happens naturally and a good deal of responsibility must rest with us. Time "lost" on such activity is time gained not providing remedial office hours too. How should it happen? This is very context specific and needs to reflect what you as lecturer/ teacher/ facilitator/ tutor are comfortable with but we can all start by showing our human sides more. It is not about undermining research reputations and disciplinary expertise but in fact enhancing our students' abilities to connect with us and one another so that they are better disposed to connect with that content. Compassion and community building must usurp the pre-eminence of 'content'

Do you agree? Please let me know your perspectives.