

A Whole New World

Educators Transitioning to a New Paradigm – An Evaluative Case Study

NADINE KARIL BARNETT

Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic catapulted educators at the University of the West Indies (The UWI) into a world of virtual spaces and platforms. As a result, educators needed to acquire competence in the virtual classroom in a relatively short period of time. Consequently, training for the educator henceforth will have to include the acquisition of Virtual Classroom Educator Competence (VCEC). This paper shows the levels of VCEC at which four educators began and how, through experience, they attained higher levels of VCEC by the end of the semester. It documents their perceptions as they taught one course in a section of a department in the Faculty of Humanities and Education at The UWI, Mona and how they transitioned to teaching online through collaboration, problem-solving, and individualised training. It highlights challenges, solutions, and lessons learnt in the virtual classroom during that first semester of transition.

Keywords: Virtual classroom; teaching online; BlackBoard Collaborate

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the face of teaching in this 21st century. For academic institutions, it necessitated a compulsory and rapid shift to teaching online in compliance with governmental stipulations in order to control the spread of the Coronavirus. This shift catapulted educators at all levels into a world of virtual spaces and online platforms, which, unknown

to some, was available long before the arrival of the pandemic. This necessary and sudden shift to the virtual classroom can be compared to the coming of a natural phenomenon for which one is caught unawares, with very little time to prepare for transition into a whole new world or be left behind.

An Evaluative Case Study

According to Bassey (1999, 28), evaluative case studies examine a single case or collection of cases to provide information to educational interests and decision makers such as administrators, teachers, etc. In this evaluative case study, a survey was designed to establish the perceptions of four educators with respect to some aspects of their individual and collective experiences teaching the same course, as well as measures that helped them to cope. This paper also highlights the terminologies and issues that emerged as the educators started the process of transition to the virtual classroom. The educators taught the seminar component of a foreign language course in the second semester of 2019/2020, in the Faculty of Humanities and Education at The University of the West Indies (The UWI), Mona, to eighty undergraduate students. The course comprises three components; four seminar hours, one hour of listening comprehension, and one tutorial/conversation hour. A course co-ordinator has responsibility for oversight of the course.

Additional Skills for Teaching

In addition to traditional teaching skills, teaching online requires a particular set of skills not previously acquired or extensively needed or utilised by some educators. The management of The UWI moved quickly to put the university on lockdown and make provisions through its technology management unit, the Mona Information Technology Service (MITS), to prepare educators en masse through a series of training sessions. These sessions were designed to train academic staff in the use of synchronous technology (Bates 2019, 386) via the university's choice of virtual platform, BlackBoard Collaborate (BBC), in order to facilitate classes online.

Nomenclature: Online Teaching vs Teaching Online

During the educators' period of transition to the virtual classroom, some referred to the new normal as "online teaching" while others called it "teaching online".

Although this could be regarded as a simple case of nomenclature, a clarification of this terminology puts into perspective what took place in the virtual classroom. I posit that what educators engaged in during this period of classes via the online mode should be referred to as “teaching online”. This is suggested because educators had to move their classroom to an online platform so that they could continue teaching courses which were originally designed for face-to-face (F2F) engagement. Online teaching, on the other hand, entails courses and programmes specifically designed to be taught in a virtual classroom. In the case of educators at The UWI, during the month of preparation to transition to teaching online, not only did they have to learn how to utilise the university’s virtual platform, BlackBoard Collaborate (BBC), but they had to take those F2F courses and finish teaching them on BBC and in some cases, via Zoom. One advantage that these educators have over those who will teach online in subsequent semesters is that they had met their students F2F at the beginning of the semester before the transition to teaching online. An established rapport already existed between educators and students and this played a role in a relatively smooth period of transition to the unfamiliarity and imperative of the virtual classroom.

Virtual Classroom Educator Competence (VCEC)

A good educator’s knowledge and experience are still needed and useful for teaching in the virtual classroom. However, while traditional teaching skills can be transferred to the virtual classroom, Huggett (2017) underscores three key differences between the two types of facilitation. First, the use of technology to connect to the virtual classroom requires certain knowledge and expertise. Second, the manner in which the facilitator connects with students requires a distinctive set of interactive techniques. Third, a new set of facilitation skills unique to the online setting is required for virtual delivery. It soon became clear that in order to succeed, or at the least, to have some measure of relevance in this new paradigm, one had to acquire a certain level of competence in the virtual classroom. Huggett (2017) is accredited with reference to the *Virtual Classroom Facilitator*, who will be referred to in this paper as a *Virtual Classroom Educator* as a matter of choice due to the specificity of the type of virtual event.

From the very outset, based on the informal reactions of some educators, it was apparent that this *Virtual Classroom Educator Competence (VCEC)* comprised varying levels. The proposed levels, developed for this case study for the purposes

of evaluating educators' VCEC, are Basic, Low Intermediate, High Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior levels. The levels are described as shown in table 1.

Based on the description of the levels of VCEC mentioned before, educators can assess their digital fluency and work towards elevating their level of VCEC. A questionnaire was distributed to the four aforementioned educators. They were asked to state the level at which they believed they were before BBC training en masse began. One educator (EdA), stated that she was Low Intermediate, while the others (EdB/EdC and EdD), indicated that they were High Intermediate. However, based on the dictates of the VCEC table, at the end of the semester, there was a change in their VCEC status which was acquired through experience and what they learnt while they taught. They indicated that the Low Intermediate level became High Intermediate while the High Intermediate attained Advanced level status. This confirms the notion that the onset of the pandemic has created a situation where educators have had to adapt quickly, on the job, in a constantly changing environment.

Table 1. Levels of Virtual Classroom Educator Competence (VCEC)

Virtual Classroom Educator Competence (VCEC)	
Levels	Description
Basic	Possesses general computer skills. Knows what a virtual platform is. Knows where to find the virtual classroom.
Low Intermediate	Possesses general computer skills. Knows what a virtual platform is. Knows where to find the virtual classroom. Knows of the existence of the names of at least two virtual platforms.
High Intermediate	Possesses general computer skills. Knows what a virtual platform is. Knows where to find the virtual classroom. Able to create a classroom session within the virtual platform (BBC). Familiar with the jargon of some online platforms. Able to utilise some of the different functions of an Online platform. Possesses a fair level of digital literacy.
Advanced	Familiar with the jargon of online platforms. Able to create a classroom session within the virtual platform (BBC). Able to utilise almost all the different functions of an online platform. Knows how to manipulate a variety of virtual platforms with little assistance. Possesses a high level of digital literacy.
Superior	Familiar with the jargon of online platforms. Able to create a classroom session within the virtual platform. Able to utilise all the different functions of an online platform. Knows how to manipulate a variety of virtual platforms without assistance. Possesses a superior level of digital literacy.

In the Beginning

Only one educator (EdC) was aware, before the period of transition to the virtual classroom, that BBC even existed. When asked to state how they felt when they first learnt they would need to do BBC online training, two educators (EdA and EdB) used the word ‘excited’ in their comments as the anticipation of learning something new in the ambit of teaching was appealing. The others claimed that they were not daunted by the new developments. The comments of the latter two are understandable since they admitted to having taught classes online before on other platforms. Their training then involved learning the peculiarities of The UWI’s virtual platform. EdC stated: “I was not too perturbed or anxious. Actually felt happy about the decision. I had done online teaching before so I knew I wouldn’t have an issue delivering classes, but my concern was how receptive the students would be.”

Not only was this going to be a new experience for educators but for their students as well who would be looking to them for guidance and reassurance. For this reason, one had to be prepared at least at the Low Intermediate level of VCEC to be able to teach classes online with relative success. Obviously, educators who had already been exposed to teaching in the virtual classroom had an advantage over those who were facing the prospect for the first time.

Collaboration

The educators claimed that BBC training helped to an extent but it was not totally adequate to prepare them to use the platform. Nevertheless, although they maintained that they would have needed more training to use BBC, they stated that collaboration with colleagues through online practice was what helped to prepare them to use the BBC platform with relative confidence by the time classes resumed. The course co-ordinator invited the educators to several meetings to practise and to try new discoveries on the use of BBC. EdA asked the co-ordinator for individualised training on the use of BBC. The co-ordinator had learnt enough to be able to instruct the group in the creation of sessions for classes. Nonetheless, she herself was new to BBC so the entire group collaborated and helped each other to manoeuvre the platform. The statements that follow show how the educators felt about collaboration with colleagues:

EdA: What really helped me was the daily practice I had with colleagues, repetition and learning from my mistakes.

EdB: I believe that my knowledge and use of other platforms enabled me to manoeuvre BBC. I think that brainstorming and collaboration with colleagues also helped.

EdC: The training I did with other members of my Department was more helpful to me since it was a smaller setting, and I was able to teach myself a few things about how to use the platform in my own free time.

EdD: The hands-on time we got to practise with other colleagues and on our own. Application of what was done in the training was necessary with the guidance of persons helping each other to survive and adapt.

It is interesting that in the last comment mentioned, the educator used the word “survive”, because that is how she perceived the transition period while she was thrust into a new world to which she was not accustomed and having to adapt. In describing what they liked and appreciated about teaching online compared to the F2F modality, educators cited students’ attendance to classes in spite of connectivity challenges. One spoke of the flexibility in the delivery of material, while the others spoke of the idea of working from home. They appreciated, “the safety of not having to interact physically with students and staff in the midst of a pandemic”, “the convenience of working from anywhere” and “not having to fight with traffic”.

Engagement in Teaching Online

EdB, in asserting what she appreciated about teaching online, stated: “I like the fact that it provides an opportunity to include a multiplicity of teaching aids and that it challenges me as an instructor to find ways to engage students. It is a continuous, constantly evolving process.”

The challenges of getting students to participate have intensified during remote learning (Minero 2020). Engagement of students is critical to a successful and meaningful teaching and learning process whether online or F2F, since students can become distracted based on what is happening in their environment and their everyday lives. Pandolpho (2020) suggests that in order to engage students, one major strategy should be the establishment of a weekly routine. This creates

order and students come to understand what is expected. In a sub-section entitled “Get to know your students”, Pandolpho suggests that more than before it has probably never been as important to get to know one’s students and perhaps never has it been more difficult to do so.

Bearing in mind the fact that the skills and abilities of a proficient educator are still needed for the online modality, one has to agree that the need for such skills and abilities is even now more pronounced. Educators have been trained to know their subject matter but engaging students online entails the technological, psychological, and even emotional aspects to the teaching/learning process for all involved. Students can perceive an educator’s regard through what is spoken, how they are addressed, and through follow-up actions in and out of class time.

It is normally an innate characteristic for us as human beings to be social and sociable, therefore engagement from the very beginning of teaching online is essential to maintain students’ interest and participation. In a Masters’ course taught online during the summer term, a student noted in a survey I facilitated, that one thing she appreciated about the course during the period was the fact that the educator greeted each student in the class, calling each by name at the beginning of the class. This was a relatively small class so the educator was able to do this, unaware of what it meant to this student and probably, by extension, to the others. One may argue that this cannot be done for large classes. However, the educator who signs on a few minutes ahead of a scheduled class will be able to greet students as they enter the virtual classroom. Some of these students may have been having challenges and an educator’s personal greeting makes a difference. Huggett (2020, 8) suggests the use of names at virtual events such as the virtual classroom in order to engage participants/students. Among her guidelines for the use of names, she suggests that facilitators/educators should

- a) incorporate the actual names of students in stories and illustrations;
- b) avoid putting persons on the spot or embarrassing them (which sometimes may not be easy to do in a virtual FL classroom);
- c) call a person’s name before asking a directed question and repeat the name then invite the person to respond; and
- d) allow participants the opportunity to “pass” and not respond, or to have shared responsibility for answers. For example, say “Let’s hear from both Jane and Maria. Would one of you be willing to go first?”

In order to engage students, educators may have to make some adjustments to

the very course manuals and course outlines that they used in the F2F mode. Some ideas come during the period of teaching as this is a whole new experience and one has to facilitate and court flexibility. To make the course suitable for teaching online, the course co-ordinator has had to adapt material for online-ready use by adding and recommending, more than before, online resources, that students can access at the click of a mouse.

Diversity in delivery is important in engaging students online. The use of videos, the chat feature available, the breakout rooms, audios, and presentations are some of the ways to keep students engaged. In one course taught this summer, one educator was invited in the second week of the course online and another towards the end, to share with students. The visiting educator would have been invited physically to an in-person class to speak with the students and teach some cultural concepts concerning his particular Spanish-speaking country. This idea was adapted to the online platform and was most appreciated. Another effective way to engage students online is through storytelling to teach or emphasise a point, a cultural concept, to create and help maintain interest and motivate students. This has been used in the F2F modality throughout my teaching experience and still proves effective in the virtual classroom. This strategy, especially if it is relevant to the topic, is valuable regardless of the particular discipline. Everyone likes a good story!

To Show or Not to Show: That is the Question

The educators found that students were reluctant to turn on their videos in the virtual classroom. One or two were willing at first. The educators, however, purposed to turn on their videos at least for the first class only or the first and second class of the first week. In one particular group, when asked if they appreciated the educator turning on her video, the students responded in the affirmative. They claimed that it felt as if the educator was talking to them personally as they could look directly at her, even while they were reluctant to turn their cameras on. Some students admitted that they were not camera-ready, were not yet fully awake or did not want to see themselves on camera nor did they want to be seen by others. These students had already been attending these classes before the onset of the pandemic, therefore the educators could associate names with faces. Fortunately for these students, there are no Mandatory Camera Policies (MCP) (Nicandro, Khandelwal, and Weitzman 2020) as in some parts of the USA.

Nicandro, Khandelwal, and Weitzman (2020) paint a scenario based on their own findings in their context where students do not want to turn their cameras on. They state that students may be in situations where

- a) they are couch surfing;
- b) they cannot close their room door;
- c) their home environment is not appropriate;
- d) their low-economic background could be exposed; or
- e) they could be disturbing family and vice versa.

The situations mentioned are not far-fetched and sound similar to what students are facing at The UWI. As for the educators, for the most part, it is a new experience to be teaching while not being able to see the persons behind the screen. In one instance, an educator reported that once when she had her camera on, she suddenly heard a male voice where a female student's name was. The student apologised profusely as a member of her family who had come into the room was staring at her teacher. Scenarios such as these are why educators in some schools in the USA enforce MCP. One professor in a college that advocates and maintains MCP, asserts that, "seeing students' faces is more conducive to a teaching environment that fosters collaboration." Besides, he says he misses the students (Nicandro, Khandelwal, and Weitzman 2020). This professor represents educators who are attempting to hold on to any semblance of normalcy during the pandemic. Unfortunately, suffice it to say, we are not in a normal period. Educators cannot force their students to turn on their cameras, they can only make an appeal. During the rest of that first semester, educators and their students mostly kept their cameras off.

Teacher Training and Preparation

It is clear that teacher training and preparation from now on will have to adapt to the demands of this new paradigm and include some form of VCEC. The educators concur that this is the way forward and the only way to be a successful educator in this new paradigm. This type of training should be ongoing because as educators progress in their knowledge of the use of technology in the classroom new challenges emerge and new applications, websites, and virtual tools become available. Whether or not there is a return to the F2F modality, many academic institutions have seen positive aspects in the delivery of classes online

and will want to continue it to some extent, or at least adapt a blended mode. They would have seen the benefits of teaching online in terms of cost reduction and other organisational and logistical advantages. Furthermore, online delivery has benefits such as the use of technology which interests students and helps educators create lessons as they manipulate various platforms. Global pandemics may become more common in the next few decades (Rice 2020) and distance learning will become more important as seen through the onset of the effects of COVID-19. If The UWI intends to offer an all-inclusive tertiary experience on an international scale, all educators must have the required competencies to deliver effectively both online and offline. One educator asserts that if they had been equipped beforehand with the skills and knowledge to use BBC, there would have been a faster end to the second semester of 2019/2020. Tertiary institutions must therefore be prepared. Many were not, but educators still had to transition and cope in the new norm.

Teaching Online versus F2F

The educators' first experience teaching online was relatively short (six weeks) since the closure of F2F classes happened in the middle of the semester. When asked to compare their experience teaching online versus the F2F modality, they seemed to speak more in favour of the F2F modality. Their statements are as follows:

EdA: Our experience online was really short — only six weeks therefore, I would say I prefer the face-to-face modality. The weak students had a hard time adjusting to this modality.

EdB: F2F teaching is more personal, provides an environment for nurture; where the teacher can impact the student with love of the subject area. I believe it is more learner-friendly whereas online proffers independent learning.

EdC: For language courses, face-to-face is ideal. Teaching can be done successfully online, and I have had some very good sessions up to this point. The recorded sessions feature is great when persons are not able to attend classes live, but Jamaica's infrastructure and the "digital divide" limits this possibility to a great extent. Smaller class groups in an online modality would probably be just as effective as larger groups in-person.

EdD: With teaching face-to-face the students participate more and you can call on them more to participate because they are in the same space as their peers so

there is more pressure for them to produce and respond. When they are online they can hide behind their screens and choose more to not respond and some use connectivity issues as excuses to not participate.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Classes

This era of teaching online has given rise to the terms *synchronous* and *asynchronous* learning/classes. According to the Glossary of Education Reform, synchronous learning comprises learning that takes place at the same time and at the same place, via the same learning platform. Before this term even became commonplace, it was often referred to as distance-education or distance learning. Video-conferencing and other forms of interactive online learning are regarded as synchronous where students interface with their teachers in real time. This type of learning has been associated with tertiary institutions such as The UWI for many years through its Open Campus and a few courses at the other campuses at The UWI. However, in Jamaica and the world, in the ambit of education in institutions at every level, this type of learning has now become the principal vehicle for teaching and learning.

On the other hand, asynchronous learning entails teaching and learning online that occur at different times while students are at different locations. This is achieved through pre-recorded video lessons, assigned tasks placed on virtual boards, email and WhatsApp exchanges between educators and their students who can access these lessons at different times. Bates (2019, 403) prefers asynchronous learning because many students work and lead busy lives so this method is convenient for them. Asynchronous material can be accessed at any time. Second, he asserts that this method is much more convenient for him as an instructor. He concedes, however, that asynchronous instruction can be frustrating for some students if a problem arises and the educator is not present in real time to assist with the situation (Bates 2019, 403).

Educators found themselves having to contend with and understand these two previously unfamiliar terms. Having taught their classes in the F2F mode for weeks before the onset of the pandemic, the idea of asynchronous teaching was met with varying levels of misgivings by the aforementioned educators. In fact, they continued having synchronous classes for the rest of the semester as they felt they were not teaching if they employed the asynchronous method. Nevertheless, the classes on BBC platform were automatically recorded, therefore

students who had WiFi connectivity issues were able to return to the platform and listen to classes they had missed. They were not able to ask questions in real time but they would have been able to follow up with the next class.

Despite the misgivings, asynchronous classes have merit in the world of teaching and learning online. Makhoulf (2014) highlights the fact that asynchronous learning is an independent approach to learning which gives students maximum control over when and where they access the material. Some students will find this approach appealing as not all learners learn in the same manner and at the same pace. Since students can work at their own pace, to a great extent, they have more time to analyze and decipher the material. It is a more flexible method of learning which proves ideal for tight schedules (Makhoulf 2014).

Conversely, not all students have that intrinsic motivation to log on to the system and complete tasks when accorded this independence. In addition to this, the level of instant feedback is not the same as in a synchronous learning environment. If a point in a lesson is misunderstood, without timely correction and direction, this could lead to a problematic situation for a student in the course. In a section of his article entitled “Disadvantages”, Makhoulf (2014) posits that asynchronous learning can also cause a “disconnect between the learners, the material and the other people involved – both instructor and other students”. Having utilised mostly the synchronous method and tried a portion of the asynchronous, the conclusion to this matter, in my view, is to facilitate a blend of both methods to benefit the different types of learners since each method has its advantages.

Volume of Work

In reference to the volume of work since having transitioned to teaching online, the educators indicated that compared to the F2F period, there was an increase in the volume of work they had to do in terms of preparation and follow-up exercises. Their comments are as follows:

EdA: Increased. It was necessary for me to keep in touch with students who had connectivity challenges or with those who had challenges learning online. Basically, this activity was done after the four hours of synchronous classes. Asynchronous classes were done very few times and only when the majority were having issues logging in. I felt compelled to be in touch with my students to check on their personal challenges online or technical issues.

EdB: It increased because of the level of preparation. Not only was I required to be

familiar with my teaching material but also the various platforms and technology to support the material. F2F they see you, hear your voice and pick up. Online they cannot do that. You had to find the best ways to get things across to them.

EdC: It felt as if it increased in terms of maintaining contact with students, getting feedback and assessing them to make sure they were understanding in class. I also did a lot of individual assessment which is more difficult than when we are teaching face-to-face.

EdD: Overwhelmingly increased. Demanded more time, flexibility and patience with students, the platform (disconnection issues with students and teacher) was an issue.

Working from home is not necessarily synonymous with working fewer hours or having a lighter work load. On the contrary, the work day has become longer. Meakin (2020) reports that according to data from virtual private network service provider NordVPN Teams, persons who have begun to work remotely due to the spread of the virus, have started to work a longer day — an additional three hours per day in the USA. This is compared to figures seen before 11 March – a 40% difference. NordVPN claims that in countries such as France, Spain, the UK, and Canada, many persons start work earlier than usual with the working day extended by an average of two hours (Meakin 2020). Based on their comments, the educators surveyed in this article can relate to this scenario.

Educators' Mental Health

The maintenance of one's mental health is critical in an educator's everyday functions. This is even more compounded with the advent of teaching online, especially for many educators who work from home. When asked to comment on their mental health and how they managed it, the educators stated as follows:

EdA: Perfect. Not a problem whatsoever. I did a couple of courses online, talked to my family and friends in Jamaica and abroad, gardening, cooking, watching TV, I did what I normally do except, limiting whenever possible the number of outings. I follow the prevention protocols and I don't think much about COVID-19. I do not live in fear.

EdB: I had to decide that at a certain point in the day that I would just stop. I had to make a conscious decision. I would also ensure that at some point if there was time in the day that I would do it, but if not, then I would do something at least once a week.

EdC: I watched TV from time to time and did some non-academic reading.

EdD: Mental health: Not well. I was juggling two different platforms; one in my fulltime job and the other part time and not being able to go out to socialise and de-stress.

Working from home blurs the separation of professional and home life and can affect one's mental health if life and environment are not managed properly. However, there are steps educators can take to safeguard themselves and balance both aspects of their lives. The following points are suggested by Gausepohl (2017) in his article on improving work-life balance when working from home:

- *Get dressed.*

She stressed that it is helpful if one dresses, to a certain extent, as if one is going to work. This will put the educator in a certain frame of mind to treat with the task ahead.

- *Create and maintain a designated work area.*

Gausepohl suggests that one should “commute” out of the bedroom into the work space. Others in the home should also respect this work space so that there are no interruptions and distractions. In addition to creating this work space one should equally ensure that there is or are spaces that are no-work zones.

- *Effectively communicate.*

It is essential to connect with co-workers from time to time. Working from home can create a disconnect between co-workers and the place of work. Gausepohl even suggests that one should go into the workplace from time to time if this is possible.

- *Block out your time to focus on specific tasks.*

It is important to allocate time for specific tasks and give one's attention to one task at a time regardless of what kind of task it is – whether home or work-related. One should set priorities and stick to them or one can find one's self being pulled in several directions, which can contribute to stress. This therefore means that it is imperative for the educator to have a plan for the day and follow the plan as far as possible.

- *Take breaks.*

Gausepohl speaks of the importance of changing one's sedentary position and moving around every hour. It is important for educators to take breaks or they could find themselves working nonstop and even foregoing lunch time. One educator in her statement on mental health had said that she had to make a conscious decision to 'just stop'. This goes to show that even taking breaks or stopping the work took effort and will, because the work is there to be done.

- *Learn to turn off your business.*

Even though it is important to be connected to those with whom one works, it is equally important to have a time limit as to when work ends. If one is available for several hours of the day beyond normal working hours then this could become everyone's expectation. It is important to set boundaries and respect the boundaries of other co-workers. During the initial stages of the transition period the challenge was that of turning off business as co-workers' needs and questions were legitimate and in some cases needed immediate attention. However, since that period, it is safe to say that there has been improvement in this area on my part and that of colleagues.

- *Make time to unwind.*

Gausepohl recommends having a transition period between work and non-work hours where one takes the time to decompress. This could involve calling a friend, stepping outside for fresh air or relaxing in some other way or as McClintock (2020) suggests, the educator should be "unapologetic" about the time he/she takes to unwind and focus on him/herself.

These are solid pointers that can help educators to organise and maintain healthy stress levels to safeguard their mental well-being.

Challenges

The challenges of teaching and adapting to a whole new modality were compounded by students' internet connectivity issues and their personal management of the process. EdA noted that the same students who did not attend classes regularly in the F2F modality were the very ones who did not prepare for classes online and had internet connectivity issues. EdD reported the same situation.

In addition, she stated that getting some students to participate was very challenging. EdB said that she has found teaching online to be somewhat impersonal, especially in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. EdC highlighted Jamaica's poor internet infrastructure and service. She claims that BBC booted some students off the system at intervals. She pointed out that it was also more difficult to get feedback from students, especially in a discipline that requires a lot of student/teacher engagement and oral practice in order to achieve mastery in particular aspects of the course.

The greatest challenge

What can certainly be regarded as the greatest challenge for educators online is the area of assessment. Fortunately, regarding the course in question, a major assessment – a written component accounting for 30% of the final mark – had already been administered days before all classes were put on hold. The co-ordinator and educators had to contend with how the rest of the course was going to be assessed through the online platform where students had ready access to all kinds of tools at the click of a mouse. One educator commented that assessments need to be carefully structured because, since students have access to this assistance from sources online or otherwise to complete tasks, it is easy for the testing to not reflect their true potential in most cases. One can only imagine that students will always seek ways to take advantage of the fact that testing has to be conducted online. It has also been discovered that some browsers automatically ask students if they need the particular page to be translated to English while some computers are able to translate the material automatically. In such an instance the Department's technician was of great assistance in helping to safeguard aspects of the test and minimise this problem. In this particular case, the technician instructed the co-ordinator as to how she could enter the Reading Comprehension as an image so that the computer would recognise it as such and would therefore be unable to translate the passage. Educators have to find ways to be ahead of their students to safeguard, as far as possible, the integrity of assessments.

The three remaining aspects of the course to be tested comprised the oral, aural and written components. The oral component was the easiest of the three to facilitate since this assessment was done F2F, in real time in the virtual classroom. The aural component, in the form of a listening comprehension exercise,

was placed on the course board and students were able to access the test over several hours for a limited period such as 25–30 minutes. Before the aural test was administered, the students were given opportunities to practise past papers on the virtual platform in the proposed test design before the date of the actual test. This proved to be essential because it allowed the students to learn how to access and practise for the test in the format that they would be given. It also allowed the course co-ordinator to test the system and make certain determinations such as the suitable amount of time to be allotted for the test. In the semester that followed, the co-ordinator was reminded that regardless of how one makes an impeccable plan, sometimes technology fails. In a test in the semester that followed, thirty-three students were given an aural test online. All students attempted the test at different points over a period of two days. However, three students were unable to hear the video. As one student put it, “the file may have been incompatible with his device”. These are students who normally engage in class activities so there was little doubt about their integrity. Issues such as these may arise, so educators have to be prepared to facilitate these students and resolve the issue. In such a circumstance, the educator has to be willing to create a supplemental test or to initially create two tests in preparation for such eventualities.

The co-ordinator divided the final assessment (written) into two parts, the first was a multiple choice grammar and vocabulary test where students had a specific time limit over a period of two days to do Part A of their assessment. The specific time limit was structured so that students had the opportunity to choose when, over a period of 18, 24 hours, etc. they wanted to do the test. Once they started the test they had to complete it in the time designated such as 25–30 minutes, etc. This availed them limited time in which to consult peers and use search engines online. Part B was a take-home essay where students had a period of two days to complete and upload their composition to the platform. The take-home essay was set in a manner that required the students to write personal information in conjunction with the theme, therefore it would have been difficult for students to find and download an essay from the internet. Unfortunately, in general, online assessments are of such a nature that some students will always attempt to find ways to outsmart the system. Therefore, educators have to be constantly searching for ways to be ahead of the students. Preparing the assessment aspect of teaching online involved much thought and planning, first by sections in the department, and then by co-ordinators in consultation with colleagues. Throughout the process, even though there was physical distancing, the necessity of colleagues working

together through online platforms, with each educator teaching the other something he/she learnt, facilitated camaraderie even behind the screen.

Conclusion

Educators, despite their age, training, and experience in the ambit of teaching, have been catapulted into a whole new world of virtual clouds behind a screen. They have had to adjust and realise that the process of transition to teaching online is an ongoing one which necessitates flexibility on their part. To survive and thrive they have had to be willing to adapt to constant changes which include ever-increasing applications and platforms in a world that in a relatively short period has forever changed and may never be exactly the same again. They have had to face challenges never before experienced and find ways to resolve them. Despite the challenges and the charting of unfamiliar territory, these educators successfully started the process of transitioning to settle in the virtual world through teamwork, patience, resilience, problem solving, and the acceptance that this new paradigm is the new normal.

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