

Why Online Teaching is Superior to Classroom Teaching (or *Why it Will Change How You Teach Face-to-Face*)

Presentation (Session 2) for the CAPPA Workshop on
Teaching Public Policy and Public Administration in Times of COVID-19

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From the Pivot to New Way of Doing Business

- Many of you had to ‘pivot’ and close-out FTF courses – this was not an easy experience: highly disruptive to students and instructors alike, closing out courses not designed for online delivery, all while adjusting to working from home and other personal demands.
- Many colleagues did not have to pivot, because they were already teaching online – indeed, many CAPPA institutions already deliver programs partially or fully online.
- Online courses can be an equally effective way to deliver education and professional development, and sometimes better – claims that ‘online’ courses are necessarily ‘inferior’ can grate. Moreover, it is our and the public sector’s future for the foreseeable future.
- My prediction: you will discover that all of us will learn a great deal from meeting the online challenge and it will change FTF teaching.

Let's admit it: Online education is a pale shadow of the real thing

MARK KINGWELL

21 Feb
2020

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OPINION

Professor of philosophy
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The fast-break virus-driven move to online education is a miniature crisis within a global one. It is non-fatal in terms of human life, of course, but may prove devastating in more subtle ways. Among other things, the massive and sudden shift in teaching at all levels exposes social and economic faultlines that predate the current pandemic.

In the United States, as City University of New York instructor Corey Robin wrote earlier this month, the biggest gap is between wealthy private universities and public state schools. The former, with robust infrastructure, enviable brand names and mostly well-heeled students, can weather the storm. At places such as CUNY, where I once taught, this is not so, not least in the uneven distribution of access to affordable internet connections.

Meanwhile, different approaches to college reopening are

quickly creating asymmetries in the experience students can expect. Even at places where in-person teaching will resume in the fall, the social and cultural aspects of campus life will be almost entirely absent. Mark Twain is supposed to have said, "I never let my schooling interfere with my education." If, as is usually thought, he meant that true education happens outside the seminar room, that kind of learning is simply no longer available on neutron-bombed campuses. There will be no college culture for the foreseeable future: no keg parties, no crowded football games, no grassy quads and dreaming spires, no rallies or late-night residential bull sessions.

Adding to these deficits are polls that show a majority of students consider online instruction "inferior" to physical gathering in classrooms and lecture halls. An estimated one-third of incoming freshmen are wondering whether university is even a good idea right now, according to a survey commissioned by the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Canadian Federation of Students, while some disgruntled current undergraduates have

agitated for tuition-fee refunds or reductions.

Small liberal arts colleges are among the most vulnerable here. An old graduate school friend of mine who teaches at one such place wrote that a liberal arts college such as his "was already living beyond its means ... as the comprehensive fee rose to an obscene \$75,000 per year. Many houses of cards have been exposed." Such institutions face financial collapse and permanent closing.

In Canada, where the postsecondary system is almost entirely public, such bad deals are not so common. Nobody here pays \$75,000 a year in fees to attend a second-tier college. But what about smaller regional or teaching-intensive schools? Can anyone, in good conscience, charge full-whack tuition to students who are sitting at home – maybe living with their parents – staring at time-delay faces on a screen or watching quickly assembled YouTube videos and PowerPoint presentations?

At the University of Toronto, where I currently teach, we've been told that we should consider adopting a system called "HyFlex

Dual Delivery." This jargony buzzphrase smacks of an advanced laser weapon or intercontinental ballistic missile, but really it just means offering simultaneous in-person and online versions of university courses. Given physical distancing, the in-person option will presumably be available only for small classes; we are then advised to respect the needs of students who won't attend in person and replicate the course online.

To those of us who see a pedagogical contradiction, not just an experiential gap, in the very idea of a webinar, that now-ubiquitous portmanteau word, this development is anathema. In my own discipline of philosophy, the centrality of face-to-face Socratic engagement, the special benefits of group interlocution with nothing but a shared text before us, cannot survive the lockstep march online. Even a hybrid model – that's what the "Hy" in "HyFlex" means – will not rescue us. Hybrid is just the new synonym for "we have no idea."

And yet, over any possible objection or plea for discussion, online education is what we are forced to accept. Like most in-

structors, I will do my level best to approximate real seminars and lectures under new circumstances. But we owe it to our students and ourselves to acknowledge that these are, and can only be, poor shadows of the real thing.

I've heard administrators insist that online instruction is just a "change in delivery system," not a diminution of content. But this bureaucratic bromide wilfully ignores the wisdom of Marshall McLuhan, whose work I often teach. The medium is always the message. You can reduce a seminar to a distortion-addled screen, sure, but that will never substitute for being there.

I'm reminded that the etymology of "seminar" refers both to places where learning happens – seminaries, the matrix of modern universities – and also to what happens there: Seeds are planted, ideally later to bear intellectual fruit. To paraphrase Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*: Ideas are big; it's the screens that got small. The fact that we've been forced willy-nilly into this virtual corner is no solace or solution.

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Why Are Such Comments Tired & Uniformed?

- For decades much PSE teaching has been done at a distance.
- Over the last decade correspondence teaching has benefited greatly from the internet, the web, and now digital platforms.
- The digital era has meant that all sorts of ‘learning objects’ and interactive tools are available for online and FTF courses.
- It is increasingly rare to find FTF courses delivered without a digital platform or supporting course-management software.
- PSEs once reluctant to invest in state-of-art digital platforms for online programs but FTF instructors/students demanded it.
- Many PSEs and programs have been delivering OL for years.
- The quality of face-to-face teaching can be greatly over-rated.

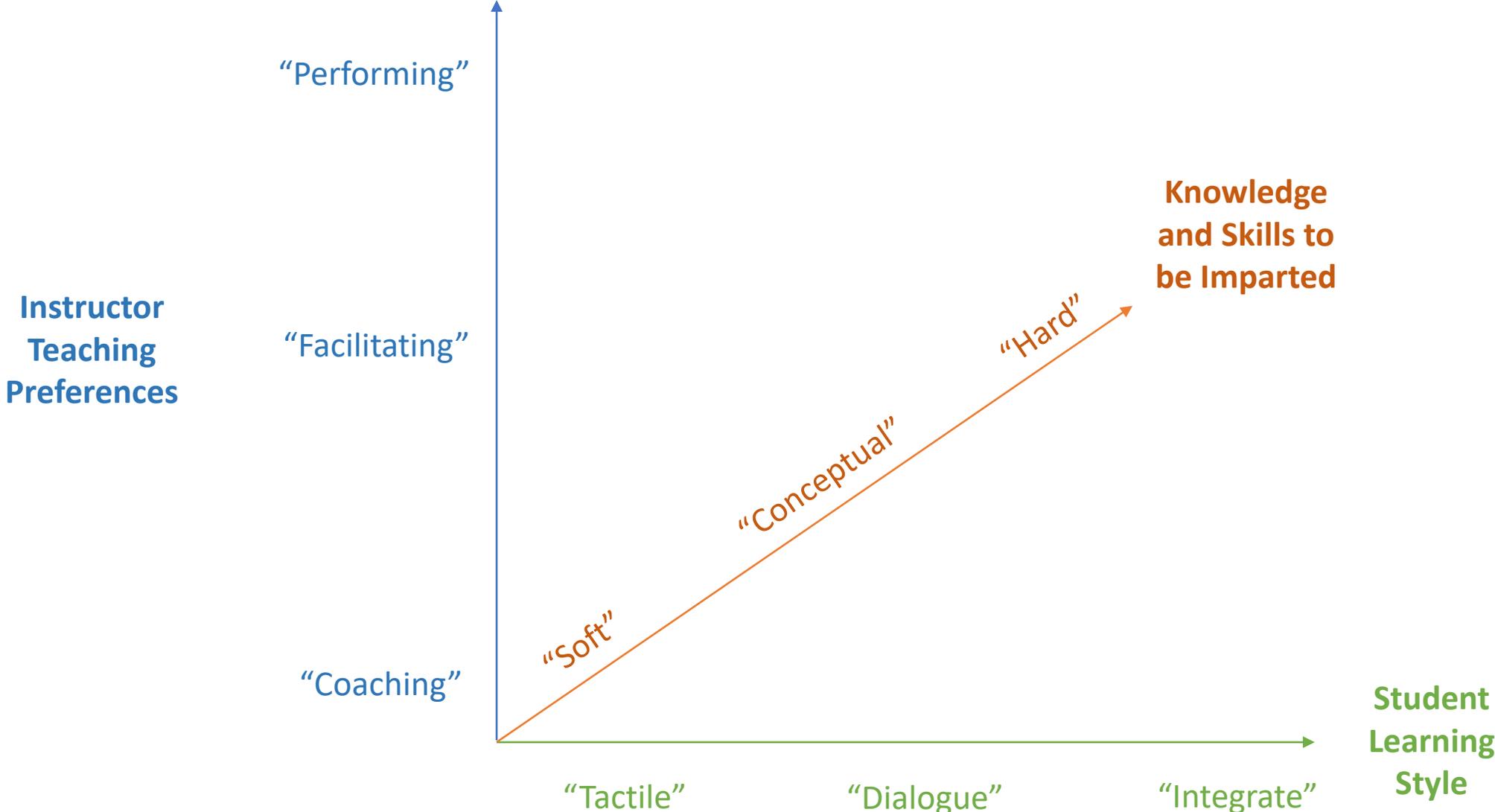
My Contention ... to Start a Conversation

- Teaching online forces instructors to examine pedagogical goals and to re-examine how they approach teaching.
- It requires reflecting on how & where students (whether early on or mid-career) learn *even when* taking FTF courses.
- Better-suited to meet diverse learning & teaching styles.
- Instructors can increase one-on-one contact with students.
- Students can learn to write much better in online courses.
- There are many ways to teach online, but it requires non-trivial front-end investments, looking sideways, and choices.

What is Online Teaching? Many Things!

- Old model: correspondence or web-enabled courses, relying on student self-directed learning.
- Instructor-led courses: but the big divide is whether online is *synchronous* or *asynchronous*, and there can be blends.
- I have taught synchronous courses with students “in the room” & “outside the room” and purely asynchronous.
- They are equally satisfying.
- A menu of learning objects: readings, video clips and web resources, discussion forums (of any size), wikis and collaboration tools, polling, testing, posting observations before dialogues or classes, instructor lectures (long or short), student videos, etc.
- All can be used for online or FTF contexts, but choices need to be made, depending on student needs and pedagogical goals.

Diverse Approaches for Different Needs/Preferences



Experience 1: FTF Professional Integrity Course

- A week-long FTF intensive MPA Campus course
- Case-based course exploring diverse ethical challenges with personal reflective essay due two weeks later
- Combination of pre-assigned readings, brief plenary lectures, table dialogues, plenary discussions, guest speakers, team exercises, and team presentations.
- Great experience but final papers revealed students were learning beyond expectations and in surprising, fundamental ways, and not revealed to the instructor nor to classmates. How to better surface such insight?

Experience 2: MPA Online Policy Course

- Fully asynchronous course for mid-career professionals.
- Fast-paced, demanding & leverages experience of students:
 - Begins with “reading guidance”
 - Followed by ‘hidden’ postings based on readings before small discussion forums are opened up by the instructor
 - Discussion forums animated by questions leveraging pre-posts
 - Discussion closed off by a wrap-up reflecting across the forums
 - Plus weekly “one-on-one” forums with the instructor developing notes
- Efficient, dynamic, “high-touch” & never lose students.
- The big surprise: far better improvement in writing skills!

Experience 3: My Pivot – Coop Debriefing

- Returning class of MPA students from first placements: ordinarily a one-day event with regular and adjunct faculty members and staff.
- The goal is for students to share their experiences, learn from the experience of colleagues, and draw connections to concepts and issues taken up in previous courses and in the semester to come.
- We redesigned the debriefing as an online event: with an easily accessible web site (bios, position summaries, posters, etc.) and a series of plenary and break-out sessions.
- The surprises: colleagues found it superior to previous events and the break-out sessions were more effective. Why? Student online offerings and the exchanges were more professional and intimate.
- Implication: we are entering into an era where online presentation & project management skills will become highly valued skills in the context of distributed workplaces – employers are already there.

Parting Observations

- There are excellent FTF & OL learning experiences, and less than satisfactory ones in both delivery realms.
- What matters is how well most students learn and where they do their real learning, embedding insights & skills.
- Online teaching can be done well, meet diverse needs, and pedagogical learning can transfer to FTF instruction.
- The COVID-19 “pivot” will lead to re-appraisal of how students learn on a significant scale, and improve future FTF & OL teaching, and that will certainly include me!
- I looking forward to your comments and learning from your diverse online experiences throughout the day.

Thank You!
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