

The Status and Problems of Online Teaching of Sino-Foreign Cooperative Education Program during the Pandemic

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Abstract: Because of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, universities in China started a large-scale online teaching campaign. This paper discussed the online teaching practice of a Sino-Foreign cooperative education program in China by reviewing the current status and problems in the implementation. Although online teaching was undertaken as scheduled in the program, yet problems concerning the technology support, the online teaching and learning capability of teachers and students, online service support and the teaching management model were found in the process. The online teaching outcomes didn't fully meet expectations. The paper ended with suggestions on improvement of online teaching in the future.

1. Introduction

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, Sino-Foreign co-operative education programs, as an important component of China's higher education system, have experienced a challenge of online teaching. Below is a review of the implementation of a Sino-Foreign cooperative education program (below abbreviated as “the program”) in the spring semester of 2020 at a university in Jiangsu Province (below abbreviated as “the university”) with regard to the status and problems in the online teaching practice, followed by measures for improving online teaching.

2. The Status in Online Teaching

2.1 Online Teaching Situation

The teachers in the program, after receiving online teaching trainings, were able to conduct online teaching as scheduled. They can freely select appropriate online teaching platforms based on the characteristics and requirements of each course. In order to improve teaching outcomes, many teachers often chose two or more platforms or software for the same course, such as China College MOOC, ZOOM, Tencent Classroom, etc. The teachers also selected the appropriate online teaching modes after considering the different objectives and content of each course. According to the feedback collected by the university, the teaching modes commonly used are: “Recorded video + online interaction”, “Live online lectures + online interaction, and “Student-directed online learning + SPOC” or a combination of the above teaching modes. Course assessments will be done jointly by Chinese and foreign teachers at the end of the semester. The assessment includes evaluation of online learning activities, course paper and final exam. All course papers and final exam papers will be submitted and graded through the distance learning platform of the foreign university.

2.2 Online Learning Situation

According to the feedback, students' overall acceptance of online teaching is good. Both Chinese and foreign teachers provided relatively rich teaching materials and learning resources. Live online lectures were recorded and could be viewed back, making learning more flexible and free from restriction by time and space. Students also felt more relaxed about studying at home and most of them were able to progress and learn at their own pace and in a way with some autonomy. Some students also reported that it was not easy to grasp the main points and difficulties of learning with

only the videos recorded by foreign teachers and MOOCs material, but the Chinese teachers organized the live online lectures as a supplement, which helped students clarify problems encountered in the process of independent learning through two-way interaction between teachers and students. The WeChat and QQ-based groups for each course, which were in use long before the pandemic, continued to be used as a learning community.

2.3 Supervision and Quality Control for Online Teaching

Generally speaking, the university still used the traditional offline supervision method. The only change lied with accessing the online teaching platform to attend classes, and teachers were required to exhibit their preparation and process of online teaching by submitting online teaching and assessment plans for each course, completing daily online reporting forms, and course-related teaching records, etc.

3. The Problems in Online Teaching

3.1 Online Teaching Platform and Course Materials

3.1.1 Problems with Online Network Support

Inevitably, a large-scale nationwide online teaching campaign at the same time will be hampered by the unstable network, network congestion, server crashes, and imperfect functions of the online teaching platform. The current platform cannot meet the needs of teachers and students. Yet, these problems exposed during the pandemic outbreak will point out the direction of improvement for the subsequent construction of online teaching platform for universities.

3.1.2 Too Many Platforms Giving Rise to Heavy Burden for Students

The teachers often chose different platforms to take full advantage of them, resulting in students having to install multiple APPs and register multiple accounts. In addition, students often have to switch back and forth between platforms to complete learning tasks such as online lectures, assignments and tests. The sheer number and inconsistency of courses and platforms adds to the complexity of learning.

3.1.3 The Suitability of Course Resources

Since the beginning of this pandemic, although the Ministry of Education has made available more than 24,000 online courses free of charge, however, considering the characteristics of Sino-Foreign cooperative education program, which adopts and draws on syllabi and curricula of foreign university, most of these online courses cannot meet the requirements, thus Chinese teachers often have to create their own teaching resources or spend a lot of time and effort combining different resources.

3.2 Problems with Online Teaching

3.2.1 Teachers' Misunderstandings Towards Online Teaching and Lack of Skills

Misunderstandings about online teaching exist among some teachers: they assume that online teaching is a simple overlay of internet technology and teaching activities, or take online teaching as delivering live online lectures in real time through the online platform according to the schedule. And some teachers were found not very skilled in the use of different platforms and software.

3.2.2 Instructional Design for Online Teaching to Be Improved

Instructional design is critical to the quality of online teaching. However, teachers are mostly used to designing in traditional offline contexts and online instructional design is still being explored. For teachers in the program, because of cross-border educational context, online instructional design is further complicated by the fact that it involves cooperation with foreign universities and foreign teachers. Chinese teachers need to discuss with foreign teachers about the teaching content, curriculum schedule, teaching modes, assessment rules, and reach agreement on

which teaching platforms to use, etc. They have to work closely together to overcome obstacles caused by time lag, pedagogical philosophies, and different e-learning environments.

3.2.3 Unsatisfactory Teaching Outcomes

According to the interviews with students and teachers, the teaching outcomes did not fully meet expectations because of distraction in the learning process, which was easily influenced by the internet support and the learning environment, and the lack of in-depth online communication. In addition to teachers' lack of familiarity with online teaching and inadequate instructional design, another important reason for unsatisfactory teaching and learning outcomes was the absence of online teaching presence. This was especially true when teachers use teaching modes such as Recorded Video, PPT + online self-directed learning, etc.

Most of the teachers in this program added live online lectures, which was refreshing to students. Yet frequently sending pop-ups and chat messages by students distracted their attention. In addition, due to the difference in network fluency between Chinese and foreign teachers and students, when students ask questions or interact with each other online, they need to arrange operations such as linking up. Network glitches occurred from time to time and interaction was not as effective as expected. These problems led to distractions and made it difficult for teachers to control the teaching pace and coherence of instructional design.

3.3 Problems with Online Learning

3.3.1 Inability in Self-Management and Independent Learning of Students

Students need to have strong self-management as well as self-directed learning skills when working alone online at home. It was reported that 51.8% of students did not feel they had “mastered online learning skills”, while 20.4% had “poor self-discipline”^[1]. This fully illustrates that many college students have weak online learning ability. In this program, especially for the senior students, the foreign university did not postpone the submission of course papers and tests for each course for the pandemic, so students need to have very precise control over their learning progress, however, being lack of a learning atmosphere as they did have in school, some students then forgot to attend class or failed to submit their course work timely.

3.3.2 Increasing Workload on Students

Students generally reported that they felt a bit exhausted when learning online because different teachers use different combinations of platforms and teaching modes, and almost every course left with assignments after each chapter, resulting in a far greater workload for online teaching than offline teaching. Coupled with the fact that in this program, lectures were all delivered in bilingual or English, especially for the senior students, and all tests, assignments, and course papers were required to write in English, so students felt much pressured.

3.3.3 Discrepancy in Learning Outcomes among Students

According to student interviews, some believed that online teaching was less effective than traditional classroom teaching. There were a number of reasons for this, yet one of them was from the students themselves, in which differences in their ability to learn on their own led to discrepancy in learning outcomes. Online teaching just served as the amplifier^[2].

3.4 Online Service Support and Management to Be Innovated

Support services for online teaching include both teacher-oriented online teaching and student-oriented online learning. The key to online service support at the teacher level is to improve their online teaching skills. Student-oriented service support, on the other hand, helps to guide and facilitate students' independent online learning, including both academic support and emotional and social support^[3]. Both online service support for teachers and students were still not strong enough. In terms of teaching and learning management, the university still adopted the model of supervisory visits and checks in offline teaching, only moving from offline to online.

4. Suggestions on Improving Online Teaching

4.1 Increase the Support of Online Teaching Platform and Curricula Resources

The university should speed up establishment of a more stable, efficient and unified online teaching platform, increase bandwidth and server investment, and iteratively upgrade the platform's functions. In this program, they should coordinate the teaching process through online teaching platforms of both the Chinese and foreign university, encouraging Chinese and foreign teachers to construct and maintain course resources in compliance with the syllabi and teaching objectives of the program.

4.2 Strengthen Teachers' Online Teaching Capability to Ensure Teaching Quality

First of all, teachers should continue to receive training on online teaching skills. Secondly, a platform should be provided for all Chinese and foreign teachers in the program to share their teaching modes and successful experiences. Thirdly, Chinese and foreign teachers should be encouraged to work together to explore online teaching models applicable to different courses.

The feedback from this round of online teaching showed that both teachers and students lacked a sense of teaching presence. "Teaching Presence" is reflected in the syllabus, the selection of teaching and learning materials, discussion topics, and instructional design, etc. When providing these teaching resources, the teachers should not only clearly inform students about "what to learn, why to learn, the specific assessment criteria", but also guide them on "how to learn" and provide the necessary scaffolding for learning^[4].

Therefore, Chinese and foreign teachers should practice the problem/task-oriented teaching mode, and guide students to construct new knowledge through self-directed and collaborative learning in light of the students' existing knowledge structure and their online learning features. The big data from the teaching platform should be used to monitor the learning status of each student, making timely adjustments on instructional design and providing personalized help and solutions for students in need. It can significantly increase their sense of presence. Online class communities can continue to be used to provide regular reminders and feedback on learning tasks to reinforce the sense of presence.

4.3 Improve Students' Independent Online Learning Ability

Students can be motivated to learn on their own through appropriate instructional design by teachers. They can be delegated to practice, think and develop their independent learning skills such as time management, information retrieval, research-oriented learning, etc^[5]. Also, courses should be offered to teach the skills of self-directed online learning.

4.4 Complete Online Service Support and Innovate Online Teaching Management

The extra effort and input of Chinese teachers in the implementation of online teaching should be fully recognized. Online service support for students should focus on personalized learning services based on their learning needs and status, and provide them with emotional and social support based on the big data, etc^[6]. The innovation of online teaching management should fully observe the characteristics of online teaching, and not simply copy the offline teaching management practices. The platform teaching data can be used to implement diversified evaluation on teaching workload and teaching outcome, together with the evaluation from supervisor and students.

5. Conclusion

This round of online teaching practice will undoubtedly contribute to the reform of the teaching model in the program. It will also help to reduce the cost of importing high quality educational resources and facilitate innovation of the program.

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