

Facing reality, “Online Fatigue” Is this a real challenge for higher education?

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Introduction

Stanford Academy, Faculty of Music (SFOM), was founded based on the concept of Blended Learning. The SFOM courses were taught in a combination of traditional on-campus teaching, online industry expert masterclasses and the signature Global Experience Workshops (GEX), where students experience intensive, real-life, practical-based learning. SFOM provides a unique proposition of global connectivity of award-winning industry experts through a series of online face to face tutorials and a week-long GEX workshops as a capstone module at the end of every term. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the entire structure of blended learning turned into a full online face to face ZOOM conferencing mode.

Early Stage

In March 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the economy of almost the entire world with all non-essential activities, including the higher education sector, made home-bound instantly. In Singapore, both the private and public education industry rushed into adopting a quick solution of “online learning” pre-maturely. Ironically, many private higher education institutions have the misconception that ZOOM conferencing is online learning.

A research article written by John R. Bryson & Lauren Andres (2020)¹ distinguish between the development of Distance Learning Programmes compared to the rapid adoption of online learning. The article highlights the improvisation of online programme delivery that adopted a quick solution as a prescription to replace face to face classroom teaching, also known as the “buffering effect” (Villar & Miralles, 2020). In the case of many private higher education institutions in Singapore, the buffering effect was blatant where ZOOM classes replaced on-campus learning, period.

The Impact of the “buffering effect.”

Inevitably, students fell into the whirlpool of online fatigue. There are many causes of online fatigue, and nonetheless, ZOOM conferencing is a prominent contributor. Schools that rely entirely on ZOOM, and among other conferencing tools such as MS TEAM, GOOGLE MEET, and the like, would now face a declining student experience and motivation, including dropping out from school. At SFOM, our initial assessments were with the presumption of the unstable quality of the video conferencing, such as lousy audio quality due to the latency, low video resolution, and bad internet connectivity.

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03098265.2020.1807478>

However, Dr Jeffery Hall, in his book, “Relating Through Technology,”, writes “ZOOM is exhausting, lonely, and if you are turning on the camera, you are seen as talking to yourself, and it can be disconcerting.”² With a contrasting view in an empirical study by C. Halupa³ at East Texas Baptist University, United States. Halupa draws attention to the study of the prevalence of technological fatigue in the faculty. Overload usage of technology has led to a decrease in work performances due to the lack of social interaction, multi-tasking and overload of work—there is no direct evidence showing the correlation between learning and working experience. However, fatigue caused by the overuse of technology may directly impact both the physical and mental health of human beings.

Managing Challenges

As a Dean of the music faculty at Stanford Academy, I came to embrace and recognise that the pandemic has been a learning curve and catalyst for building a much more robust and conducive online education. Before COVID-19, our focus was more on developing a virtual learning environment such as a Learning Management System (LMS), Mobile Applications, Online Learning Journals and many more. Although such effort continues to evolve, our focus has since moved towards managing the learning experience by re-visiting the contents of the courses.

Concurrent to the Flex Model by Andy West (2021)⁴, face to face ZOOM sessions are now interactive and engaging as compared to “dry” lectures. Students are assigned missions to be completed before each lesson on the LMS in the form of quizzes and other software, including Rising Software for Theory and Aural studies. Online F2F/ZOOM classes are converted into discussion sessions or in the form of tuition.

Experiential Learning Approach

To reduce online fatigue, SFOM aims to balance the use of technological tools against the learner experience in the form of experiential learning. John M. Beckem and Michael Watkins (2012) write about the immersive learning simulations (ILS), suggesting that the simulation of learning experience is best achieved through the combination of simulation, pedagogy, and fun - to create an engaging and behaviour-changing form of learning.⁵ Adopting a similar model of the ILS, we aim to develop and stimulate learning through practical experiential learning, and increase the learning appetite with an array of activities created in the LMS.

Take our Western Music History course as an example. The course has been re-designed to stimulate the appreciation of music history through a series of interactive programmes. The course - which was once based on immense reading content - is now segmented into components of activities, including weekly listening quizzes where student listen, analyse and

² <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/online-trending-now/zoom-fatigue-what-we-have-learned>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329228644_TECHNOLOGY_FATIGUE_IN_FACULTY

⁴ <https://www.ubss.edu.au/media/2716/what-is-meant-by-blended-learning.pdf>

⁵ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1000091.pdf>

explain the historical contents, topic presentations and the writing of short essays in a weekly forum writing session. The outcome has been positive and students have developed interest the course. Learning based on experience is evidently suitable for online learning.

Live Music Performance courses such as ensemble and performance projects are now developed into producing performances online via social media applications such as Tik-Tok, Sessions and other online programmes. In addition to learning performance-related skills, students learn the necessary skills and knowledge to perform online, including studying the specifications of various online equipment, hardware and software, camera angles, lighting, and acoustic. Students are required to create Vlogs in place of journal writing for their performances and peer reviews. Concurrent to the ILS's Personalized model,⁶ the simulated activities provide an engaging student-centred approach to learning (John M. B. & Michael. W, 2012). Such development strengthens student's communication and presentation skills and, at the same time diverts attention and prevents online fatigue.

The effort does not end with the re-designing of courses/modules. It has indirectly encouraged tutors from all other courses to work together to find synergies and co-relation between them. Tutors gained valuable insights into student performance which in turn contributed to maximising student learning outcomes. The by-product of the chain of articulated work within the faculty has created the automated review and reflective practice of continuous improvement among faculty members. The Journal of Geography in Higher Education, written by Bryson, John R, et al. (2020), explained the natural shifting of the tutor's role in teaching online. The tutor now transforms from one role to another to better support students and the changing teaching environment. The shift from a teacher to facilitator, coordinator, encourager and simulator to engage students in various ways and formats (Panigrahi et al., 2018).⁷

Conclusion

Before the pandemic, we could draw a clear line between Blended Learning, Massive Open Online Courses, and Hybrid Learning. COVID-19, to a certain extent, has erased the need to define the various online learning methods. Over the last 18 months, students have been forced to face their computer screen extensively, and a number of tutors have been unprepared to deliver the courses entirely online. Education institutions improvised lessons online without proper planning, neglecting the need to review their curriculum and pedagogy. As observed the patterns of our students at SFOM demonstrated clearly unmistakable signs of declining interest, motivation, and, most importantly, evidence of fatigue. Students showed signs of losing focus in almost every lesson toward the end of each term over the recent six months after a year of COVID-19. The faculty at SFOM has reviewed and refined how we deliver our courses by re-designing our course content and tutors coordinating and reviewing peer to peer to improve the processes and redefining their role. The question is whether such changes and improvement are sustainable.

⁶ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1000091.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03098265.2020.1807478>



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