

# Challenges Of Transitioning To Online Learning And The Importance Of Social Learning In A Successful Online Experience: A Case Study

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*Around the world, many education courses had to switch from face to face to online as a result of COVID-19. This article summarises the experience of one lecturer in Marketing at an Australian university.*

A review of the history of 'online learning' indicates that technology has always directly impacted distance education. While at the start, the main focus of distance education was the delivery of subjects through a one-way communication, such as recorded lecture videos, as time went by, researchers have addressed the importance of interactivity and social learning among the teacher, learner and study peers in the learning process (Sumner 2000).

As the newest form of distance education, online learning is rapidly growing throughout the world ([Stern n.d](#)). Research forecasts the [online education market to reach \\$350 Billion by 2025](#), although this number is expected to increase due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic has challenged traditional modes of course delivery, with multiple universities and institutions being forced to function online. The shift to online delivery has caused uncertainty in an otherwise structured environment, requiring both students and staff to undergo a significant adjustment.

In order to understand the challenges faced and to obtain an insight into how they were addressed with a particular focus on social learning and interactivity, one project at the University of Adelaide was examined. Gediminas Lipnickas, a University of Adelaide lecturer in 2020 (involved in designing and delivering five subjects in the marketing discipline) as well as the recipient of the 2020 Executive Dean's Award for Learning and Teaching, was interviewed to gain an understanding of these challenges as well as approaches to tackling them. The two-hour interview revealed concerns and four main challenges faced and addressed.

Initial concerns when the transition began were regarding student needs, anxiety, accessibility to staff and course resources, while considering the barriers to online delivery. Access is an essential factor as contact between students and staff becomes restricted, thus requiring alternative solutions ([Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson 2018](#)). Online delivery also removes a sense of community and can be challenging to establish if staff are not experienced in online teaching; thus, it is important to mentor new teachers and re-establish the community environment ([Willis & Ratcliff 2020](#)). Core challenges faced and addressed include course design and delivery, technology use, promoting collaborative learning and a sense of community and getting accustomed to the new normal.

## **Challenge: Course Design and Delivery**

The first challenge was in relation to course design and delivery. Uprooting and transferring what traditionally was a face-to-face course required some thought and planning. Moving the course online meant more restricted access to staff and course resources. The course site needed an overhaul making it convenient, intuitive, and as simple as possible to create a seamless student experience and reduce anxiety.

Some courses required a drastic change in delivery where lectures were replaced by short, topic-specific videos to allow for more efficient learning. Lectures were pre-recorded, with an additional two-hour weekly live Zoom session (drop-in session) with the coordinator to increase teacher presence and discuss concepts, assignments, or other course matters. Some tutorials were recorded to ensure students did not miss out on key information while also enabling them to attend live sessions on various days/times. For courses that were typically run in intensive mode and would take up the whole day, the content was compartmentalised into specific parts of the lecture, for example, the first 2 hours, while activities were redesigned to allow learning and engagement via Zoom.

## **Challenge: Technology Use**

While the transition to Zoom was relatively painless, students had to use a range of software throughout various courses. This required not only teaching methods of accessing the software but also guidance on using it. Something that would typically be shown in class, where students could follow along, was now almost impossible. Most students also studied on a single screen laptop, which made juggling software and instructions frustrating. A new set of materials needed to be designed to accommodate this shift. Short videos detailing instructions for specific tasks were made to show students the most important aspects, while more detailed step by step guides were developed that students could download and follow along.

This also required lecturers and tutors to learn new techniques for engagement, specifically how to utilise Zoom features for enhanced teaching. As students went online, they pulled back, turned their cameras off and were reluctant to engage. Teachers needed new materials and a different way to deliver them that encouraged engagement. Training sessions were held to share engagement techniques among the teaching team as different things worked in various settings. It was important to have a collaborative environment among staff.

## **Challenge: Collaborative Learning and a Sense of Community**

Face to face classes naturally bring about a collaborative environment that is lacking online. Most students indicated that they 'didn't even feel like they belonged to a class or university when delivery shifted to Zoom'. This was perhaps the most important element to tackle as otherwise students felt isolated and alone throughout their studies.

Teacher/tutor presence was important to establish. Introductory videos, drop-in sessions and regular communications (on course-related matters, specifically highlighting due dates, processes, and other relevant information), were all necessary to remind students that they weren't alone and they could always reach out for help. Clear and regular communication with students in an online delivery has been found to ease student anxiety and allow for more effective studying ([Willis & Ratcliff 2020](#)).

In class, students often felt reluctant to engage as Zoom tended to feel official, as it was being recorded most of the time. Activities helped, but what was found most useful to bring students back to lively discussions was making Zoom sessions as casual as possible while staying on topic and the utilisation of breakout rooms. Talking to students about their lives, asking them to show off their pets, and even asking about their work, allowed everyone to relate and humanised the people they saw on the screen. Making the session more casual resulted in higher engagement, more active participation and higher enjoyment.

If classes had tutorials, to make the session more manageable, students were encouraged to create social media groups including their tutorial group members. Typically, students would socialise at university; hence, peer to peer communication and learning was encouraged. Zoom sessions would typically revolve around certain topics, which could limit student interaction. While activities via breakout rooms gave students more time to connect, the Facebook group was a place just for them to ask questions, talk about the course, discuss assignments and support one another. Social media groups played a big role in socialising students in this difficult time and improved their experience. An online forum (Piazza) for 300+ students and staff to enable an easy and efficient way to discuss course-related matters (monitored by seven staff) was also established.

## Challenge: The New Normal

Everyone's lives were impacted to some degree. While the desire to study was present, students often had a lot on their minds. It was important to be flexible during this time. While online delivery grants some flexibility, it is also easy to fall behind, making catching up often stressful. Students were granted extensions and extra support to help them progress. Students who were not engaging or not submitting assignments were contacted to see if there was something that the teaching team could do for them to make their studies easier. Sometimes a reminder was all that was needed.

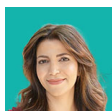
**In conclusion**, while the global pandemic caused an immediate transition of education from mostly physical and social environments to online platforms; collaborative, interactive and social learning remains a crucial part of the learning process, which creates an opportunity for a paradigm shift in developing and adopting more interactive educational technologies that facilitate social learning.



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Bora has over ten years of experience working in academia and industry. Bora obtained her PhD from the University of Adelaide, Australia (where she taught for five years) funded by the ARC Training Centre for Innovative Wine Production, graduated with honours from a MSc in Luxury Goods and Services from the International University of Monaco (Monaco), and has a BS in Bioinformatics from Jacobs University (Germany) which equipped her with strong analytical skills. Dr. Qesja continues her engagement with the industry as a consultant, with the latest project ('Riverland on the Verge') resulting in a permanent Virtual Reality fixture (for promoting the tourism of the Riverland Wine Region) in both the National Wine Centre (Adelaide) and Riverland Wine Centre.



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Samaneh is a self-motivated researcher with a multi-disciplinary background in marketing and tourism management fields. She has a solid experience in applying qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research methods. Samaneh holds a PhD in Business and Management from University of South Australia.