

CHAPTER 4

Online engagement with students during a pandemic: lessons learned in first-year mega psychology classes

Mianda Erasmus

North-West University Mahikeng Campus

Mianda.Erasmus@nwu.ac.za

Christiaan Immanuel Bekker

North-West University Vanderbijlpark Campus

Christiaan.Bekker@nwu.ac.za

Hershel Meyerowitz

North-West University Potchefstroom Campus

27654753@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

In 2020, soon after meeting our first-year students in class, the pandemic obliged us to think of learning and teaching in different ways. As a team of lecturers from three different campuses in an aligned module, we collaborated to use what we had learned before the pandemic to aid us in the online learning and teaching environment, but it was not sufficient. We needed new skills, perspectives, approaches, and technologies to engage the very large (“mega”) classes we teach online, so we attended many professional learning opportunities. We aimed to create quality assessments, maintain effective communication, and foster an ethic of care, while not leaving any student behind. Using Lebrun’s pragmatic learning model, we started developing an environment that offered engagement, support, scaffolding, and personalised learning, while also making provision for

different ways of learning and personal circumstances. Using feedback from students, we continuously improved our approach. It has been a period of professional learning and continuous development for us as a lecturer team to upskill and remain relevant. We have learned that a properly constructed and aligned learning environment is crucial for learning. This professional learning will enable us to craft our future plans to manage mega classes in a blended way. Going forward, we will have tools in our toolkits to create an optimum hyflex/blended learning space for students at the North-West University. We will continue to use technology to create an online space conducive for engagement, interaction, and reflection, but also plan in-person face-to-face sessions in a very different way than before. This will be done to facilitate more discussions and application, making psychology relevant to the South African student.

Keywords: mega class, psychology students, online engagement, professional learning, pragmatic learning model

Introduction and background

The number of students interested in studying psychology increases annually at the North-West University. Students registered for the PSYC111 module (Introduction to psychology) increased by 25% from 2180 students in 2018 to 2734 students in 2020. In person face-to-face interactions involved more than twenty scheduled class times across three campuses, with only three lecturers, making this a challenging module. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, we had already started to move to a more blended approach by building online lessons and content to use with our students, including additional elements such as YouTube videos, journal/newspaper articles, infographics, and sound clips. We also relied on resources made available by the publisher of

the textbook, to aid our face-to-face efforts. We built this with the idea of having it readily available to students outside of class time, or when they needed to refer to something before an assessment.

We were excited to meet the new first years in 2020 and introduced them to online activities and functions on our Learning Management System (LMS). We continually had to offer additional support and guidance to the students in order to help them understand the LMS and online activities. Five weeks into the semester, South Africa went into a national lockdown (Insession 2020; SAnews 2020), having declared a national state of disaster on 15 March 2020, and life as we knew it would change for 21 days. Students vacated their dorms to go on an early recess and lecturers and support staff had to move the required items from their offices to their homes to enable them to effectively function in an emergency remote online learning and teaching environment (Kgwadi 2020a: para. 6 line 2). Little did we know the national lockdown would last for more than 21 days.

Although engaging with students during remote online learning and teaching has been a challenging journey, it also brought valuable growth, insight, learning, and development. In this chapter, we will share our reflection on our journey of professional learning using the critical reflection process of the 'What, so what and now what' as explained by Rolfe *et al.* (2001), while also showing how we used theory to guide our online engagement practices. The 'what' refers to the changed teaching context; the 'so what' refers to what we did to adapt, change, and improve and the 'now what' refers to lessons learned and where to go from here.

Teaching context (the 'What')

In an instant, the teaching context as we knew it, changed. Emails, Skype, Zoom meetings, webinars, training opportunities, and talks between the University Management Committee and relevant members of every faculty, seemed to be never-ending. Panicked parents and students phoned and emailed to get answers to questions that we did not have the answers to. The university released weekly updates to staff and students alike, to help them make sense of the emergency online learning and teaching process that would follow (Balfour 2020: para. 1 line 1; Kgwadi 2020b: para. 2 line 1).

Realising that we could no longer afford to have only a part of our content available online for the students, the lecturer team met daily. It was no small feat to have to adapt and change strategies almost instantaneously. We each brought our ideas and skills to the larger group. We relied heavily on one another's strengths and created the online content necessary to help students make sense of the work systematically and logically. Lebrun's model guided us, as discussed in the following section. Lecturers and students alike had little time to prepare for emergency remote online learning and teaching; and what was possible in the short time is in no way reflective of the usual online courses, but rather it shows the important aspects that are brought about with a sudden change in modality (Engelhardt *et al.* 2021: 3). Through this, we learned to adapt, change, and improve our strategies.

Adapt, change, improve (the 'So what')

In developing the online content and learning environment, we were guided by literature. Although different learning theories could have assisted us with understanding learning, these theories seldom offer a holistic and practical guide to designing learning and learning

environments. With his pragmatic learning model, Marcel Lebrun (2007), using Biggs' (1996) constructive alignment as basis, bridged the gap between theory and practice. He made provision for the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) which has become an integral part of our learning and teaching context across South Africa. Lebrun's model suggests that learning activities should be aligned with the teaching method, the assessment, the objectives, and the tools used. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

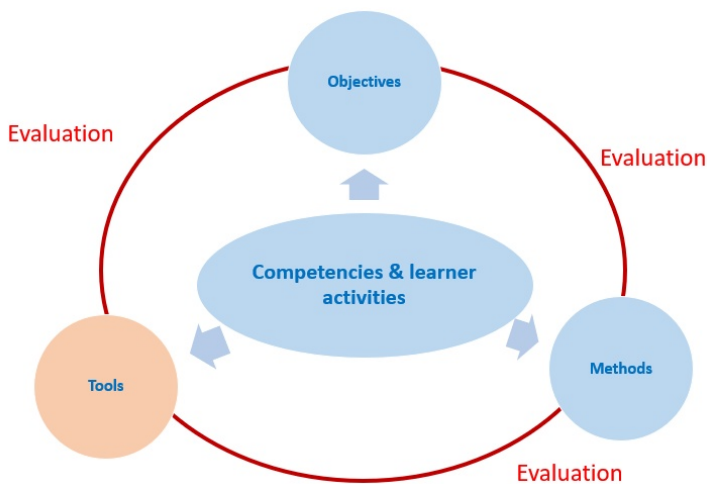


Figure 1: Constructive alignment (Lebrun 2007: 117)

In this alignment (Figure 1), the objectives to be reached and pedagogical methods used, should be aligned with appropriate tools to foster student learning and enable the student to develop competencies (Lebrun 2007). Building on this constructive alignment, Lebrun's model includes 5 important aspects: 1) the *information* provided to students, 2) the *motivation* to get involved in 3) *activities*,

and then 4) *interactive* engagement that leads to the 5) *production* of knowledge. This is also known as the IMAIP model, “I’M An Innovative Professor” model (Lebrun 2007: 120). As shown in Figure 2, this is a continuous loop of input, process, output in the learning process and many theorists’ concepts can be implicated in this process. In addition, Lebrun emphasised the importance of the specific context of the learning (Lebrun 2011: 7).

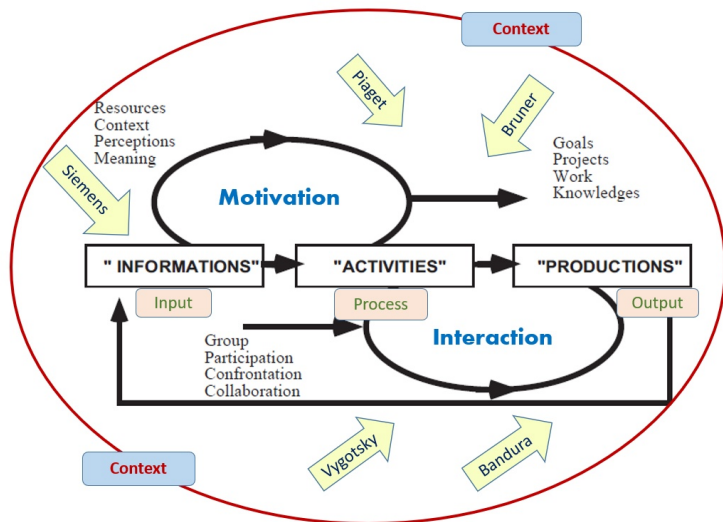


Figure 2: Adapted from Lebrun’s pragmatic pentagonal learning model (2007: 120)

Using this model as a framework, we started adapting our learning and teaching experience to be fully online in April 2020. We created content online, varying between text, video, audio, images, and diagrams aiming for a multimodal learning experience (Bouchey *et al.* 2021: 35-54). The comprehensive lessons on the LMS took students through the content step by step, and outcome by outcome. We made sure to create activities throughout to encourage students to engage with the

information that will help them to achieve the outcomes. They also had the liberty to do this at their own pace within a given period. Students were required to complete in-lesson activities (multiple-choice questions or reflection questions) before they moved on to the next study unit.

We kept in mind that the tools, methods, and assessments needed to be in line with the objectives/outcomes. Even in choosing tools to use, we asked ourselves whether it was adding value to the students' learning or just adding work to keep students 'busy'. We also realised that we did not know all there is to know about the LMS or using online tools effectively. This is also in line with the findings of O'Keefe *et al.* (2020: 2) that educators and instructors need help in understanding and developing effective high-quality online instruction.

We were always aware of the 'context.' We knew that most students initially only had a smartphone to engage in learning, so we needed to ensure that information was accessible and mobile-friendly. In addition, students did not necessarily have data in the beginning, therefore the LMS being zero-rated for most cell phone carriers gave us peace of mind that all students would be able to access the content (Kgwadi 2020c: para. 4 line 2). Later, the university provided data packages to students for learning, and we were able to use external tools, like Flashcards, which helped students master the concepts. We enhanced the quality of the assessments and promoted academic integrity by making use of test banks and randomisation.

To ensure that we did not overwhelm students, we made tutorial videos explaining how to approach online learning, where to find information and indicated what we expected. What we found to be important was frequent, clear communication with students, not only to make sure

that they were on track, but also to motivate, encourage and support them. At first, the interactions and engagements were challenging. Engaging students through technology is different from engaging in contact, face-to-face sessions (Means and Neisler 2021: 23) and we had to adapt our methods. Students did not have data or devices to allow for live online sessions (e.g., on a platform like Zoom). We could only have asynchronous interaction. This was identified as a non-engagement factor (O'Brien and Toms 2008) and limited student engagement via the LMS. By 2021, we realised from students' feedback that there was a need for more interaction and a means to engage with the lecturers and ask questions directly. We subsequently started a weekly live 'question & answer' session on Zoom to allow for this interaction and student engagement. These sessions were recorded and shared on the LMS so that those students who could not attend, could watch them. In addition, we took time in the weekly 'question & answer' sessions to show our commitment and support, bringing in the warmer human element as opposed to the colder screens of online learning.

We constructed the assessment plan in a way that allowed for sufficient scaffolding. Doo *et al.* (2020: 69) found that scaffolding led to improved learning outcomes when compared to learning outcomes where no scaffolding was present. Being first-year students, they were overwhelmed by the workload and the stress of the pandemic made it more challenging. Students had the opportunity to do small engagement activities for learning, including reflective tasks, before engaging in bigger quizzes on the same content and eventually the bigger tests. Students could use the learning platform to help them better understand the content and retain the knowledge for future use (Saye and Brush 2002). Additional support was offered through means

of Supplemental Instruction (SI) sessions where students could ask questions to facilitators regarding the content they did not understand or aspects that were unclear to them.

SI played a vital role in assisting students achieve the learning outcomes. Numerous studies have found that SI is valuable in student experience and performance, especially in large classes (Adebola *et al.* 2020; Bowman *et al.* 2021; Erasmus 2017). This proved to be even more so in these times with no personal contact with lecturers and peers in class. The idea was that the SI leaders, senior students who have completed the module, facilitated smaller groups in which the content was discussed and explained. This too had to move online. At first, it mostly happened on platforms like Telegram and WhatsApp, but later Zoom or Google Hangout, etc. were incorporated. Lecturers had weekly check-ins with these SIs to assist and guide them in this new model. Based on feedback from students, SIs helped, not only with the content but also with the adaptation and motivation during the trying times. The SIs themselves also developed additional skills through this experience.

In terms of support on a smaller, more individual scale, it was important to provide students with adequate support opportunities. The feedback from students echoed what Al-Kumaim *et al.* (2021: 6) and Kalman *et al.* (2020: 3355) found in their studies. Students struggled to adapt to the new way of learning. They experienced work – and information overload and had personal challenges such as insufficient data, connectivity problems, non-conducive learning environments, mental health problems, and/or pressure from family while learning from home. As Adams *et al.* (2021: 7) suggested, we learned in this period that caring for students goes beyond understanding their

difficult circumstances. It also included the effort that went into providing the module content in a better way, the scaffolded assessment, the communication plan, and the overall institutional and managerial support. In addition to creating quick links on the LMS site to support pages offered by the university, we also created “TUF”: The Ultimate Fighter Toolkit that provided tips on online learning and ways to stay motivated, which was also suggested later in the work of O’Keefe *et al.* (2020: 9). Despite these efforts, we still heard sad stories, for example, students not owning an appropriate smartphone and having to borrow one from a neighbour for a few hours a day to study, or a student sharing a three-room shack with nine family members and struggling to focus on studies. These types of stories necessitated the adoption of an ethic of care in supporting our students.

As part of the university’s commitment to an ethic of care (North-West University 2019), no students were to be left behind. We therefore had to identify at-risk students using the available information. At-risk students can be defined as students who are likely to fail or have not had the opportunity to engage with online learning, due to various contextual factors. Monitoring the frequency of students’ logging in to the LMS, and their progress in completing assessments, we were able to determine which students were at-risk and we reached out to them using email. We extended an invite to them to explain why they were unable to complete the work or why they had not been engaging with content. Being guided by theory and feedback from our students helped us to create a more engaging online environment that would lead to better student well-being and success. It also forced us to reflect on our own learning and teaching approaches.

Reflection

Professional learning and growth were inevitable. The pandemic forced each of us to change the way we saw learning, teaching, and student engagement. One author with over 10 years of experience reflected that the sudden move to online teaching was overwhelming. Similarly, the second author realised he needed professional learning to adapt. The third author who just started his lecturing career was faced with the curveball of online-teaching instead of in-person teaching. This sudden change challenged us to continuously re-evaluate how we see learning and teaching, student engagement, assessment, and support.

We formed a collegial bond as a module team, and this created an unseen benefit during these challenging times. At the onset of the pandemic, the two more experienced authors attended multiple webinars, workshops, and colloquiums to improve their ability to engage students using the LMS and to improve their technical skills. They then upskilled the third author when he joined the team. This enabled us to use our skills, strengths, and experience to assist one another, grow and develop an engaging learning and teaching environment.

Through our reflections we learned about the importance of student feedback and how understanding their socio-environmental and personal factors can contribute to quality learning experiences and student engagement. By enabling students to have a voice, they were active participants in their learning, and they had the opportunity to engage not only with the content but also with the lecturers and their classmates. This feedback and engagement helped us grow and see where we could improve and provide further support. In this way, our critical reflections allowed us to form a mutual understanding that

working together as a module team, continuously attending professional learning opportunities, and allowing students to be active participants in their learning created a positive online environment that enabled engagement within a mega class, while also promoting student well-being.

Our reflections are supported by the newly suggested model of Al-Kumaim *et al.* (2021) which proposes an integrated conceptual model in teaching practice that focuses on students' sustainable well-being by incorporating personal factors (self-efficacy, self-determination, and self-regulation), technical factors (digital literacy, appealing design, and mobile interactive design) and socio-environmental factors (family support, university support, and emotional engagement) (2021: 11). The use of scaffolding assisted in improving students' self-efficacy. It also assisted in improving self-regulation and self-determination by allowing students to be autonomous and take responsibility for their own learning. The use of online interactive methods such as engaging in-lesson activities and a well-structured LMS assisted students in developing sufficient digital literacy for the module. By adopting an ethic of care, we were able to identify at-risk students and provide them with the necessary information and guidance on university support structures available to them, in this way engaging with them on an emotional level.

Lessons for the future (the 'Now what')

In the critical reflection process, as explained by Rolfe *et al.* (2001), it is important to get to the 'now what' - focusing on how this experience and what we have learned will influence future practices. As Hattie (2021: 14) argues, this experience of instruction during the Covid-19 era, has evidence of aspects that went well and afforded us to rethink and

let go of certain practices that we might have been stuck in. Going forward, we will have tools to create an optimum hyflex/blended learning space for students at the NWU. We will continue to use technology where appropriate, create an online space conducive for engagement, interaction, and reflection, but also plan in-person face-to-face sessions in innovative ways. In this way, we will create a blended, hyflex learning environment (Joosten *et al.* 2021: 17).

One element that has been complicated to implement in psychology undergraduate classes, even before the pandemic, was sufficient time to apply the theory to real life. Long hours are spent in class covering the content and theories resulting in real-life applications lagging. We believe that by effectively using the online space, the in-person face-to-face classes we conduct in the future could be better used to connect theory to practice. Creating a space for students to share their lived experiences would foster a sense of community amongst the class, as discussed by Means and Neisler (2021: 10). Instead of using valuable time with students to repeat content, we will be able to create an improved flipped-classroom approach for optimal learning.

In this chapter, we shared our journey of teaching a mega class during the pandemic, and how engaging in reflective practices assisted us to develop professionally as well as personally. Deeper connections made with colleagues during this time will play a positive role in future collaborations. We no longer function in silos struggling to create learning tasks and assessments, but we have people that we feel at ease with to turn to for help and guidance when necessary. It took a pandemic to help us get back to the basics - building quality relationships with students and colleagues alike! We developed skills to use ICT to reach individual students in mega classes and allowed

students to work through content at their own pace using different approaches to learning. We have learned that a properly constructed and aligned learning environment is crucial for learning.

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