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COVID-19 WAVES

From Face-To-Face Sessions and On-Paper-Based Writing to Online Open and Distance Learning Sessions and On-Screen-Based Jotting

a chapter by

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Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infection caused by severe acute respiratory disease coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Rai et al., 2021). COVID-19 first emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 before it was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 11th March 2020 (Ochani et al., 2021). In Malaysia, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported on 24th January 2020 (Aziz et al., 2020). Since then, Malaysia has experienced three waves of COVID-19 (Rampal & Seng, 2021). As a preventive measure against COVID-19, a series of Movement Control Order (MCO), Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO), Enhanced Movement Control Order (EMCO), Semi Enhanced Movement Control Order (SEMCO) and Full Movement Control Order (FMCO) has been enforced by the Malaysian government starting from 18th March 2020 until 14th June 2021 (Rama Naidu & Chelliapan, 2021) to limit the travel of people, thus minimizing the spread of COVID-19. The National Recovery Plan (NRP) has then taken place starting from 15th June 2021 until 31st December 2021 (Tang, 2021) to allow the country to revive from the COVID-19 pandemic and the people to adapt to the new life and economic status.

The COVID-19 outbreak and the implementation of a subsequent series of lockdowns in Malaysia due to COVID-19 have caused a staggering impact on all sectors including education. Academicians and students of Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) were also affected by the continuous lockdowns in which all the teaching and

learning (T & L) sessions that were previously conducted face-to-face had to be converted into fully online sessions. As for the pre-clinical students of the Faculty of Medicine UiTM, the Year 1 and Year 2 students of the academic session of 2019/2020, 2020/2021, 2021/2022, and 2022/2023 have to undergo either fully or partially online Open and Distance Learning (ODL) during the lockdowns and NRP periods.

Pre-COVID-19 Era: The Implementation of Face-to-Face Sessions and On-Paper-Based Writing

Before the emergence of COVID-19, all T & L sessions for the pre-clinical years of the Faculty of Medicine UiTM such as the lectures (LEC), small group sessions (SGS), practical (PRC) sessions, and problem-based learning (PBL) sessions were fully held face-to-face in the auditorium, SGS rooms and multidisciplinary laboratories (MDL). These face-to-face sessions are considered as a synchronous learning method that allows two-way interactions between the lecturers-in-charge and the students for comments, discussions, and feedback (Bower et al., 2015). Lecturers were able to identify the issues faced by the students while learning specific topics and explain further about the topics for better understanding among the students on the spot.

In addition, paper-based question handouts were distributed to students during the SGS, PRC, and PBL sessions for them to answer or write down important short notes. These handouts were prepared by the administrative staff before being disseminated to students by the lecturers-in-charge during the T & L sessions. Students were given some time

during the T & L sessions to write down their answers on the question papers before the discussions were carried out by the lecturers with the students towards the end of the T & L sessions. Students were then allowed to bring home the handouts for their revision later on before sitting for the Module Progress Tests and the Semester Examinations. The use of paper-based handouts has permitted the students to familiarize themselves and practice writing their answers on paper using the usual pens before entering the Progress Tests and Semester Examinations which were also prepared on paper.

Lockdowns and NRP Periods due to COVID-19: The Implementation of Online Open and Distance Learning Sessions and On-Screen-Based Jotting

When the first MCO was announced by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia; Tan Sri Dato' Haji Muhyiddin Mohd. Yassin, UiTM circulars have also been issued in which all UiTM students were required to return to their hometowns or for certain cases to remain on the campuses and all T & L sessions to be carried out as online Open and Distance Learning (ODL) sessions.

During the earlier series of lockdowns, similar to other faculties in UiTM, the Faculty of Medicine has also delineated some new procedures for the conduct of ODL for all medical students. All the T & L sessions for the pre-clinical students were also obliged to be carried out fully online. Flexible timetables for online classes have been released to prevent prolonged and constant screen time for lecturers and students which may create additional stress among them.

All the LEC scheduled during these periods have been prepared as pre-recorded LEC to accommodate all students including those who stayed in rural and remote areas with poor or no internet connection. In other words, although all the LEC have been scheduled in the timetables, students were able to access and watch the pre-recorded LEC at their convenience, depending on their internet accessibility. During the crisis period, flexibility is critically needed in the learning

process (Annamalai, 2021). These pre-recorded LEC were uploaded by lecturers-in-charge on several online media that they were familiar with such as Microsoft Teams and Microsoft Streams (Figure 1) which are part of Microsoft 365; an official online platform of UiTM, and also on YouTube.com. The pre-recorded LEC allow the students to watch and listen to these lectures repeatedly to gain deeper comprehension of the topics covered (Chung et al., 2020). However, the use of pre-recorded LEC has made the immediate two-way interactions between the lecturers-in-charge and the students which permit the students to enquire about incomprehensible topics to their lecturers, impossible. Students were required to approach the lecturers-in-charge via emails, short text messages using the WhatsApp and Telegram apps, or mobile phone calls if they had any queries on the LEC. This scenario has become a challenge to some lecturers as certain emails and short text messages from the students had been missed out due to the numerous incoming emails and short text messages from various parties as the same communication platforms have been used by everyone during these periods. Nevertheless, despite the delayed discussions and feedback with this asynchronous learning approach, there is time for reflective thinking particularly among the students (Bower et al., 2015). Additionally, students were also given access to the PDF form of the lecture notes which could be downloaded either from UFUTURE; another official online platform of the Learning Management System (LMS) used by UiTM students and lecturers, or Microsoft Teams.

On the other hand, all the SGS, PRC, and PBL sessions were timely performed as scheduled in the timetables on various online platforms, depending on the accessibility and familiarity of both lecturers and students, as well as the directive instructions from the respective Head of Departments. Most of these sessions were conducted using either Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Zoom, or Webex which still allowed the two-way interactions between the lecturers-in-charge and the students. Although there were a few obstacles faced by some students and lecturers in joining or conducting

these on-schedule sessions due to their poor internet accessibility at the beginning, all these sessions generally went well as planned.

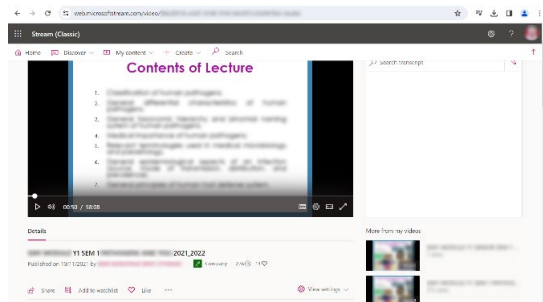


Figure 1: The pre-recorded lectures were uploaded on Microsoft Teams during COVID-19 lockdowns (2021)

During this time, all the question handouts had been converted into soft copies which were mostly in PDF form. These soft copy-formed question handouts have been uploaded on two main online platforms which were UFUTURE and Microsoft Teams. Therefore, students were required to download these soft copy-formed question handouts, and open and answer them on their computers, notebooks, tablets, or any other electronic gadgets. This scenario has led to a new phenomenon in which all the pre-clinical students have slowly gotten into possessing the tablets in which they were needed to use the stylus pens to quickly jot the answers on the PDF-formed question handouts downloaded on their tablets. The tablets were preferred by the students over notebooks or other electronic devices with touchscreen function as the size and weight of tablets are more convenient for the students to bring along wherever they go even within their own houses. Moreover, it is faster to jot down the answers using the stylus pens than writing the answers on paper using the usual pens. Furthermore, all the Progress Tests and Semester Examinations were performed fully online during the lockdowns and NRP periods via UFUTURE while Google Meet and Microsoft Teams were utilized for the proctoring and recording purposes throughout the tests and examinations (Figure 2). The formula to calculate the time allocation for each question for these online tests and examinations was also amended and recalculated to consider some uncontrollable obstacles during the

conduct of the tests and examinations such as the possibility of losing the internet connection and also the prolonged web page loading time. Above all, by the time these lockdowns and NRP periods ended, the majority of pre-clinical medical students had already owned at least two electronic gadgets for their medical learning purposes and one of these devices was the tablet.

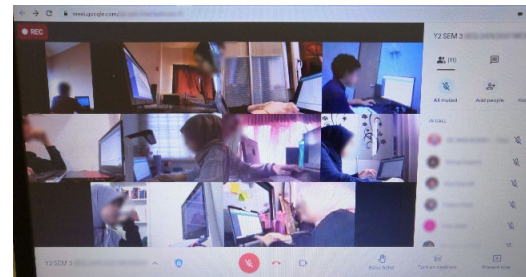


Figure 2: Examinations were conducted online via UFUTURE while Google Meet was used for proctoring and recording these examinations during COVID-19 lockdowns (2021)

Post-COVID-19 Period: The Mixed Implementation of Face-to-Face Sessions, On-Paper-Based Writing, Online Open and Distance Learning Sessions and On-Screen-Based Jotting

Once the series of lockdowns have been lifted by the Malaysian government and the people entered the NRP periods, all the sectors including education have re-emerged by stages and started to resume regular working practices. All UiTM staff including the academicians and students have also returned to the campuses. Most of the T & L sessions like the SGS, PRC, and PBL sessions have gradually been converted back into face-to-face sessions whenever possible while some of them such as LEC remained online for some time due to inevitable reasons like insufficient seats in the auditorium for the students and lack of functioning teaching instruments. In other words, blended learning which involves the combination of conventional face-to-face learning sessions with communication technologies- and internet-based learning sessions (Rahman et al., 2020) has been put into practice.

Although the LEC remained online, the mode of teaching has been shifted from the pre-

recorded LEC to live LEC sessions, mostly via Microsoft Teams (Figure 3). This conversion has allowed instant two-way interactions between the lecturers-in-charge and the students in which the students were able to raise questions regarding the LEC directly to the lecturers-in-charge during the LEC time without delay. At the same time, students still have access to the PDF form of the lecture notes which can be downloaded either from UFUTURE or Microsoft Teams.

As for the SGS, PRC, and PBL sessions, there was a mixed implementation between face-to-face and online sessions, depending on the directive instructions of the Academic Office of the faculty or the convenience of the respective departments. Most of the departments initially conducted these sessions online via Microsoft Teams before slowly converting them into face-to-face sessions at the SGS rooms and the MDL. The reverse transition from online learning sessions to traditional face-to-face learning sessions was made as most of the contents of the medical degree syllabus are still best to be taught in the physical classes which will allow active discussions and also the hands-on practical experiences among the students in the laboratories.

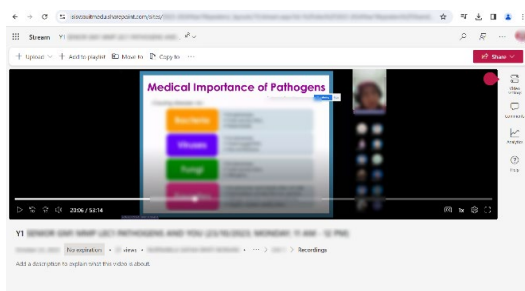


Figure 3: Pre-recorded lectures were replaced with live lectures during the post-COVID-19 period (2023)

In terms of the question handouts, most of them continued to be disseminated to the students in the form of soft copies instead of paper-based handouts as in the pre-COVID-19 era. This scenario happened as the majority of the students seemed to carry along their tablets all the time and they preferred to continue answering the SGS and PRC questions on their tablets during the conduct of the sessions at the SGS rooms and the

MDL (Figure 4). Despite some lecturers have made their efforts by preparing hard copies of question handouts for the students to give them opportunities to practice writing down their answers using the usual pens as part of their preparations before sitting for the Progress Tests and Semester Examinations which have also been converted back to on-paper-based, many students still captured the pictures of these hard copies of question handouts and then answered them on their tablets. This phenomenon showed that the majority of the students still preferred the soft copies to the hard copies of the learning materials due to easier accessibility in downloading and answering the questions.

The phenomenon of using soft copies of T & L materials has now led to a new challenge. The continuation of the use of the soft copies of the question handouts has not only reduced the paper usage significantly but also has lessened the time for the students to answer all the questions completely which consequently has given more time for the discussion between the lecturers-in-charge and the students. However, based on the non-formal observations and feedback from the lecturers who had the opportunities to serve as the examiners for the Progress Tests and Semester Examinations, many students are now having difficulties in finishing answering the paper-based test or examination questions within the allocated time although the formula used to calculate the time allocation for each question remains the same as the pre-COVID-19 era. The most possible reason for this problem is due to the excessive use of the stylus pens on tablets as compared to the use of the usual pens on paper by the students. A pilot study in Norway involving primary school children has demonstrated that pupils who have been used to the on-screen writing method wrote far more words during the on-screen test in comparison with the same group of pupils but were tested on papers (Wollscheid et al., 2016). The loss of marks from the Progress Tests and Semester Examinations among the students due to this issue could lead to inaccurate findings of teaching effectiveness by the lecturers. This problem has become a burning issue among the UiTM pre-clinical

lecturers that is still continuously being discussed to seek effective solutions to help the students overcome it.



Figure 4: Students preferred to continue answering the SGS questions on their tablets during the post-COVID-19 period (2023)

Conclusion

Despite the emergence of COVID-19 which has caused high mortality among human populations worldwide including in Malaysia, it has positively changed from the old perspectives of T & L methods, particularly in the university environment which were mostly face-to-face sessions and the on-paper-based to the new perspectives of T & L approaches via the online ODL sessions and the on-screen-based, especially using the tablets. It is believed that most academicians support the paperless efforts through the “Go Green” campaigns held by various government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and universities including UiTM. However, the issue of a decreased rate of on-paper writing faced by the COVID-19 student batches needs to be seriously looked into in detail, critically discussed, and smartly resolved.

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