Pedagogic considerations for online course migration: Lessons from Queen Mary Engineering School (JEI QMUL-NPU)

The case of English for Academic Purposes/English for Specific Purposes

Meeting Learning Objectives: Teaching English for Academic Purposes broadly follows a pedagogy informed by Communicative Teaching (CL) and Task Based Learning (TBL). This means our schemes of work are scaffolded to meet staged learning objectives as we develop academic communication skills and improved academic literacy. The migration of these CL / TBL approaches to an online platform is, for us, a case of replicating classroom input and providing the opportunity for reaction / response from the students.

Taking a TBL approach makes breaking down these learning objectives into structured ‘set pieces’ a relatively straightforward process. We have tried to mirror the structure of our classrooms as closely as possible by recording short videos in which we present the given target principles of academic communication or language and then, much like in the classroom, we provide examples and analysis and set up production tasks or problem solving activities for students to respond to individually or in groups. As in all course design, we aim to ensure our materials are purpose driven and supported by the opportunity for practical application designed to support progress towards assessment – both written and oral.

With that broad approach in mind, our next key consideration was to foster a supportive student community and ensure a supportive learning environment. Therefore, the following factors were vital as we proceeded to migrate content online:

Student experience: What broader resources, facilities, services and support (e.g. Library, IT, skills development, pastoral support) will be available to students to help them to succeed?

Student engagement: What arrangements are planned for student-student and student-staff interaction, including gathering student feedback, and involvement in student presentations or other oral work?

Information to students: in what ways will information to students about University expectations, and accessing facilities, support and services need to be tailored in view of their location off-campus?

Teacher experience: Timetable / feedback – hours / isolation and support networks – both material and technological / standardisation of materials and delivery

Regional factor – time zones – clustered? – impact of regional groupings – cultural diversity / different platforms / accessibility to online resources?

Assessment: What steps are needed to ensure security of assessment? In particular, what proportion of assessment (formative and summative) will take place under controlled conditions, and how will the academic unit verify the authenticity of a student’s identity when undertaking assessment or submitting assessed work?

How to blend synchronous and a-synchronous course structure?: We are using QM+ as the central hub of our teaching and learning but quickly understood that this platform would need to be supplemented by additional multimedia or social media platforms to increase the avenues of communication and feedback. These applications are used in parallel with each other. We quickly learned what represented the best blend of these supplementary applications and their functions in terms of creating the most flexible and communicative, synchronous teaching and learning experience.

QM+ has a wide range of task functions – multiple choice Q&As / quizzes / short essay answers / voting / recording videos - all of which can be used to mix up the TBL approach.

The teacher is online for the full duration of the session interacting through QM+ Live Chat or through QM+ Forums or (most often) through the supplementary platforms. Teachers can chat via their keyboard or by using short recorded audio messages. The right blend can create a fully interactive experience for both the teacher and students.

We have made a point of keeping pair work and group work as central features of our communicative online classroom - group video chats captured with Kaltura can be uploaded to the students’ MyMedia page and then submitted to QM+ where the teacher can provide feedback.
A-synchronous interaction is also important so emailing absent students or those struggling to adapt to online learning will maintain engagement and attendance. Offline group work / completion of tasks maintains engagement and productivity while also linking sessions together for continuity and clarity. As an extra ‘adhesive’ element we have also used Classroom Assistants to facilitate delivery and record attendance and help deal with tech issues etc. This is highly recommended.

The case of Science and Engineering

Underlying rationale: This is not just about migrating content online, but planning teaching activities online to deliver the module’s intended learning outcomes. This has specific issues in Science and Engineering, especially where experimental teaching is concerned. While there are no blanket recommendations, it is important to focus on the learning outcomes and not on the pre-existing module approaches. For example, some experimental modules focus on off-laboratory learning outcomes, such as data analysis, experimental design and group work, rather than use of equipment. Migration can be attained, therefore, without major issues by maintaining this focus. For those experimental modules focusing on experimental manipulation, a programme-level approach should be considered, which enables the attainment of such learning outcomes at later stages in the programme, once the crisis is over.

Delivery should approximate the student experience that is achieved offline, and improve it, whenever possible: Is it possible to introduce student-centred learning approaches? If videos or recordings from content-focused sessions (i.e. lectures) are available, scaffolded exercises that guide students through interacting with course content in a challenging and exciting way should also be provided. Formative assessment, followed by feedback based on student work, whether in-sessions or outside sessions, should be considered. In this case, it is not needed to assess all submitted work. A representative sample, providing a range of relevant examples onto which build significant feedback can work very well. Using peers to evaluate and suggest improvements to each other’s work is also a powerful learning methodology, as long as some staff monitoring is provided. This is also critical to maintain a sense of community (see below).

Keep a live presence online: The right balance will depend on each module and programme, however, leaving students to navigate through an online module without any live interaction with academic staff, or other students, must be avoided. Email, or even the module’s QMPlus forum, is definitely not a good substitute for offline learning. However, there is a range of applications that will support live sessions, with varying capacities for simultaneous participation, some are embedded on QMPlus, such as Blackboard Collaborate. If live sessions are to be limited, use them for activities beyond just content delivery, such as question and answer sessions, academic tutorials, group discussions, guided exercises and providing feedback. These are also critical to monitor participation and engagement (see below). Design teaching activities that will enhance independent live sessions not monitored by academics, to create/maintain a supporting, learning-focused student community.

Communicate clearly what/when/how/who/why: This is an opportunity to be much more explicit about session or weekly learning outcomes, precise module guidelines and instructions for each session. A proportion of dissatisfaction in the NSS comes from lack of understanding of what is required in each module.

Monitor attendance/participation and engagement: This is critical to early identify students who may not be coping well with the transition. Make sure you strike a good balance, monitoring participation and engagement through approaches embedded in teaching activities within live sessions. There is no need to exceed monitoring over what is available offline: we do not police student thoughts during lectures!

Blend use of applications/Back up: It is unlikely that a single application/software will provide a route to integrate all these aspects of online student experience. Start with what you know, talk to your colleagues, professional services and E-Learning, and be flexible. This may evolve during the semester. Hope for the best, plan for the worst: have an online back up of ALL online content that is required (e.g. files and QMPlus pages, converted to files) ready to be deployed through downloads if your students, or yourself, cannot access the required applications.

Migrate in packs beyond your module: Co-develop your online migration with colleagues in other modules, and professional services wherever possible. Share your experience, positive or negative with others.