

Policy Insight

Online Course Learning in a Time of a Pandemic: The Wuhan Experience

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On January 23, 2020, the city government of Wuhan in Hubei Province, China decided to impose a lockdown to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in other areas of China. The lockdown entailed the closure of roads in and out of Wuhan, as well as the suspension of public transportation. While this happened during the winter break,¹ when students returned to their hometowns or home countries, the indefinite nature of the lockdown posed a question on how the spring semester will be conducted.²

Days before the semester started, following the guidelines set by the Hubei Provincial Government and Wuhan City Government, the Central China Normal University announced that classes will be held online using all available platforms.³ The regular registration process of enlisting students in classes was replaced by forming and joining “groups” in two main messaging applications used in China, with one group per course. Professors instructed student beadles to coordinate with fellow students to ensure all those who needed to take a course was enlisted. In a matter of days, classes were filled, and students were able to complete the registration process. The only remaining task left was the opening of classes.

The spring semester opened on February 12, 2020, with classes (from undergraduate to graduate levels) held online. For this term, I am enlisted in four major courses (political science research methods, topics in comparative politics, local government studies, and contemporary Chinese politics and government) and a required

course⁴ on Chinese society, culture, and history. Each class has its group, and each course instructor has his or her own choice of application to use.

For this policy insight, I share my experience with online course learning or online classes. I begin by sharing the applications we used to hold classes, followed by a discussion on how the classes have been conducted online. I will also identify some of the challenges to online classes, which hopefully can serve as a basis for future policy at the university level, or even at the national level.

Applications

As class activities are all conducted online, several applications were needed to facilitate class discussions and other administrative aspects of class management. These applications are made and developed by Chinese companies, and their functions may or may not be available in other similar applications. For communication and sending other information to students, the two main applications used are QQ and WeChat,⁵ both of which are owned by Tencent. Both applications are more or less similar to Messenger, Viber, or WhatsApp, but with added features.

We use QQ in our major classes because of its classroom feature. A chat group can be converted into a “classroom,” and roles like teacher, class secretary, or student can be assigned to determine the relationships in the group. Some of the classroom group functions include assignment submission, time log for attendance, teacher’s announcement, schedule maker, collection checklist, polling, and document sharing. Through the group, the classroom setting is simulated, and the setup is more transparent as there is a timestamp for submissions and attendance. Although not all of these functions are utilized in every class, its availability makes the application very convenient for both teachers and students. For graduate classes that are held in a seminar format,⁶ scheduled presenters can upload in the documents section of the group electronic copies of books and articles used and the presentation files in advance. During class, presenters can also share their screen for the rest of the class to see, which is crucial because not everyone uses a laptop or computer to attend

the class. With the permission of the teacher and other students, the entire class can be recorded.

Due to instances where the screen sharing function does not work or the speaker's audio output has no sound, some classes opted to use external applications such as Tencent Meeting (腾讯会议)⁷ that has an interface and functionality almost exactly similar to Zoom (e.g., screen sharing, recording, etc.).⁸ The benefit in using this platform to conduct classes is that it was made for large meetings. The video and audio feeds are relatively stable, and the interface is easier to use. Unlike QQ, Tencent Meeting can only be used to conduct the actual class. The absence of essential functions such as holding conversations beyond the actual lecture and sharing files with other students renders the application supplementary.

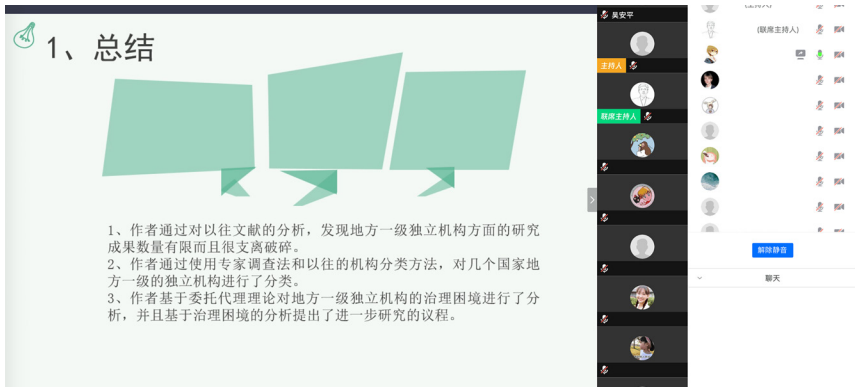


Figure 1. Screenshot of Tencent Meeting application where the presenter is sharing his screen. On the right side is the list of participants and below it is the conversation space.

Weishi (微师), unlike QQ, is an actual online teaching application and a messaging application with a modified classroom function. Its home screen is a virtual chalkboard where the teacher can post and share presentation slides. There is another screen where the teacher can share other materials such as videos or photos. Aside from chat and recording options, there is a recitation function where the teacher can manage class interactions with a click of a button. Students can virtually “raise their hands,” which the teacher can acknowledge. Only then is the microphone turned on to allow the student to speak.

The three applications mentioned are available in China and are in the Chinese language, with no exact counterparts available in the Philippines or elsewhere. As was demonstrated earlier, the use of applications have been vital in teaching, but nonetheless these applications only form one part of online classes. The equally important question is: How are classes actually conducted?

Conduct

I detail below how classes are usually conducted. We follow the original schedule set before the lockdown, meaning that class hours are strictly observed. The classroom setup is simulated using a combination of the three online applications. The teacher provides an introduction, the assigned student presents the topics for the day, and the discussion follows after.

All classes are “voice-only” to save bandwidth and ensure stable connectivity. This means that teachers and students do not have to open their cameras, and not everyone needs to open their microphones. Only those who will speak, present, or answer during recitations can open their microphones. In my experience, I have not seen my teachers and classmates on screen. I only heard their voices.

Starting a class. Classes begin on the dot. Students are given five to ten minutes to log in before the class starts at the specified time. The teacher then begins by welcoming the students. It feels as if we were still inside a classroom, but only from a distance through our devices.

As this is a new model of teaching, not everyone is properly equipped for synchronous online classes. The usual problems that affect our class sessions are the unstable audio connection and screen sharing function, which often cause a ten- to thirty-minute delay.

Attendance. During the first few meetings, one of my teachers tried to check the attendance through a roll call. Unlike in face-to-face classes, doing a roll call online is time-consuming. Fortunately, most of the applications indicate the number and names of the attendees, which make it easier for the class monitor to take the attendance. However, because classes are “voice-only,” there is no guarantee that students are listening attentively to the presentations or are focused

in the class discussions. In my case, graduate classes last between two to three hours. This requires a lot of trust on the part of the teachers. On the one hand, the teacher does not have the same control that would be present during face-to-face sessions. On the other hand, the teacher cannot be too strict, knowing that students are not necessarily in a suitable learning environment.

Recitation and discussion. If recitations are already difficult in face-to-face classes, they are even more demanding during voice-only classes. Calling and recognizing students to recite takes time. Technical issues delay the class further.

To participate in discussions, students can type their answers in the chat section of the screen. Most professors, however, prefer the students to speak. This would require people to turn on their microphones when speaking and turn them off when finished. But some forget to follow this simple rule. One time, when the teacher was delivering his lecture, we heard a mother scolding her daughter in the background; my classmate apologized for not turning off the microphone. In another instance, one student was singing during class; the teacher quipped that the student may continue singing as her voice sounds good, to which everyone laughed.

There are also times when no one responds to the teacher at all. Teachers would then have to ask if the students are still around and are listening to the discussion. One time, the teacher asked a question to which no one replied. He then said in Chinese, “Are you still awake?”

Ending a class. Since we follow the schedule of classes as if it were a classroom, we also end on the dot. The teachers ask if there are questions from the students and instruct them to just post the questions in the group. The teachers thank the students for their attendance and participation, and the call is ended.

Challenges

With the lockdown of Wuhan, holding classes online was the only option. Schools and universities from elementary to graduate levels have shifted to online learning. Institutions in other countries also announced their shift to online mode as community quarantines

and lockdowns were implemented in their respective localities. While it is seemingly convenient, from my experience, there are some challenges in holding classes online.

First is the issue of access to the internet, one of the main obstacles in fully shifting to online learning. Whether synchronous or asynchronous, online learning requires internet connection. Materials are uploaded online or sent via email. Instructional videos on YouTube or other video hosting services have to be streamed online. Even those that can be viewed and used offline still need to be downloaded. However, internet access is not universal. In geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, students do not have stable internet connection at home and often resort to going to computer rental shops. Even in urban districts, not everyone has access to the internet at home; some rely on mobile data for connection. The bottom-line is that the student has to shell out money to cover the cost of accessing materials online.

The second issue is on the infrastructure support for online learning. The integrity of the internet connection is a function of the stability of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. Even here in China (known for its fast internet connectivity and 5G technology), some of my professors and classmates still experience internet cut-offs, weak signal, or worse, no connection at all. This is partly due to the excessive demand for students from all levels conducting classes online. There needs to be a strong infrastructure to carry this demand. This is best illustrated by my teachers' experience. There are three of them in the household. Both the husband and the wife are schoolteachers. Because classes are conducted online, they both use the connection at home to hold their classes. But their child also has to attend his classes. All three of them use the internet at the same time. In large numbers, this could mean heavy online traffic. Thus, without good infrastructure, the connections may collapse, resulting in slow connectivity.

The third is on the absence of a suitable learning environment. A school setup is different from a home setup. This entails extra effort on the part of both teachers and students to use their home spaces as spaces for teaching and learning. As seen in the examples during my online classes, there are household concerns that may affect the conduct of the class, in particular, and learning, in general.

More importantly, the situation is not the ideal one. In normal times, tasks are isolated. Schoolwork is done at school. When at home, the expectation is to focus on household chores or to relax. In the middle of a public health crisis, it is not the same. Attention is now divided between preparing for classes and ensuring one's safety and health. Others even argue that conducting classes while on lockdown should not have even been an option.

Concluding Notes

When the lockdown in Wuhan was lifted on April 8, 2020, there were rumors that face-to-face classes will begin. Everyone was excited to go back to the campus and interact with classmates and teachers. However, by the first week of June, the university announced that the semester will be completed online as instructed by the provincial education bureau of Hubei. Only those graduating at the end of the semester will be allowed to return to the campuses and finish their requirements.

The assessment of my online class experience for the entire semester may be different from others. Compared to face-to-face classes, the quality and level of discussions are different. Participation is not maximized. The overall appeal of the class was less than expected. Understandably, students and professors had to settle with whatever means were available.

The shift to online learning is like moving mountains. There are already existing modes like the "open university" format which could be the take-off point as we consider the policy on conducting online classes and a total shift to this mode under the so-called "new normal." However, we also have to confront the social and economic realities and try to address the challenges on access, infrastructure, and environment.

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Notes

1. Winter break is a monthlong break that coincides with the Chinese Lunar New Year (春节) celebration. It usually begins in mid-January and ends mid-February, depending on the Chinese lunar calendar (农历).

2. Spring semester this year started on the second week of February, or roughly three weeks since the start of the lockdown.

3. “关于2020年春季学期研究生延期开学返校相关工作的通知” <http://www.ccnu.edu.cn/info/1075/29279.htm>

4. This course, entitled “China Panorama,” is required for all international students, regardless of degree and level. There are English and Chinese sections. Because my Ph.D. program is a Chinese program, I am enrolled in the Chinese section of the course.

5. WeChat is the main messaging application used in China. Aside from its messaging function, it also has a wallet function, which is used to pay for any purchase through scanning a QR code. WeChat also has functions linked with third-party applications for train and plane ticket booking, hotel reservation, and other similar functions.

6. A seminar format entails graduate students conducting presentations on assigned topics.

7. This application can be downloaded in Google Play Store or Apple AppStore as VooV.

8. Zoom has been used by many in the Philippines in conducting meetings. However, there have been issues regarding privacy and security that led some others to consider using other platforms such as Google Hangouts.