

**Abstract**

Online teaching is hardly a new feature at Chinese colleges and universities. However, during the COVID-19 epidemic, it has become the main mode of instruction and is being widely used in colleges and universities. The student participation rate and degree of interaction with teachers are very high. After the crisis, are the effects of this large-scale experiment going to disappear, or will some experiences and practices be retained and integrated into traditional classroom teaching?

## Temporary Action or New Model Experiment? Teaching at Chinese Universities in the Time of COVID-19

**Bie Dunrong and Liu Jin**

**W**inter vacation is China's most festive holiday, during which time teachers and students return home from the colleges and universities where they work or study, to reunite with their families to celebrate the Spring Festival. The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic this year disrupted winter vacation plans. In order to contain the epidemic, campuses closed, teachers and students could not return to school, and colleges and universities had to rely on information and communications technology and develop online teaching, to ensure that the teaching load of the spring semester could be carried out as planned.

### **A Large-Scale Online Teaching Experiment**

Online teaching is hardly a new feature at Chinese colleges and universities and has been developed to supplement classroom teaching. However, during the COVID-19 epidemic, it has become the main mode of instruction and has been widely used in colleges and universities. China has the largest higher education system in the world, with 2,688 colleges and universities nationwide as of 2019. According to statistics from the ministry of education, that same year, the number of students reached 30,315 million. After the Spring Festival, colleges and universities hastily developed new teaching plans to be implemented during the period campuses would be closed. Teachers received online training to become familiar with the requirements of online teaching and to align their classes to this new medium.

There are three basic forms of online teaching, including MOOCs, online real-time interactive teaching (ORIT), and video teaching. ORIT is the newest pedagogy to be implemented. Online teaching is now being implemented on a massive scale. Most teachers do not have any experience in online teaching, but have started teaching their courses online with great enthusiasm during the special time of the epidemic. Some foreign teachers who could not return to school on schedule after their vacation back home are overcoming the time difference and carrying out their teaching online from their home countries. Most theoretical courses are being taught online, while that is not possible for courses including practice and experiments. For example, Xiamen University is offering 3,475 online courses. Although, so far, no survey has been made on the quality of online

teaching, the phenomenon is undoubtedly of great significance as a national experiment and ensures that teaching can go on, even at a basic level, during the COVID-19 epidemic.

The participation rate is very high. From their homes all over the country, students access their online classes at the same time and interact with teachers and classmates on learning issues. Statistics show that the average student participation rate in the first week of online teaching exceeded 85 percent, and what is surprising is that online interaction between teachers and students is much more frequent now than ever before. One reason for that may be related to a sense of novelty and appreciation for the new medium among students, since it also fosters networks; another may be the strict discipline promoted by schools.

Online teaching needs strong technical support. Colleges and universities did not have much time to mobilize and prepare themselves; the number of teachers is massive, and students are scattered all across the country. It is therefore unimaginable that online teaching and learning can be carried out smoothly without efficient technical support from modern educational technology centers at colleges and universities. Meanwhile, educational technology enterprises, such as the MOOC platform of China University, Wisdom Tree, Online School, Rain Classroom, Tencent Class, and more, are also providing technology support and teaching resources for online teaching.

Is this large-scale online teaching experiment of higher education successful so far? It is too early to say, since teachers are still insufficiently skilled, and since, for various reasons, about 15 percent of the students cannot participate. Yet, there is no doubt that this is an important emergency initiative for colleges and universities, which may have a significant impact on future developments of higher education after the COVID-19 epidemic.

### Hybrid Teaching

The COVID-19 epidemic will eventually pass, and colleges and universities will return to normal. Are the effects of this large-scale experiment going to disappear, or will some experiences and practices be retained and integrated into traditional classroom teaching? This is a question worthy of attention. The value of the experiment is not only to fill out a gap during school closure, but also to adopt new teaching ideas, methods, and techniques to improve campus education.

Scattered learning leads to wider outreach for universities and colleges. By not being located in the same space, teachers and students are constructing a new kind of learning community through the Internet. The advantage is that the “classroom” expands beyond the limitation of campus capacity, and allows colleges and universities to enroll more students. In 2019, the gross enrollment ratio of China’s higher education was 51.6 percent, which is far behind that of many high-income countries. Meanwhile, the average student enrollment of colleges and universities has reached 11,260. Obviously, with the need to expand access to higher education, the space of traditional campuses has become a limiting factor. Large-scale online teaching and learning catering to a scattered student population can contribute to widening access.

Online interaction helps to make up for the lack of regular classroom communication. A number of studies show that students in East Asian countries tend to speak less in the classroom and interact less with their teachers. But in the context of large-scale online teaching, students are more willing to interact with teachers, possibly because they find it easier, with the sense of distance, to express themselves in the virtual environment. In regular campus teaching, teachers can open an online interactive channel outside of the classroom, in order to provide students with the opportunity to communicate with them and answer all kinds of questions related to their study. Online teaching and open online interaction channels are conducive to stimulating and cultivating students’ autonomy, and encouraging them to develop a sense of ownership and initiative toward their own learning.

School–enterprise cooperation has led to the development of a comprehensive educational model for students at colleges and universities. In the context of this large-scale online teaching experiment during the COVID-19 epidemic, school–enterprise cooperation played a key role, and the technology and services of many educational technology enterprises have won the trust of colleges and universities. The teaching resources of educational technology enterprises can make up for the shortage of teachers and

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curriculum resources. By strengthening their cooperation with related enterprises, colleges and universities are able to provide more abundant, comprehensive, personalized, and high quality teaching resources to their students, including courses, learning materials, interactive communication platforms, and more—far beyond the limitations of campus resources. ▲