

Reflections on post-pandemic university teaching, the corresponding digitalisation of education and the lecture attendance crisis

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Abstract

This short commentary discusses effective university teaching in the context of the pandemic, the corresponding digitalisation of tertiary education, and the recent lecture attendance crisis. By critically reflecting on my own experience as a university educator and as a student in a teacher education course, I suggest that the attendance crisis presents an opportunity to explore effective teaching in a rapidly changing context. To improve our teaching and learning, we can reflect on what students and teachers have gone through and seek to understand who our students are.

KEYWORDS

effective teaching, lecture attendance crisis, post-pandemic university teaching, self-reflection

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last couple of years, most university students and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand have had first-hand experience of the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on their learning and teaching. After most restrictions were lifted in the country in 2022 and universities shifted back to in-person learning, students have (un)surprisingly not come back to class in the same numbers as before. As an educator at the University of Canterbury (UC) in Aotearoa, I recently had a unique opportunity to also be a student by taking a teacher education course in 2022. This helped me realise what it was like to be a student through the pandemic and prompted me to consider what constitutes effective teaching in the context of the pandemic, the corresponding digitalisation of tertiary education, and the recent lecture attendance crisis. In this short commentary, by critically reflecting on my own experience in the teacher education course, I

explore how the attendance crisis represents an opportunity to improve our learning and teaching in a post-pandemic context.

2 | THE RECENT LECTURE ATTENDANCE CRISIS

The general impacts of the pandemic on learning and teaching, especially the corresponding shift to online learning, have been widely discussed (e.g., Cameron et al., 2022; García-Morales et al., 2021; Godber & Atkins, 2021; Selvaraj et al., 2021). While the transition from face-to-face pedagogies to virtual learning provided opportunities for innovative teaching, emerging challenges for learning and teaching have also been highlighted in the literature. The radical digitalisation of education exacerbated educational inequalities; the accessibility and affordability of digital devices, digital competency, reduced

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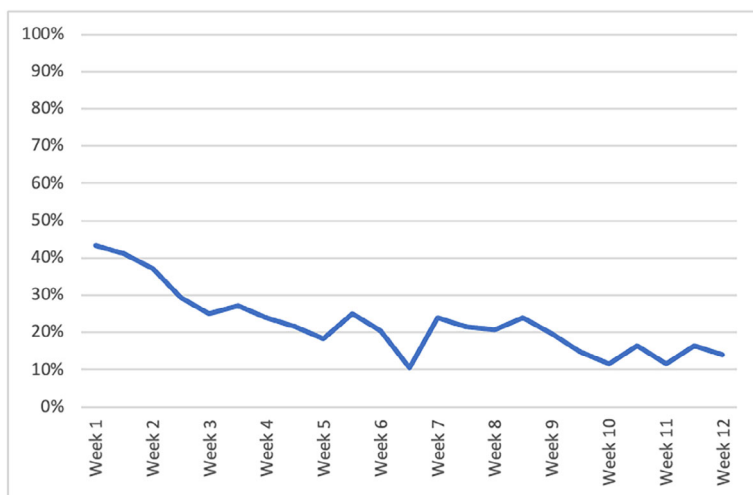


FIGURE 1 Lecture attendance rate (Weeks 1–12).

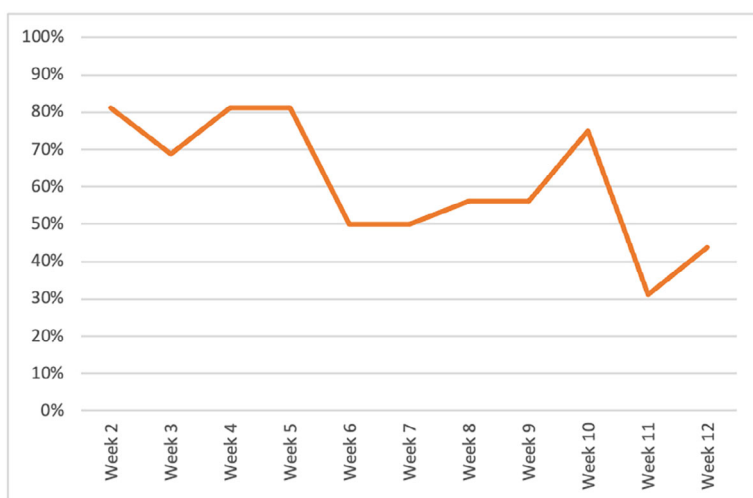


FIGURE 2 Tutorial attendance rate (Weeks 2*–12).

*Tutorials began in Week 2.

student–teacher contact hours and limited consultation opportunities for students became serious concerns, particularly for already educationally disadvantaged students (see, e.g., Sintema, 2020). While lower retention and poorer student performance in distance/online courses had already been identified as a concern (Bawa, 2016), there are some indications that COVID-19 virtual instruction led to worse, and uneven, learning outcomes (Bird et al., 2022; García & Weiss, 2020).

Absenteeism in Aotearoa's primary and secondary schools has been on the increase for several years, with the pandemic exacerbating what is now called a 'truancy crisis' (Henry, 2022). Declining university lecture attendance, on the other hand, is a relatively new phenomenon, coinciding with the return to in-person lectures in 2022. There has been little as yet in the way of academic articles, formal institutional responses or strategic initiatives that attempt to address the issue. However, a few media reports have highlighted the university lecture attendance crisis in Aotearoa and elsewhere (e.g., Holstead, 2022;

Kinash et al., 2021; Readman et al., 2021), and colleagues in geography, business, law and other humanities and social sciences disciplines across Aotearoa have mentioned drastically decreasing lecture attendance in 2022.

Throughout Semester 2, 2022, I happened to have an opportunity to count the number of students attending lectures in a first-year sociology course (200+ enrolments) and to take the roll in the accompanying tutorial. This is a sociology course, but many in the class were geography, psychology, law and other arts, humanities and social sciences major students. As with many other humanities and social sciences undergraduate courses at UC, this course was taught in a '2 + 1' teaching format (i.e., 2 × one-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial per week). Figures 1 and 2 show the changes in both lecture and tutorial attendance rates across the 12-week semester. Overall, the lecture attendance rate declined from 43.3% (Week 1) to 14.1% (Week 12). While the tutorial attendance rate also declined significantly from 81.3% (Week 2) to 43.8%

(Week 12), the attendance rate for tutorials was consistently higher than for lectures.

I agree with Kinash et al. (2021) that this attendance crisis or, more accurately, changing pattern of attendance is 'a sign of the nature of educational change brought forward by the pandemic, which was perhaps long overdue in the higher education sector' (para. 24). The changing pattern of attendance calls for an investigation of university teaching practices in a post-pandemic context and presents an opportunity to explore ways to improve our learning and teaching. The lecture attendance crisis is a clear opportunity because, even prior to the pandemic, there had already been some debate over the effectiveness of the traditional lecture and efforts to design more engaging lectures (Matthews, 2021; Readman et al., 2021). While there are a variety of teaching models present in geography and the STEM disciplines, the challenges of falling lecture attendance are nevertheless present. I am hoping to start a discussion among university educators across disciplines as to the nature and importance of effective university teaching in a post-pandemic era.

3 | CALLING FOR AN INVESTIGATION OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING IN A POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

Good et al.'s (2009, p. 803) broad definition of effective teaching as 'the ability to improve student achievement as shown by research' can be interpreted in various ways. To me, effective teaching requires a student-centred approach, especially in the post-pandemic context in which a significant proportion of students in 2022 seemed to feel disconnected, defeated, exhausted and overwhelmed (Holstead, 2022; Lessard, 2021). This approach revolves around creating an inclusive and collaborative learning environment. In line with some of UC's graduate attributes, effective teaching in Aotearoa contexts could encompass the following: education is Te Tiriti driven; bi/multiculturalism is embraced; differences/different backgrounds and thoughts are respected; students help each other; creativeness and critical thinking are promoted; and students feel a sense of belonging to their learning/university community and ownership of their education.

Some tertiary educations in Aotearoa, such as AUT, Lincoln University and Unitec, had already initiated learning and teaching transformations, with a focus on enabling more collaborative, student centred, blended, interactive, Mātauranga Māori and Pasifika inclusive styles of learning (see, e.g., Marshall, 2011). UC and other

universities have made similar attempts. Nonetheless, the 2 + 1 format (or close variants thereof) is still a common teaching format in humanities and social sciences, including many human geography courses, in Aotearoa. This way of teaching might have been cost-effective, particularly in large first-year courses, because of the greater student-lecturer ratio, and it may also be preferred by some students and lecturers. Yet we have perhaps failed to adapt it to students' emerging needs and expectations in the post-pandemic context. Indeed, the discrepancy illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 between lecture and tutorial attendance rates suggests an opportunity to rethink the value of lecture. To be fair, students probably attended the tutorials to receive tutorial attendance marks, yet this is unlikely to be the sole reason (i.e., returning to class after the social, health and economic impacts of the pandemic has been problematic for students), especially those already identified as vulnerable due to economic, psychological and social factors (see, e.g., García & Weiss, 2020). Some studies (e.g., Selvaraj et al., 2021) found that many students, having experienced remote learning, expressed an interest in more student-teacher face-to-face interactions for improved learning. This is also what I heard from some UC students, especially those who turned up to the tutorials: they are tired of online learning but not interested in lecture.

Despite this evidence of a preference for face-to-face interactions, what students experienced during the lockdowns (and consequent online learning) has perhaps convinced them that, under certain conditions, there is no need to attend lectures in person. The one-way transmission of knowledge can be easily replicated and delivered via the Internet or lecture recordings. Holstead's (2022) survey results (conducted in a large media and communication course in the United States) revealed that students felt that most learning materials, including lecture recordings, are available online and could be accessed from their bedrooms. Why, then, would students choose not to access 'everything' through the internet? A key issue to consider here is that there might be a gap between how students want to learn and how university educators want to, or can, teach. As educators, do we know what our students prefer in this unique post-pandemic education context? A shift in how people communicate in society probably has had a significant impact on how students today want to learn. Many students in this Internet age are used to expressing themselves through social media, which is a popular medium of communication. It was therefore unsurprising to find that online discussion forums were effective for learning because—as is the case for much communication through social media—students had more time to reflect and develop their ideas than is normally the case during

in-person group discussions, and they could interact with others when it was convenient for them. One-way communication media (e.g., television and radio) are no longer popular, and interaction and engagement in both in-person and online classes are expected more than ever. When I walked around and asked some questions even in a large lecture theatre, I always saw some students having a say! I do not want to overgeneralise this point, yet it at least calls for further exploration of the changing nature of students' expectations.

4 | WHAT DOES MY SELF-REFLECTION SUGGEST?

My own experience suggests a cautious shift from one-way knowledge transmission via the lecture format to a student preference for more collaborative, engaging and interactive learning in smaller classes. Bringing students back to class is not the only goal, yet the attendance crisis prompts us to ask an important question: why do students not turn up to in-person lectures if many of them prefer face-to-face over online learning?

If there is no bi/multidirectional interaction (i.e., teacher to students, students to teacher, and students to students) required in a class, students may not consider it worth attending, because they can access the materials delivered to them in more convenient ways, even if their preference is for face-to-face learning. Even when award-winning teachers gave guest lectures on our teacher education course, the one-way format—which at times felt like we were being talked down to—made me feel disconnected, and I wondered if I really needed to be physically present. In this way, inspiring content unfortunately became uninspiring, and I had difficulty at times staying focused. While I have high regard for excellent lecturers, this situation reminded me of Matthews' (2021) and Readman et al.'s (2021) claim of the lecture being ineffective and 'dead'.

Such a one-way knowledge transmission approach often disconnects students from teachers, learning and, most importantly, their classmates. Speaking on behalf of students, Young (2022) points out that 'some students weren't going to show up if their friends weren't there' (para. 1). Research shows that stronger relationships between students—a form of social capital—is beneficial for students' performance, mental health and confidence in their studies (e.g., Holstead, 2022; Yomtov et al., 2015). My observation as a teacher and experience as a student support this point. Early in my teacher education course, we had some group activities and a mini field trip, which were good icebreakers for helping to create a sense of connection and learning community. This was a strong

driver for us to keep attending the class in-person and online; however, as we had a series of guest lectures afterwards, I started to feel disconnected and saw the attendance rate drop (both in-person and via Zoom). Although there may be ways of designing engaging lectures, this can explain why, even prior to the pandemic, some Aotearoa and Australian universities such as AUT, University of Tasmania and University of Technology Sydney had moved away from offering lectures in some courses. For these universities, the rationale for shifting to small classes where more student engagement and active learning were expected was to improve pedagogy and teaching methods (Kinash et al., 2021).

Online and blended learning have many advantages, provided they are designed to be engaging and collaborative. During the Omicron outbreak in early 2022, UC (and probably other universities) recorded most lectures and then made them available, to all students, not just those unable to attend class for health and safety reasons. The issue I identified here is that recording lectures has been deemed the only solution in many courses since the first lockdown in 2020, instead of designing more engaging and collaborative online learning. As Kinash et al. (2021) note, '[t]he lecture is still the lecture, whether on-campus, or recorded and posted online. The lecture does not teach any better just because it is digital' (para. 20). During the semester, when, as a teacher education student, I could not attend or Zoom in the lectures, the recordings were helpful to catch up on what I missed. However, they were of no use when there were interactions going on in the class. It was hard to follow the conversations due to the low volume and audio quality, especially when speakers were not close to the microphone, and this made me feel left out. In my institution, the recorded lecture only captures the lecturer's computer screen and sound from a microphone, which is either attached to the podium or carried around by the lecturer. This does not help students who, due to the COVID-19 response measures, are already feeling disconnected from school and classmates (Lessard, 2021).

5 | IMPLICATIONS FOR UNIVERSITY EDUCATORS

If the lecture is no longer fit for purpose, then what now? I do not simply blame the pandemic, students or lecture recordings, nor do I suggest we buy into a 'command-and-control' approach to bringing students back (e.g., lecture attendance policies). What is clear is that students need to be convinced that there is value in coming to class if educators, students and universities wish to increase attendance. I see no value in lecturing to an

empty classroom. Our teaching pedagogies should adapt to the 'new normal' to improve our learning and teaching. It may be time to consider seminar teaching formats and hands-on high-impact practices such as polling/word clouds, role plays, flipped classrooms, community service learning, learning communities, undergraduate research with faculty, field experiences, et cetera, all of which can help promote whanaungatanga and build a collaborative environment where students can take more active roles, feel empowered and are able to develop a sense of ownership, belonging and connection (see, e.g., Dohaney et al., 2015; Kuh, 2009; O'Steen & Perry, 2012).

Unfortunately, the 'nice-sounding' effective teaching practices discussed here and elsewhere may face (un)known challenges such as teacher resistance to radical transformations. As Mutch (2012) notes, despite some efforts, transformation attempts at institutions can and have faced a great deal of teacher resistance if the transformations are deployed through a top-down approach and are perceived by some as a form of potentially increased workload, further funding cuts and redundancies. Some students also may resist new pedagogies. Thus, despite the potential of effective teaching approaches, university educators cannot choose to implement novel teaching methods freely, as there are many limitations posed by resource availability, institutional culture and regulations, government, cultural ideologies, pandemic disruptions and other external factors which are out of our control.

I do not necessarily believe that innovative teaching methods can magically solve the current lecture attendance crisis or other pandemic-induced challenges, including the extreme neoliberalism in education (see Fleming, 2022). Yet, these unprecedented issues have provided us with an important opportunity to develop effective teaching practices, while critically reflecting on what students and university educators have gone through and understanding who our students are. As my self-reflection on both the sociology and teacher education courses show, students are not withdrawing completely; rather, students seem to be choosing how they learn. For improved learning and effective teaching in geography and other disciplines, further investigation is needed, but we as educators need to ensure that students' voices are carefully listened to, and, most importantly, we need to know who our students are and to understand our rapidly changing learning/teaching contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Associate Professor Billy O'Steen for his mentorship and the great course. The author would also like to thank the Managing Editor, Professor David Conradson, for providing constructive

feedback and valuable suggestions. Open access publishing facilitated by University of Canterbury, as part of the Wiley - University of Canterbury agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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How to cite this article: Uekusa, S. (2023). Reflections on post-pandemic university teaching, the corresponding digitalisation of education and the lecture attendance crisis. *New Zealand Geographer*, 79(1), 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12351>