Covido-pedago-phobia

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Breathlessness, aches and pains, abdominal discomfort and a hoarse voice! These may sound like the clinical presentation of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), but nay! These are the symptoms experienced by the countless health professions education (HPE) teachers who have suddenly been thrust into the online world to engage learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a daunting challenge to HPE teachers, requiring them to gain competence in the delivery of online education almost overnight. We must, however, remember that competence is not proficiency and that well-planned online learning experiences are distinctly different from learning that is rapidly migrated to an online world in response to a crisis or disaster. We need to be consciously aware that what we are experiencing currently is ‘emergency remote teaching.’ Unsurprisingly, this academic upheaval has churned up many fears in teachers, leading to a malady we label ‘covido-pedago-phobia.’

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‘Covido-pedago-phobia’ refers to the fears experienced by teachers when they are compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic to rapidly transition from conventional teaching to an online educational milieu. It is a conglomeration of several minor phobias, which we will further elucidate as we suggest possible approaches to overcoming them. We offer these, in part, as consolation for those timid ‘digital immigrant’ teachers who need to know they are not alone in this predicament.

‘Xenophobia’: a fear of the unknown. From books and blackboards to computers and cyberspace: this abrupt transition many are experiencing can generate insecurity and intimidation akin to the incoherence and discomfiture associated with learning a foreign language. Teachers, who are commonly ‘digital immigrants,’ may have trepidation about instructing ‘digital natives’ in a medium that is all too unfamiliar.

Overcoming this fear requires getting acquainted with how things work in the online environment. We need to understand the similarities and differences between online and traditional pedagogy when exploring the different types of online encounters that can take place with students (eg, synchronous vs asynchronous). Investigating the advantages and disadvantages of each is the best initial foray. Fortunately, there are several resources from which to glean such information before you embark on a hands-on experience.

‘Technophobia’: a fear of advanced technology. Technophobia, perhaps unknown to technophiles, is prevalent amongst HPE teachers. This malady can stymie the effective use of technology through intimidation and lack of confidence. Again, however, there is a plethora of web-based tutorials and training programmes to help technophobic teachers navigate this new world. That said, many find this a difficult phobia to overcome all by themselves, and hence the key to vanquishing this fear is to seek help. Admitting your own ignorance may be critical in making the optimal use of technology to enhance students’ learning.

Letting yourself meander through the technological quagmire with a certain degree of (virtual) handholding, and making mistakes and learning from them will, over time, assuage fears. Teachers should, thus, attempt to go through the required steps themselves (with supervision) rather than just watching what is being done by technological trainers. Playing with the buttons and simply...
experimenting like a child playing with a new toy allows the teacher to identify problems and build confidence.

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‘Social phobia’: a fear of being judged. Teachers often take pride in being both expert teachers and teaching experts in classroom scenarios. This vanity is rattled when, often under duress, they clumsily grapple with gadgets in full view of their students, thus exposing their technological incompetence.

The trick here is to take your students along with you as partners in this journey. Give away authority and concentrate on how best you can contribute to learning. Learning from students allows teachers to understand what students want in order to adapt to their needs. This in no way means that you must relinquish the role of the teacher, but it re-emphasises that we are partners with students in their learning rather than having some magical capacity to imbue them with what we know.

Students will appreciate that their teachers are open enough to admit their lack of expertise with technology if they are willing to go the extra mile to help the students learn the subject. Doing so, furthermore, creates the potential to role model the behaviours we expect of our learners now and in their future careers.

‘Isolophobia’: a fear of isolation. The aloneness created by physical and temporal distancing from students can unnerve even the most ardent teacher. A paucity of interaction and discussion between teacher and students can deprive online sessions of richness, vibrancy and vitality in a way that can make it feel as if the class has lost its soul.

To overcome this, we need to constantly explore how to increase instructor-content-student interconnectedness to ensure that links come alive. Introducing activities like polling, quizzes and games amidst online lectures can establish connectivity with learners. Asking students to voice their queries in the chat box and getting the class representative to act as a moderator will make the teacher more comfortable and connected with their students.

‘Metathesiophobia’: a fear of change. High expectations in a new environment can make even the most intrepid faculty members feel somewhat tentative and uncertain about whether they can live up to the expectations of administrators, students and parents. Universities in which online education has been on a backburner have suddenly woken up to realise that it is now in the forefront of all educational endeavours. This compelling imperative thrust upon those who have not taught online before can be disconcerting to say the least. This calls for more understanding and appreciation from all concerned, which may be more easily said than done.

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It is important, therefore, to give faculty staff some flexibility, to allow them to innovate in the ways they want to reach out to students and to assist them in this transition. With proper support and encouragement, everyone can become familiar with the benefits of taking the challenge created by such changes head on.

The veteran, versatile, virtual teacher is one who invests time in planning, preparing for and practising the delivery of online sessions. This teacher is also one who engages learners actively and acts as a partner in their learning. As such, we need to be aware that meaningfully structured and rewarding online experiences are quite different from the emergency remote teaching emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic crisis we are facing today. This is much more of an opportunity for education leaders than it is a threat because the principles outlined here, which are intended to provide guidance as to how fears of virtual teaching can be overcome, are precisely the principles education leaders were striving to help faculty staff understand long before COVID-19 struck. We are currently observing how many things we thought of as ‘impossible’ prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (clinically and educationally) were actually prevented by perceptual barriers that need not have existed. As such, we need to devise ingenious ways to help apprehensive educators overcome the fears that may be natural side-effects of having to respond to an unprecedented situation and to internalise strategies for better online teaching so that we do not slip backwards into old habits we hope to have overcome by the time the COVID-19 pandemic recedes.

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**DOI:** 10.1111/medu.14193

‘Hands-on’ ideas to provide student-targeted clinical reasoning educational interventions

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In this issue of *Medical Education*, Richmond et al present a realist review of educational interventions aimed at developing clinical reasoning ability amongst medical students. Their efforts provide insight into why different teaching strategies sometimes succeed and sometimes fail. According to Richmond et al, and similar to what has been extensively observed in different fields, specific domain knowledge, self-efficacy and ability to cope with challenge influence learning of clinical reasoning. Teachers should, therefore, create and/or explore clinical reasoning learning opportunities based on these parameters, individualising students’ experiences.

But how can that be achieved (ie, how can we use the review’s results in our daily practice as clinical teachers)? First, let us consider domain knowledge and how it applies to teaching clinical reasoning. We know that knowledge level varies between students at the same point of their academic training and that it is content-specific to the point that a student can know a lot about iron-deficiency anaemia, for example, and little about myelodysplasia-related anaemia. Moreover, we know that past clinical reasoning performance can be a poor predictor of current performance. Therefore, guiding clinical reasoning teaching through assessment of a specific clinical domain for each individual at the moment that teaching occurs is important. That can be challenging, but it is achievable through deliberate discussions about how one reasons through a case presentation.

The suggestion by Richmond et al to use new educational technology offers a promising path for supporting large numbers of learners. For example, e-learning platforms with ‘adaptive environments,’ as the name suggests, can provide activities tailored to each learner’s characteristics or choices. To help students develop clinical reasoning in a simulated scenario, we can design exercises in which students explore and diagnose cases with their performance...