

WHEN NEW ACADEMIC TEACHING STYLE IS THE NORM



by Ir. Prof. Dr Jeffrey Chiang

ADAPTING TO A NEW CONDITION

The nation and the world as we knew it before mid-March 2020, was caught in a turmoil and faced a pandemic crisis due to the widespread infection of Covid-19 virus in humans. Life took a very drastic turn when the Government first announced the Movement Control Order (MCO) from 18-30 March 2020. The MCO duration had since been extended four times.

To mitigate the risk of Covid-19 virus infections, academics, including lecturers, university administrators and students were stopped from entering university premises. Classes, experimental laboratory works and other academic research pursuits came to a halt, with the MCO restrictions imposed on all those working, teaching and studying in universities.

On hindsight, even before the MCO was announced, the SEGi University management did have the foresight to explore the possibility of online teaching in case there was a national lockdown. All its lecturers were required to attend a training session on the use of the Panopto Online virtual platform on 17 March 2020, a last-minute arrangement. Unfortunately my laptop computer malfunctioned and I could not attend the training session.

When classes were held online during the MCO, many lecturers, including myself, chose to use the Zoom meeting platform instead, as it was more user-friendly and free via internet access.

It was truly an eye-opening experience for academics like myself who had not envisaged the need to use online teaching tools. Indeed, the prospect of mastering distance learning techniques was an alien thought for most of us. I guess even the students themselves were bewildered at having to sit at home to learn, instead of attending physical classes in campus.

Anyway, universities around the world were switching to online classes from March 2020. It is most likely that this will be the mode of operation for all universities till the end of the year, if the pandemic is not resolved any time soon.

LIFE AS A VIRTUAL LECTURER

How has it been to be a virtual lecturer since March 2020? I have been homebound since the start of the MCO, except for two occasions when Conditional MCO was announced from 4 May 2020 and I had to go to the campus office to settle some students' assignments and other necessary paperwork.

On a regular basis, I arranged for Zoom meetings with my students on Thursday afternoons to teach classes (on Structure 1) for architectural students. On Wednesdays, I had other Zoom meetings for consultation purposes for Final Year Project civil engineering students, followed by consultation with Integrated Design Project students.

So, this novice in the use of the Zoom meeting platform for online classes is now quite well versed in the process; it's just all part of a normal day now to have face-to-face onscreen time with my students. This unconventional situation has now become the norm in teaching and we are having to learn fast through regular dialogue with or learning from other faculty staff via email and WhatsApp communication. Our faculty members are a co-operative bunch of people who are keen and enthusiastic about learning new things... and this attitude spills over to the students too.

Figures 1 and 2 show my usage of whiteboard tools in Zoom meetings with students, where computerised sketches were done for better illustrations to students in online classes.

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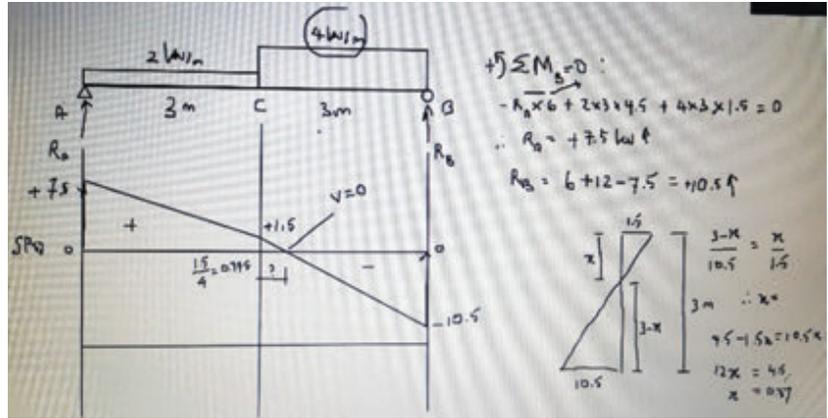


Figure 1: Sketching SFD and BMD in beams

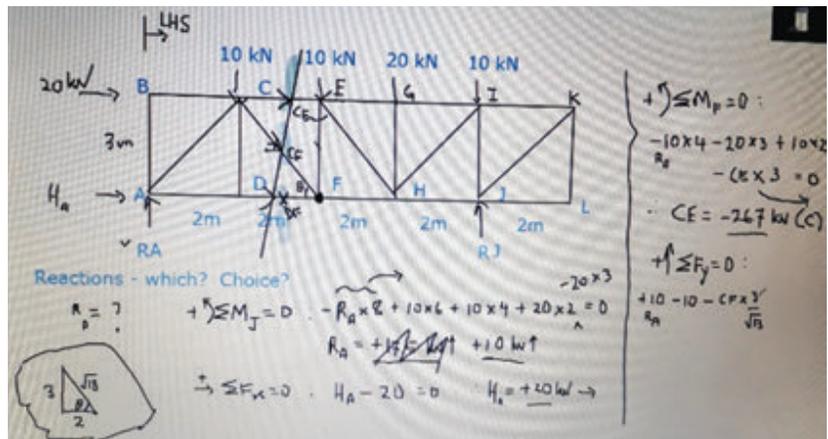


Figure 2: Analysis in truss structures

Besides learning to share Powerpoint presentation slides in online classes, lecturers can also record the online class session on the Zoom platform. The videos can then be uploaded to the university's Blackboard Learning Management System (BB LMS) and students allowed to view and download the recorded videos after the class ends. The use of Blackboard as a teaching tool is also required by lecturers so as to allow students access to all teaching materials to be uploaded at the beginning of the semester. All coursework and assessments are also done online using the Blackboard tools.

The students had their final examinations on 12-22 May 2020, conducted online via the BB LMS. The final papers were set and uploaded to be made available to students on a particular date and time. Students were given a pre-determined time duration of about 4 hours to complete the paper, scan and submit by uploading to the Blackboard. I finished the examination for my students on 15 May 2020 and I downloaded their papers and marked them accordingly.

Overall, it has been an exhilarating experience to learn new things and to adapt to new situations; we pray that life will be peaceful ahead and healthy for everyone, even though we may not go back to the way we were before. ■

Author's Biodata

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