

It was a strange time. In some ways the lockdown crept up on us, there was talk of 'herd immunity'; letting the pandemic take its course. Then, suddenly, we were told to stay home. And if we disobeyed there were stiff penalties. The week before London was pretty empty. No masks yet, they came later.

I was meeting a business associate when the call came. We were in an empty wine bar, my phone rang: "Hi John, Julie from the parish council, we are closing our halls." That was my tai chi class, the next day, stopped in its tracks, writes John Roper

# How was it for you?

Fortunately my students were all understanding and supportive. It led me to wonder how other teachers had managed. There was a perception that everyone was suddenly teaching online but did everyone have the technology? And what about the students, no one asked if they were tech savvy. We all take Zoom for granted now but before lockdown, I admit, I hadn't even heard of it.

So TC&IA decided to ask union members how they coped and how their students reacted. The response was overwhelming and in some ways surprising. And because of the number of replies I will apologise now, if you sent a response but we haven't had room to use it. What I have tried to do is to give you an overall idea of how things were and how they are now.

We asked members to answer a number of questions about what they did, how their students reacted and where they are now.

## What did you do when the first lockdown was imposed?

**This question initially showed how difficult it was to keep going. Teachers had mixed success with some stopping teaching and others just losing contact with students. Although while some students – and teachers – were nervous, others just wanted to keep going.**

**How our students reacted, and bear in mind many of them had their own worries and perhaps fears, about the pandemic, was likely to dictate where we were going to be.**

### Here are some of the responses:

"We informed our students that classes would close until further notice."

"Everyone was understanding and in fact classes had got quieter the couple of weeks leading up to lockdown."

"I sent students regular e-newsletters."

"I ended classes. I started a regular communication – I wrote several papers on aspects of GMC tai chi, circulated it to students and asked them for their thoughts which I gathered and circulated."

"Many students were alarmed and fearful of closure of classes."

"Lost contact with students."

"I largely stopped because all the halls got cold feet about being used at all. Moved to teaching outside on a bit of spare ground by the river Torridge...tried Zoom and it was sort of helpful for the social contact side of things but a dead loss when it came to being able to see what the students were actually doing..so no good for actually teaching."

"I encouraged students to practise at home and keep in

touch, sent a monthly email to everyone with news updates, and links to anything I may have seen on the internet that was relevant to our class."

*"Classes were cancelled without notice and without any possibility of face-to-face communication. We did communicate by email. I did a video of our class warm up exercises and posted this at the beginning but did not maintain this."*

"I first closed my classes in March 2020 and went straight online within a week. Some students found it tough and dropped out but a hardcore of 4/5 stayed with me."

*"It was a difficult and stressful time for everyone but especially for people who were self-employed. My initial experience in Scotland was no state or local government help or support. There was no time to prepare and when the lockdown hit I lost contact with my students."*

"I was a student of tai chi. No one stayed in touch with me." [What? come on guys! ed.]

*"I was working at an elderly day centre and they closed all classes a week or two before the lock down."*

"No, lost touch with most students."

"I spent the first year of lockdown living with family and just taught one indoor student (my mother-in-law!)."

## Did you move to online teaching?

**Another mixed response with some teachers getting straight into online classes while others struggled. The same seems to apply to students.**

"By October I had arranged a booking system to do live classes and started having students book in from there."

*"I began live classes online via Zoom but these quickly lost numbers and I found that it was not particularly worthwhile trying to do a live class."*

"I ran two online Zoom classes a week but these had to cover for half a dozen or more live classes."

*"Thankfully we already had good email contact with everyone and quickly set up a WhatsApp group and moved classes online via Zoom."*

"I supplied my students with a Guide to getting on Zoom and a Guide to working safely on Zoom (which I still use). I changed my way of teaching to suit this type of technology."

*"I bought a camera, eventually a 2nd monitor. It worked*



John Roper



**One solution to lockdown was online video lessons. We broke down our form into individual moves showing lots of detail. We sent these out by email every week. Our students still use them and new students find them a useful resource for learning at home.**

*immediately I contacted everyone who had previously come to classes and we learnt the new technology."*

*"Yes, but many students didn't like online."*

*"I usually had around 25 in the class although the numbers varied between a record 52 in the height of lockdown down to around 15."*

*"Facebook was ideal – hardly any of our students have laptops*

but almost everyone had a smart phone and is on Facebook: we found their younger relatives were happy to set up "mirroring" for them to enable them to watch the live stream on TV."

*"Very difficult for everyone due to space restrictions, camera angles etc."*

*"I was able to "broadcast" from outdoors, with good view for students."*

*"I was able to charge for classes."*

*"No – I found it did not enable me to teach what and how I wanted and was difficult for my students to follow."*

*"Yes very quickly, within days. We experimented with platforms and subscriptions, investing some of the grants into lighting, sound and camera equipment. Where we had total control it was very successful and we are continuing online supporting people who cannot access classes for various reasons. For some clients the free access and the Joe Wicks effect devalued their membership and here student numbers still remain at 40% of pre pandemic levels. Some people eventually gave up exercising and many are now 'shut ins' and do not leave home."*

*"Yes. Bought a new iPad as a camera for Zoom. Also BT discs throughout for WI-FI connection. I also bought Apple AirPods for sound during Zoom."*

**When the first lockdown eased did you start face-to-face teaching straight away?**

**This seems to be a 'bite your arm off' moment for many. Students and teachers were keen to get back to working together though there was still nervousness and, for some, numbers were down.**

*"Yes. Student numbers held up well. I run not for profit classes so outside classes were free and when we moved back inside the numbers were ok for the hall costs."*

*"Yes, initially outdoors. A few students were not able to return, but most were keen to return."*

*"We started some classes almost straight away with limitations of numbers, social distancing."*

*"Yes. With reduced numbers and following hygiene requirements."*

*"As soon as we could we were out in the parks. Classes ran at about 50% of previous capacity."*

*"I started taking cards as well as cash payments as some people were freaky about handling cash."*



*"We eventually started back in a couple of halls. They all had air purifiers provided for them from the local councils."*

*"I had open air groups by the sea most days. At no charge."*

*"Taught individuals at weekends free of charge in a local park. Teaching staff forms helped to maintain a safe distance and avoid physical contact."*

*"When two meter distancing was permitted we recommenced out of doors, under a glazed awning."*

**With all restrictions removed are you back to face-to-face classes? Do you still run classes online?**

**Finally we were back. And in the answers to this question, while many teachers are still, at least partly, online I don't detect an overall enthusiasm. Especially from students. One thing that did come up is the size of classes being smaller.**

*"I much prefer face-to-face teaching as physical corrections and in person demonstration is so important to pass on tai chi properly. Maintaining loyal group of students is a key."*

*"Online teaching can't replace face-to-face teaching. Students learn more quickly and can be corrected more easily face-to-face."*

*"Online is a great addition to other classes and recording them provides a resource that can be sold."*

*"I continue to teach face to face and numbers are coming back."*

*"People expect online classes to be cheaper which makes it difficult to earn a reasonable income."*

*"I began to teach face-to-face, no online classes."*

*"A couple of students requested to continue with online but I have largely given this up as it was not something I enjoyed."*

*"Once everyone was happy to be indoors we trained inside and have continued so far to get back to normality."*

*"I am only doing face-to-face classes. The only difference is that some of my students are reluctant to get involved in push hands and physical contact generally though this is improving."*

I have tried to give a flavour of people's thinking through what was a weird time. I think it reflects the dedication and ingenuity of our members. Some of us teach because we like doing it, for others it is a business. Whatever the reason we did what we could to keep on teaching our arts.

One thing I noticed was the many times teachers mentioned their age. Us oldies are well represented at the teaching end of things. But one I must mention is the teacher who said their classes were now smaller, but they didn't mind as they will be 90 next year. 🍷