

## **FACILITATING INSTRUCTIONAL CHANGE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19**

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### **Introduction**

World over, universities have had to make swift changes to their instructional delivery considering the current pandemic conditions. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a “new normal” in methods of content delivery. Need has warranted rapid changes in traditional methods, from primarily traditional face-to-face to online teaching. As a result, there was significant initial pushback from students as a 100% online curriculum was mandated (Anderson, 2020). To mitigate this pushback, students were given partial room and board reimbursements, tuition adjustments and shortened semesters.

The other hurdle was technology—for the schools and the individual student. While the corporate world was already into digital technologies, higher education seemed to be a step behind (Friend, 2019). It quickly became clear how far behind higher education was. While many colleges and universities offered online classes, they were unprepared to offer EVERY class online, including those requiring labs. There were number of issues: 1. Poor communication and clarity with instruction and assignments; 2. Lack of reliable internet access from home versus the school environment; 3. Reluctance on the part of the student to embrace this new learning medium; and 4. How do instructors meet the learning objectives and also keep students engaged in online classes?

### **Implementation**

While there are innumerable digital tools to make course content available digitally, the more challenging aspect is to keep the students engaged. Human connections and meaningful interactions are an essential part of the learning process even in an online class. It has been suggested that successful transition requires a balance of the following: clarity, structure, accessibility, dynamism, and flexibility (EHL, 2020). Within this LCT group, two different experimentations were implemented to facilitate the transition to online instruction and hopefully, mitigate student concerns.

One example used the story from the book, *Who Moved My Cheese*, with the goal of helping students navigate the rapid change they were about to experience. The story highlighted four individuals who, when facing the exact same problem, reacted in several different ways. Being aware of which character you most resembled, helped students realize that lack of action on their part would not prevent change from occurring. Protesting, not participating would result in the student lagging in their work but would not stop the course being delivered at the pace needed. Zoom was the medium used for faculty to facilitate these discussions and allow students to develop strategies for their own success.

The second example used a Practicum course in Child Development at Alcorn state University. Again, the biggest challenge was: How to deliver to students to fulfill course objectives and yet keep students engaged?

As an online instructor, the need was to function from a place of empathy and compassion in every aspect of online teaching. To make Learner Centered teaching relevant and effective, these strategies were adopted for the Practicum:

1. **Simplification and flexibility of content-** Having flexible deadlines, making content available online, providing students the opportunities to participate in online discussions, online collaborations, virtual sessions etc. Understanding the difficulties students face, challenges with technology, lack of internet, or not able to afford the needed technology.
2. **Providing the needed resources and support:** Instead of asking students to look for content, content was provided to students online so that they would spend less time searching for resources and focus on learning from them.
3. **Weekly check ins:** Each week principal investigator conducted a brief one-hour session to check in with students, allow the students to share and connect with each other on a personal level not necessarily about the course. This was done before the course discussion was initiated.
4. **Ample group projects:** Throughout the course, PI assigned multiple group projects so that there were more opportunities to collaborate on course work and as peers which is a valuable learning opportunity. Students were encouraged to exchange email addresses, and other contact information.
5. **Acknowledging student needs:** Woven into the class were some lighthearted positive sharing to help ease student's angst. Time was taken to check on student wellbeing, overall health, including mental health. While seeing each other in a virtual environment is important, students could choose whether to join by video or audio. They were given extra breaks to step away from technology to keep the balance. Making students feel connected and letting them know that we are all in this together has now created a sense of belonging.

### **Outcome/Advice to Others**

The Who Moved My Cheese experiment was beneficial in many ways: The students identified their book character twin and as such, realized their "tendencies" when faced with change and worked to mitigate their inaction. The book served as a student reference guide to cope with the change around them. Students embraced online learning and used the book tools to get a better learning outcome.

The outcomes of the Practicum course were rewarding. The course objectives were fulfilled which was evident in student course work. The most rewarding aspect was positive students feedback given through their course reflection papers.

This pandemic has required and will continue to require that we think outside the box because educating as was typical in the past is...well, passe.

## References

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