

Five Key Lessons Learned from Faculty and Instructors Moving Their Courses Online as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Around the world, millions of faculty and instructors are now experiencing remote teaching and learning in different ways:

- Some faculty and instructors are using Zoom to lecture and asking their students to send questions by e-mail for response.
- Others are creating student-based project teams and have them present via videoconference.
- Others are designing home-based experiments students can do on their own with materials they likely have in the home or can easily acquire.
- College and university faculty and their support teams are finding ways to engage and involve learners in active and meaningful learning.

Five key lessons learned during what is, for many, a forced experiment.

1. Technology cannot replace the work of a teacher.

Technology – whether synchronous technologies for audio or videoconferencing or asynchronous technologies for anywhere, anytime learning – can support the work of teachers in enabling learning.

Those who claim technology can replace teachers, especially those who see artificial intelligence as being able to do so, misunderstand both the purpose and practice of teaching and learning in higher education.

During the lockdown, the focus across the entire higher education ecosystem is on the effort to discover new ways faculty and instructors can provide more connection, more support, and more presence for their students, not less. This focus highlights the relationship side of instruction and the depth of knowing who their students are and what they need to maximize their learning and as a group experience nurturing learning environments.

2. Engagement is as important as content.

Posting content – readings, videos to watch, audios to listen to, games to play – may be needed, but it is not the essence of what teaching and learning is about.

Content is everywhere and curated content is increasingly useful. But it is what faculty and instructors do with it that matters. When students are assigned a reading, what is expected of them with that material and how can the instructor explore what that reading means to them in meaningful and authentic ways? That is what is becoming clear. Just reading a textbook or a collection of papers and watching a few videos may help understanding at one level, but what

faculty and instructors help students do is explore the “so what?” question. They engage, question, explore the content with students through interaction and challenging students.

3. Design matters.

Sharing a course outline on a learning management system (LMS), together with a curated collection of content, does not make for engaged and effective learning.

It may be all that can be achieved in the short time between the lockdown and delivery, but faculty and instructors know it is not enough. Instructional designers have known this for many years, which is why they design effective learning experiences, based on learning models and theories. What is becoming clear, is some faculty and instructors are unfamiliar with these design principles and practices, though some intuitively “get it”, based on rethinking and reimagining what they do in a normal classroom.

Others are “picking up” ideas from the excellent materials developed by centres for teaching and learning and professional development in colleges and universities. But a great many struggle with learning design and need support.

4. What the learner does between classes is as important as what they do in class.

Scheduled class times and face-to-face (Zoom, Adobe Connect, FaceTime or Google Hangouts) sessions help learning, but significant learning takes place outside the classroom and always has.

Indeed, student-to-student interaction, self-study and the challenge-based work that students do on their own is often more important than the synchronous learning involving an instructor. Whether we are talking about a skill (musicians tell you practice between lessons is what builds capability), understanding or knowledge acquisition, the role of the instructor is one of enabling and shaping learning. The student does most of the work. But faculty and instructors can help shape the design of this, between class learning and dramatically improving learning outcomes.

5. We have to rethink assessment.

Assessing students who are online is difficult.

We cannot assume all students have equal access to online resources or to Internet-equipped devices such as a laptop or tablet. One student completed a twenty-page final year project on a smartphone – it was the only device available to him.

Proctored examinations are taking place, but many faculty and instructors are seeing the flaws in the assessment of knowledge, skills and capabilities with large groups during their online teaching. In particular, assessment of technical competencies in apprenticeship training are challenging, if not impossible, using our standard approaches.

There are other lessons too – for example, online learning is testing the technology infrastructure of all colleges and universities and their staff. LMS providers, such as D2L, Canvas, Blackboard, all are seeing [dramatic increases in utilization](#), with Canvas reporting a tenfold increase in video uploading in the first ten days of the lockdown.

We are also discovering our limitations in using technology. Some systems, like Zoom, are intuitive but others are “clunky” and cumbersome. Not all faculty and instructors are good at creating or editing video material for students. Most do not know enough about the functionality of LMS, and only use a few features.

Not all students are coping well, as a review of student comments in a [recent edition of the Canadian news magazine University Affairs](#) makes clear. Some students are unable to work from home with ease and others do not have any access to the required technology at the needed times. One student had to work in the garden shed in the cold, since other spaces were taken by parents and other siblings working from home.

But the five lessons identified above are key lessons in relation to pedagogy – the key focus here.

The lessons learned during this experience of remote teaching have to be addressed. Just as faculty and instructors learn more about a pervasive world of online learning so too will the entire sector have to adjust. Just like colleges and universities are asking their students to learn new skills knowledge and understanding of how to learn, so too do faculty and instructors and educational leaders.

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