

CHAPTER TWENTY

Navigating Without Knowing

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an educational disruption in 2020 that had a ripple effect on classrooms across the country. The shift from in-person class to the adoption of online learning continues to impact institutions of higher education and, more importantly, the way in which faculty teach and the way students interact and learn. In an accelerated timeframe, faculty reimagined and redesigned their face-to-face course material for delivery online, providing ample opportunities for lessons to be learned and applied post-pandemic. The challenge for many faculty will be learning how to create courses using virtual online platforms that are conducive to building community while still engaging students in learning. Additional aspects peripheral

to content include ensuring that access to material is equitable and that it supports all students including our most vulnerable populations dealing with housing challenges and food insecurity (Hess).

This chapter examines the process and outcomes of how honors college faculty at a southeastern university shifted their introductory freshmen seminar from a traditional face-to-face format to an online one. These shifts included using technological resources, innovative pedagogy, and social media to foster a sense of community within the honors college. The chapter provides several examples grounded in Chickering and Gamson's "seven principles of good practice," which readers can utilize to improve teaching and learning. An overview of the course design using Canvas as the learning management system along with pedagogical examples grounded in the nationally recognized Quality Matters standards of teaching and learning will demonstrate innovative use of software tools that promote student engagement while facilitating learning outcomes. Additionally, examples of social media tools will highlight how faculty can develop community among students while fostering group interaction to complete course content.

SETTING THE STAGE

The impact of the pandemic was far-reaching, and to address curricular challenges, an interdisciplinary team of faculty documented how they transitioned their face-to-face, 5-credit-hour, year-long, required course for 200 incoming honors freshmen to an online platform. The context behind the traditional delivery of the course was that, during the fall semester, each faculty member teaches one section of students. During the fall term, the course contains the foundation for human-centered design, business and mission model Canvas is taught, and wicked problems are selected to be solved by teams of students. A "wicked" problem, according to Rittel and Webber, is an issue that is difficult to solve and usually involves a social or cultural component. The spring semester includes the same student teams continuing to solve wicked problems, but all 200 students attend class in a large auditorium where they pitch their solutions weekly. Student teams are required to meet outside of class to work on solutions while in-class time is designed for instruction, pitch, and relentlessly direct

feedback. To keep pace with one another's instruction, the faculty provide student instruction Tuesday evenings for two hours followed by a 90-minute debrief the following day to address successes, challenges, and pivots. The primary goal was to achieve a high level of social and cognitive presence among the students, which is a component of Garrison et al.'s community of inquiry model. The community of inquiry model includes teaching, social, and cognitive presence, and each element includes the extent to which faculty and students are able to construct meaningful learning through communication, reflections, and discourse in a critical community of inquiry (Garrison et al. 89). Additional outcomes embedded in the course included a focus on students developing leadership capacity and teamwork skills.

WICKED PROBLEM

As fate would have it, the pandemic proved to be the faculty team's wicked problem of how to transition an intensive experiential learning, hands-on course to the online format. Interestingly enough, the answer lay within the very process the faculty team teaches the students. Using human-centered design and Lean LaunchPad as the framework, the faculty team began designing the course. Brown states: "Human-centered design is about cultivating deep empathy with the people you're designing with; generating ideas; building a bunch of prototypes; sharing what you've made together; and eventually, putting your innovative new solution out in the world" (1). To address the wicked problem, the faculty team started the process by incorporating observation and customer discovery so that they could understand what students needed to be successful in an online delivery format. The team began by incorporating discussion forum questions, reviewing student reflection posts, and conducting smaller virtual team meetings. Students' input and suggestions were compiled and addressed during the faculty team's debrief meetings. During the meetings the faculty brainstormed ways in which to design course assignments and activities. The materials were created and posted using a variety of digital tool platforms. The process was iterative and included collecting input from students, ideation, prototyping, and testing the design of the materials week after week.

Throughout the process, it was clear that some of the materials created gaps in student engagement. Employing Chickering and

Gamson's "seven principles of good practice" include 1) encouraging student-faculty contact, 2) encouraging cooperation among students, 3) encouraging active learning, 4) providing prompt feedback, 5) emphasizing time on task, 6) communicating high expectations, and 7) respecting diverse ways of knowing. The instructional team utilized the principles to gauge the methods for delivery and engagement as they apply to student learning. In addition, research has shown that inequities exist around diversity, accessibility, and inclusion. In a report by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Black and Hispanic students had more difficulty fitting the courses in with family/work responsibilities, knowing where to go to receive help, and finding a quiet place to do their work" (Darby 17). These difficulties, coupled with access to the internet, accounted for additional challenges that students faced with the sudden transition to online course delivery.

To further address these inequities, the faculty employed the Quality Matters Standards. Quality Matters (QM) began with a group of colleagues at MarylandOnline, Inc. (MOL), who wanted to ensure a scalable process for providing quality online courses ("Quality"). Quality Matters goes beyond the focus of content: it assists the instructor in designing the course from a student's perspective. For example, standard one promotes inclusiveness through introductions and a course welcome message while standard eight ensures that designers address accessibility and useability (QM Standards). Additionally, the QM rubrics were utilized to frame the course design to include QM's best practices of align, engage, and connect. The faculty team began the first phase by assuring the course objectives were aligned to the assignments, materials, and technology. In the second phase, the assignments, content, and technology were evaluated to determine if they fostered interaction and engagement. Faculty addressed whether the course included enough flexibility in the materials, technological tools, and timeline to account for students' individual needs. With the third phase, the materials were evaluated based on the learning outcomes and course modules offered through the learning management system Canvas, which completed the cycle to ensure the course materials created were designed for student success and achievement. By employing the QM Standards, the instructional faculty were able to create a well-designed course that would increase student interaction and overall engagement in the content.

EXAMPLES

One of the more successful strategies that the faculty team incorporated was the development of an open line of communication with students. To help students foster feelings of social presence and community within the online classroom, student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions are essential (Bickle et al.; Zhan and Mei; Short et al.). The students had become familiar with receiving an announcement each Wednesday following the faculty team debrief. When the sudden transition to online learning took place, the announcement was utilized to communicate the continuity of the instruction plan. The statement included the following: “As of this communication, *we value your level of dedication* to this course and believe that you possess the requisite skills necessary to design your team’s direction. This opportunity calls for you to apply human-centered design thinking and creative problem solving.” The plan outlined new course outcomes, requirements, mode of communication, and activities to promote engagement. Because the plan empowered the students, a level of trust developed within the course community.

In addition, the continuity of instruction plan included the use of social media as a strategy to engage students. Research shows that an asynchronous course increases feelings of isolation and emphasizes the importance of integrating a variety of technologies that increase socialization and community-building activities within an online course (Bickle et al.). An example of the strategy included the following statement and directions:

We have created an Instagram # that we would like you to use when sharing posts that are relevant to our Class, Semester, Team, Projects, Coronavirus, Honors College, and Community.

#ecuhhrs3k20

We will be monitoring the hashtag and look forward to seeing you all in action during this unprecedented time. Look for lots of comments from your peers and instructors. *Have fun with it.*

The activity proved beneficial because it met students where they were. It provided an outlet for students to share what they were feeling and dealing with throughout the pandemic. That instructors consider different contextual variables that affect the design and implementation of instruction as it relates to the individual needs of students is essential (Shin and Cheon). It also allowed the faculty to give the students a glimpse of who they were outside of the classroom. For example, in honor of COVID-19 only having 15 genes, one faculty member posted daily thoughts on Instagram using only 15 words (Figure 1). It was something everyone looked forward to reading throughout the pandemic. Whereas many students would post video clips, some random, others developed a consistent theme and following. For instance, one student posted golf ball putting challenges that he did throughout his home. It was through these small gestures that students engaged the larger community. The students posted multiple videos that ranged from how they created building designs using Minecraft software to showing their study routines, or more importantly what they did during their breaks in study time. These videos provided opportunities for both faculty and students to share in the sadness and laugh at the insanity of what was taking place.

Figure 1. Student and faculty Instagram posts



Additional examples that increased feelings of belonging and helped to deter the realities of isolation were sending students personalized postcards. Some faculty sent their own artwork, whereas others sent pictures of local areas to let students know that even from a distance, faculty thought about their well-being. One student was so elated at having received the card that she posted a video clip on

Instagram singing about how it made her feel. These examples and numerous other stories evolved from the faculty team navigating without knowing. The process formed a distanced community that created memories that will be shared for decades.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

The global pandemic provided faculty the opportunity to navigate the course redesign without knowing the full impact it would have on student learning and engagement. Because faculty approached the problem using human-centered design, the course redesign became an iterative process of prototyping and testing to determine what strategies were most successful. A primary goal was to achieve a high level of cognitive and social presence among students. The faculty's ability to measure student success (Frisby et al.) was through their perceptions of their own learning, which was captured through a qualitative study to examine the holistic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on first-year honors college students. The most notable finding was that the pandemic drastically affected every aspect of students' lives, and many struggled to cope with these changes, which had personal and professional ramifications (Das et al.). Based on the findings, the following recommendations may help increase student cognitive and social presence, thus affecting student achievement.

1. Develop Continuity Plans of Instruction

In 2005 following Hurricane Katrina and Rita, the "Sloan Semester" was developed to meet the needs of thousands of students who did not have access to an education (Lorenzo 5). Similarly, COVID-19 prompted faculty to develop a continuity plan of instruction, which ensured course expectations and outcomes were clearly defined to support student learning and achievement.

2. Foster Communication and Interaction

Emerging technologies offer new options for fostering communication and interaction, which is essential to developing a community of learners in an online environment. Chickering and Ehrmann offer seven principles

for implementing new technologies; most paramount is fostering positive student-faculty relationships. The additional strategies include:

- Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students.
- Use active learning techniques.
- Give prompt feedback.
- Emphasize time on task.
- Communicate high expectations.
- Respect diverse talents and ways of learning. (Chickering and Ehrmann 144)

3. Co-Construct Learning

Much like traditional face-to-face instruction, affording students the ability to lead and co-construct learning experiences is integral to fostering students' sense of competence (Pino-James 1). Research has shown that when learning is meaningful, students are more likely to engage (Fredricks et al. 60). Connecting content to student interests and providing opportunities for students to share their experiences will ensure learning is meaningful. Students should be encouraged to suggest the use of technological tools that are essential in their everyday lives. In response, faculty should model the use of the tools to demonstrate how they value students' input.

4. Provide for Autonomy and Individualized Support

Characteristics most sought after in today's workforce include "creativity, spontaneity, deep understanding, critical thinking and the development of multiple forms of collective intelligence" (Hargreaves 86). Cultivating an online environment that supports learner autonomy and individualized paths creates conditions where students can attain these skillsets. Tremblay posits that an online course should include opportunities for students to

- "know oneself as a learner."
- be "reflective" and have the capacity of learning through action.

- build capacity to “adapt” to the situation and the context.
- and “learn from others.” (Tremblay, qtd. in Eneau and Develotte 5)

To this end, the future of teaching post-pandemic is not just about transitioning courses to an online format but seizing it as an occasion to rethink how to create opportunities for learners to collaboratively design solutions (Akyol and Garrison) and to construct meaning through their online interactions. Faculty can utilize the lessons discussed in this chapter in a variety of ways to promote student learning and engagement; however, faculty will need to consider how the “seven principles of good practice,” such as how to encourage student-faculty contact in an online environment, would impact engagement. Likewise, employing Quality Matters rubrics such as “learning activities and learner interaction” to promote collaboration, reduce students’ feelings of isolation, or increase “learner support” to meet the needs of diverse learners could impact student achievement (“Quality”). The implications of the lessons learned will have far-reaching consequences for faculty and students alike by establishing a sense of belongingness. Our hope is that post-pandemic the examples provided in this chapter will ignite conversations among faculty on ways to meet the ever-changing needs of our student population.

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