Reflections on Pandemic Teaching

Teaching Tips is designed to provide ideas and educational resources for faculty. The focus of this month's newsletter is to share my reflections and offer insights from others related to pandemic teaching. My hope is that you will take some time to think about your own pandemic teaching experience and engage in discussion with colleagues.

According to Columbia University's Center for Teaching and Learning (2021), "taking an intentional moment of pause affords you an opportunity to reflect back on your teaching experiences, evaluate your approaches, and consider how course design decisions impacted your students' learning." Some questions to ponder about our pandemic teaching include:

- What lessons did we learn during remote instruction or from teaching in modified on-campus classrooms?
- Which instructional methods worked well and which ones did not?
- Which instructional technologies supported learner engagement?
- What assessments were used to evaluate your learning outcomes?
- What do you plan to adopt or revise to use again from your pandemic teaching?

Reflect backward as we forge ahead. After more than a year of COVID-19 disruption, higher education has been compelled to question long standing teaching practices (Kachani, Ross, & Irvin, 2021). "This forced experiment in hybrid and online education has opened a wide window into the fundamental ways institutions and instructors think about teaching and learning: how rigor is defined, what role community plays in student learning, whether or not giving grades is always the best way to respond to student work and a host of other previously "normal" teaching behaviors that for many instructors have never been open for questioning" (Kachani, Ross, & Irvin, 2021). *In our quest to get back to "normal" this fall, did we miss learning these lessons?* I encourage you to reflect on the past three semesters and examine how this forced change impacted the way you teach. Schapiro notes, if we return to business as normal we will have wasted an opportunity (2021).

Keep what worked! For most faculty, the pandemic caused major upheaval in our course design and delivery. Faculty were forced to redesign their courses and pushed to use new instructional technology. Many faculty experimented with recording lectures, creating virtual labs, implementing online tests, and using collaborative Google tools for the first time. What worked well for you and your students? Some of these instructional changes took hours

to create and should continue to be part of your teaching toolkit (Saleska & Lovern, 2021). For example, last year, I experimented with flipping parts of my course after students complained of Zoom fatigue. I created numerous mini-online lectures and e-books with embedded videos which were assigned as homework. During face-to-face class meetings, we completed case studies, solved problems, and discussed issues related to the assigned content. I've decided to continue to use some of these captured lectures, e-books, and interactive class activities this semester.

Although students did complain of Zoom fatigue and separation from peers, they also reported several advantages with using this technology such increased flexibility to watch a lecture at a time that best fit their schedules, the ability review parts of a lecture as needed to clarify difficult content, and 'seeing' faculty in their homes which made us seem more real and approachable (Schapiro, 2021). In one of my courses, my colleague and I had guest speakers attend via Zoom. Because of positive feedback, we will continue to invite alumni from distant locations to share their stories about working as travel nurses.

However, I have to wonder, should I offer a Zoom option for students who have to miss class but could attend remotely? Students with excused absences (athletes, ROTC, National Guards), those in quarantine/isolation, those who cannot travel due to inclement weather, parents with sick children…. the list of valid reasons to miss class is endless. *Since we have the technology and have learned how to use it, should we be offering students who need to attend remotely this option?*

Communicate caring! During the past academic year, many of us felt more personally connected to our students. Maybe, this was due to the feeling of 'we are all in this together' generated by shared academic challenges and pandemic experiences (Saleska & Lovern, 2021). We learned how to connect in new ways with our students using video-conferencing for classes, individual appointments, and office hours. Many faculty used class emails, online chats, and text messages more frequently to keep in touch with their students.

During the abrupt pivot to remote teaching in March of 2020, I witnessed the impact on my son who moved home to finish his final college semester. I saw first-hand his frustration trying to complete courses that were not designed to be taught online, deciphering unclear assignments, struggling with internet issues, and being stressed during remote exams. He greatly benefited from those faculty who demonstrated caring in numerous ways such as providing frequent class communication, responding promptly to questions, offering alternative learning options, and being flexible with assignment deadlines. For example, one instructor gave him the choice to post answers weekly to a discussion forum or attend a synchronous discussion moderated by the instructor. During these small group discussions, the instructor was able to get to know the students and understand their learning needs.

As the pandemic is ongoing, we need to continue to demonstrate caring and understanding through effective communication and empathetic actions. One suggestion

includes adjusting to individual student's needs on a case-by-case basis rather than following hard rules (Saleska & Lovern, 2021). Relaxing an attendance policy for a family crisis or creating an alternative out of class assignment are two examples. Last semester, my co-instructor and I decided to 'forgive' two missed homework assignments which is not something I have done in the past. Students will continue to need frequent reminders to stay on track again this semester. Did you know that you can email your class by using the announcement function in EduCat? This feature not only provides an easy reference for students but the messages are archived at the end of each semester. Virtual office hours are another way to communicate caring by accommodating students' complex schedules while also saving travel time and related expenses. *Perhaps, some faculty office hours should be offered virtually without defined times to better meet student and faculty needs.*

Faculty may also benefit from joining peer communities to debrief and share their pandemic teaching experiences (Irvin, 2021). The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is excited to be offering face-to-face New Faculty Network luncheons, IDEA forums, and instructional technology workshops again this semester. Consider signing up to meet new faculty, join a book club, or explore instructional technology. Upcoming workshops include: screen recording with Camtasia, designing interactive exercises with H5P, creating surveys with Qualtrics, using Gradebook in EduCat, and teaching with light boards in Studio 102. To review the schedule and register [visit our website](). Please note, the CTL staff and I are available to assist with your course design and teaching needs. To schedule an appointment, go to [nmu.edu/ctl/appointments]() or email [ctl@nmu.edu](). Feel free to share ideas for future Teaching Tips and suggestions for faculty workshops with me via email: lflood@nmu.edu.

References

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