

Connections and Choices: What will remain in my post COVID courses

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The transition to fully online courses in higher education during the pandemic came with challenges such as technology issues, the need to improvise, lack of time and resources and facilitation of online student engagement (Bryson & Andres, 2020). The 2020 spring midsemester change was fraught with a sense of urgency and fear. Given a summer of professional development courses and shared resources, faculty redesigned their courses. I for example, attended an On Course workshop series with my colleagues with the goal of rethinking and reworking courses. I hoped the activities would help students feel motivated, empowered, confident and competent. Still, the dilemma of students in online classes intensified simply because there was no face to face alternative. Beyond the typical challenges that come with the online environment, the pandemic exacerbated barriers students already faced, making commitment to and engagement in course work difficult as students and faculty remained in survival mode with limited bandwidth.

In the midst of the chaos and controversy, some strategies and supports I employed will remain as we transition back to a more typical schedule. The two key strategies that I intend to maintain as we move forward into whatever the new reality may look like are: creating connections and providing choices. Efforts to build relationships with students as an instructor as well as facilitate engagement between students have always been important. Some of those relationships happened organically for a variety of reasons. Pre-pandemic, whether online or on campus, students had in-person interactions outside of class. Students gathered before and after class, as well as interacted at their tables in class. Before the pandemic, students self-selected into courses taught remotely due to the benefits of flexible scheduling and had some expectation of working independently. Students in the spring of 2020 and in the 2021-2022 academic year did not choose to take online classes; it was their only option. They were disconnected from classmates, but this was due to factors beyond their control. Feeling disconnected from both peers and faculty can be a barrier to learning, making it difficult to connect with the material (Nwabuoku, 2020). Difficulty connecting extended beyond being remote in course work, impacting other areas of life. One lesson learned is that connecting with others takes some creativity and intentionality both to connect with students and to help them connect with one another.

Particularly in the asynchronous courses I was teaching, helping students see me and feel seen was important. I am responsive and have a strong instructor presence online, providing

frequent communication, but more was needed. I did a range of things to increase connection. The first thing I did was to offer virtual office hours (Darby & Lang, 2019) as well as provide global video feedback about common assignments (Faller, 2021). Students could see me and feel less isolated. When we return to in person classes, continuing these practices will allow for flexibility and an opportunity to revisit feedback. The next thing initiated, that I will continue to do is send postcards to students. I called them “postcard pick me ups.” Students received a survey with the following introduction:

This is an optional sign up for a postcard pick me up at some time during the semester. If you would like to receive a postcard with a positive message at some time during the semester, simply fill out your name and address and return this form. If you are not interested, just exit this survey and do not return it.

About 25% of my students opted into the postcard pick me up. They emailed about their gratitude and commented on it in course evaluations. Students noted it was helpful that I was encouraging. They told me they hung the postcards on their bulletin boards as motivators.

The third practice I engaged in to connect with students was doing both an introductory discussion board and an introductory survey. I have always done an introductory discussion board in online classes, but during the pandemic, I asked more targeted questions about goals in the course and proudest accomplishments (On Course, 2020). Referring back to these surveys served as a useful tool to make personal references to students’ experiences. Students were prompted to comment on something they shared in common; this allowed them to recognize similarities and support one another. I also allowed myself to be a bit vulnerable and shared my own responses. In the introductory survey, students responded to questions about parts of syllabus they had questions about and what would help them to be successful in the course. I think having access to the discussion board and survey even in a face to face class could lead to deeper relationships and serve as a memory for key information about each student.

Finally, to connect students with one another, I divided them into success teams (On Course, 2020). Students were accountable for one another and received extra credit for connecting with classmates. Students provided peer reviews of each other’s work and had the option to complete assignments individually or collaboratively. I provided a list of films that could be viewed using Netflix watch parties or other virtual viewing tools. Connection became integrated throughout the course.

The second strategy I will continue is providing choices. So much of life seemed out of control during the pandemic; having some sense of agency was helpful to students. Providing choices as a regular part of teaching practice is something to continue. It resulted in rich, meaningful, personalized assignments. Before the pandemic, there were particular assignments with choices built in. During the pandemic, I provided several options for several assignments. For example, students could choose to respond to the case study most tied to their interests.

When students in my early childhood classroom organization class were creating a classroom design, it could be done using Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Google slides, a Bitmoji classroom, an online planning tool, or drawn by hand and submitted as a jpeg or pdf. Any of these would meet the goal of designing a classroom based on course content, and students had the flexibility to complete the assignment without the format confounding their expression of learning.

Reflecting on my experience, I learned that I thought of building a rapport with students as one of my strengths in the face to face classroom, but it was perhaps inconsistent. Before the pandemic, I made connections by talking to students before class, and they connected to each other through group work and the way they were seated at tables. Rather than rely solely on casual interactions and proximity, I will use tools like surveys, postcards and success teams. Relationship building is so important, and I was letting it happen by accident. The danger is that some students could still fall through the cracks or be left behind. I provided choices in the past but focused on a particular assignment rather than seeing how choice could be provided through a range of assignments with something as simple as more than one option for a case study discussion. The kinds of choices provided matter. Students need options in content, context, and tools (CAST, 2018). As we move forward into the future semesters, my lesson learned is that if I am just as intentional about the things that seem to come naturally as I am about teaching the content, it's likely to be more equitable, memorable, and meaningful.

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