

We're All in This Together: Building Community in a Time of Turmoil

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We're all in this together. How many times did we hear that in 2020? This was a phrase that could either boost confidence or induce anxiety all at the same time. I recall that although it was nice to hear we were all in this together, the phrase also reiterated the fact that we were in a pandemic and isolated from one another on a global level. Society longed for the sense of being "together", and the lack of physical and social community was evident in the world and on our campuses. Our students felt the weight of financial strains from losing jobs, distance from family, and being sent home from campuses that, for many, provided stability and community. They missed out on hands-on learning that enhances their knowledge and boosts their confidence and career-readiness. This was a time of confusion, rapid change, and many questions for faculty and students. The lack of control in all aspects of our lives deepened that sense of loss. My campus community that once felt so supportive was altered in the sense that our physical proximity and connectedness was different. From that moment on, teaching in our traditional ways was a thing of the past, or was it?

Already having some experience with teaching online prior to the pandemic, I felt confident that I could help my students achieve the learning outcomes in any modality. I was fortunate to have online courses that blended nicely with the on-campus labs in my master's program. I was a novice professor in academia. I played by the rules, organizing my content in weekly modules and sticking to the objectives in my courses. Incorporating videos, recorded lectures, supplemental articles, discussions, and asynchronous sessions appealed to all types of learners. That is what I was supposed to do, wasn't it? That is best-practice, right? If I connected to the students enough in those teaching methods, students would feel supported and outcomes would be good. And, theoretically, the objectives were met.

Of course, no one could prepare us or our students for the loss of community that was deeply felt when the shift to online learning occurred. "We're all in this together", took on new meaning for me from that moment on. As an occupational therapy educator, I am conditioned to look at people and communities holistically. Seeing the world and teaching through this "OT" lens fosters a power of adaptability that is beneficial in times of uncertainty. I realized one thing that would help my students learn best and build resilience during this tragic time would be to maintain some sense of routine and community within our new fully online classroom.

Prior to the pandemic, I thought I emphasized community in my teaching whether it was online or in person, but physical proximity played a significant role in all of my labs. Being an

experienced occupational therapy practitioner, I understand the importance of kinesthetic learning and demonstrations that are fostered by being together and learning from one another in the lab. How could I still continue that style of learning with clinical labs during a pandemic? I am sure many of you asked yourself the same question. In order to adapt to the new “normal”, the students and I would have to get creative together.

Moving forward, I did not eliminate the effective video lectures, discussions, and consistent weekly schedules already being used in my lab and online classrooms. I built upon those methods. Upon moving labs fully online, new emphasis was centered on nurturing that sense of community and connectedness in supportive and empathetic ways from a distance. Modifying some individual lab assignments into group assignments really built teamwork and reduced isolation among my students. Our bi-weekly synchronous sessions allowed students time to open up about their losses on a human level while being “together” online. Embracing the new normal, I took the lab off campus and right into my basement. I welcomed the students into my world, and they welcomed me into theirs. Lab activities were redesigned with my children acting as my clients instead of demonstrating activities with a student in a lab. Our homes, apartments, and the great outdoors became our lab. While social distancing, the students practiced clinical skills with roommates, family members or any stuffed animal they had on hand during our synchronous sessions. We adapted together all while learning in a new classroom full of interruptions. Is that a dog barking? We laughed along the way, and we all grew together. I had their back, and they had mine.

The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive! They valued the structure within the courses and appreciated opportunities to contribute and express themselves in creative ways with their new lab partners in new environments. Emails and course evaluations stating that we “didn’t skip a beat” when we shifted labs online really validated that routines were maintained. The students stating that “the mental health support was so appreciated” affirmed they still felt the sense of community even at a distance.

I reflect back on teaching during the pandemic and compare it to looking at a broken mirror. The image in the mirror will continue to be distorted if we only look for the old image. I believe that the mirror was meant to be broken. It is only then that the mosaic can take shape and a new image can appear out of the debris. Our traditional teaching methods of lectures, discussions, and group activities are foundational and need to be part of that image, but we owe it to our students to connect with them on a deeper level to build a community for learning. Adding group check-ins, synchronous lab sessions, and recorded demonstrations to our teaching mosaic will create a different picture, and the new picture can certainly be better. Although moments were stolen from our students, campuses, and from our traditional methods of teaching, a sense of routine and community help us stay connected on a human level. We can exceed expectations when we are all in this together.