

The Silver Lining of COVID-19: Lessons from an Adjunct during a Pandemic

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As an adjunct instructor in our college's Business and Economics Department, I am not formally trained in the art of pedagogy. Often, I rely on personal industry experience, or tangible technical skills that students need to be successful in the next stage of their program and future careers. My focused subject is management information systems (MIS), more specifically, digital technologies in business. Through my own experience as a learner, in the military, and in industry, I use the "K.I.S.S." model (keep it stupid simple) so that the course avoids complexity and gives end users plenty of practice with increasingly difficult problems.

In a typical face-to-face class, I used a teacher centered model that focused on direct instruction through lecture. Ensuring student comprehension, I often used the latter half of the class session to employ an expeditionary learning style that required students to apply new knowledge by assessing applicable case studies. On lab days, I used the same template for instruction while introducing new software and technologies to students. In person, this worked wonderfully! I could dynamically evaluate a student's command of the day's topic through discussion and non-verbal cues which allowed me ad hoc moments to extend the lesson or move on to our next objective.

This course design has gone well. My course evaluations have been quite positive, and former students regularly expressed to me how excited they are to pursue new pathways in business because of taking my class. The feedback has been rewarding. I want students to be excited about learning, and hungry for more of what comes next in their educational journey. As

an adjunct instructor, I was hitting my stride and gaining confidence in my ability to be a resource to students at my own Alma Mater. Then, COVID-19 happened!

Fortunately, when the pandemic struck, the course was near the end of a spring term. I was able to scramble and amend the course schedule to both fulfill course requirements and allow students to succeed under the circumstances. Recognizing the immediate hardship our transition to remote learning created for students, I altered the course schedule to allow students extended time to submit the term project and weighted the final exam more heavily towards material that had been covered in person.

Unfortunately, I would soon learn that remote learning would continue for the next academic year. I immediately identified challenges in using my typical course design remotely. The first hurdle was time constraints. Normally, students will simultaneously follow along while I demonstrate technical skills. They can see what I am doing from the overhead projection while working on their own computers. This is nearly impossible remotely because all the activity is condensed to one screen. Students had to watch what I was doing, and then practice afterwards instead of simultaneously. They often forgot steps then had to go back and ask about them. As a result, labs were much more time consuming in the remote environment.

Another obstacle was that COVID-19 took us all down a few levels on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Students were challenged with competing priorities such as personal health and safety, or simply making ends meet while trying to stay afloat in classes. Normally high-performing students were missing deadlines, skipping classes, or seeming distracted in online synchronous classes.

Taking those matters into consideration, I pivoted to prioritize my course objectives. First, I replaced my traditional lecture model with quick sprint lecture videos (no longer than 30 minutes in length) followed by low-stakes short discussion posts and a weekly quiz. Students liked this because it gave them 7-days to work through the week's readings, video, and assignments on their own terms, asynchronously. Our prized synchronous time together was spent exploring hands-on activities that moved at a slower pace. Students could follow along, ask questions,

share their screens, and troubleshoot lab exercises. This approach was effective. Students realized they had to be active learners to succeed, and the points assigned to application activities kept students motivated to complete the work.

In order to address attendance challenges, I recorded the synchronous classes to share the content with students who were unable to attend. This sort of grace netted a stronger connection with the students outside of the class, even with remote learning. Students were grateful, and it kept many of them persisting when they may have dropped out.

While I look forward to returning for face-to-face classes, I have taken away one key lesson from COVID-19. Equity and access in higher education go far beyond the iron triangle of enrollment management (enrollment, headcount, and academic profile); equity and access happen through the small decisions in the classrooms that keep students learning. Decisions like altering my teaching methods to be more student centered with a flipped classroom model. Or offering differentiated instruction that allow students with various needs more grace to complete the weeks readings, lectures, videos, and assignments. I am now better prepared to combat the anomalous circumstances students face from time to time with tools that empower me to be more agile and resourceful as an ally on their educational journey.

I have heard it said that instructors are tasked with ensuring the highest standards of academic rigor to prepare students for their careers. Another important role for instructors is doing what we can, within reason, to help our students succeed, and in this last year, it has meant empathy and compassion for unusual circumstances. While COVID-19 will pass, and we will resume “pseudo normal” operations, it is important to remember, life happens. When it does, we must be agile enough to react and support our students in a way that is both accommodating to the student and preserves the integrity of our work. Whether that is extending due dates, or creating small group remedial hours to fill in the gaps for students that are struggling and behind; we can all do a little more to create opportunities for meeting our students where they are when they need us most. As we transition back onto campus, I will forever be grateful for the

experience of teaching during a pandemic. I am more prepared as an adjunct to support the unusual circumstances our students experience in future terms.