

## **Creating Opportunities for Virtual Instruction Dynamics: Teaching Through COVID**

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The COVID-19 pandemic definitely accelerated the move to more innovation in online course delivery and instruction. I've been teaching in-seat and online since 2016 so when we were forced to move online, the transition was not difficult for me, but for my first-year and second-year students in my Introduction to African American Studies, the transition was not as smooth as many had no experience in taking a course online. Their class online experience was limited to submitting their chapter review assignments and discussion forums on our learning management system, Blackboard. COVID-19 presented both challenges and opportunities for pedagogical innovations for teachers and different ways of learning for students. I "adjusted my sails" to the changing winds brought about by COVID-19 in respect to carrying out a group assignment and a term paper presentation. This was done with explicit instruction through email, virtual meetings with students, YouTube videos, and utilizing the Blackboard features, Collaborate and Ally, to increase communication, connection, and content access for students. These innovations will stick because they fostered student engagement while also allowing students to pivot as their lives were changing.

When I received the email that we would transition online to work purely through Blackboard, I immediately emailed my class stating that our course would be asynchronous and explained what that meant. I justified my choice by acknowledging many of my students live in rural areas with unreliable internet access, and they may have external factors that may keep them away for long durations. Students really appreciated not being forced to have meetings at class time because their lives were changing as many had to help their families. At the time of COVID-19, there were two large remaining assignments: a term paper group peer review and final paper presentations.

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For the group peer review assignment, there were two components: reading and providing comments on their peers' work using a rubric I created and then providing a report to me using the rubric. This assignment is usually done in a 50-minute class period and the students usually go through a couple of papers. The move online meant that the assignments would be facilitated through Google Drive and specifically using Google Docs. I emailed instructions on how to create a Google document, how to make comments on the document, and how to share the document with their peers. With this format, students actually had more time to provide more feedback to their peers than allotted in the in-seat session. Once the students completed both

components, they were instructed to share the documents with me through Google Drive. Students were able to follow the instructions promptly, and those who needed clarifying questions reached out to me.

For the term paper presentations, I generally have students present in front of the class and do a Q&A session. For the online transition, we utilized our learning management system, Blackboard Collaborate where students could screen share their slides and talk about their projects. I checked with students to be sure they had devices that had cameras, microphones and could use Blackboard Collaborate. Most students were able to comply and those who were unable recorded their presentations and sent them to me.

I emailed students with instructions on how to access Blackboard Collaborate and the various functions that were needed to present their PowerPoint presentations. I also sent YouTube video links that provided overviews of the learning management system which students found helpful when it came to sharing their screens for the class, how to use the “raise hand” gesture, and how to use the comment section when asking questions. COVID-19 provided an opportunity for me to think of creative ways to maintain connections with my students, which I did through individual and group Google Hangouts and email correspondence.

Both assignments went relatively smoothly with a lot of positive feedback on my course evaluations. Students enjoyed the flexibility of the asynchronous course and appreciated the walkthroughs with instructions on assignments. Students enjoyed the flexibility of the course. They also appreciated my accessibility to address any pressing concerns relating to course content or technology. Most of these students reported having greater confidence in navigating Blackboard Collaborate and presenting themselves and their work in a virtual space.

### **Reflections on Teaching through COVID-19**

When doing my own self-reflection, I felt I learned a lot about myself as an instructor. When COVID-19 forced me to change, I “adjusted my sails”, but I also extended grace to my students who were doing the best they could given the circumstances. I learned to use Blackboard Collaborate on the fly and did various test runs to be sure I knew how to troubleshoot when my students ran into problems. This adversity primed me to be innovative to keep my students as engaged as possible.

I am definitely keeping the process for the group peer review assignment in Google Docs. Generally, this is done in class, and I collect the papers at the end of the session. This is clearly not environmentally friendly, and all handwriting is not clear. With the use of Google Docs for both the worksheet and their paper drafts, students sharing a document creates more efficient processes. As for the virtual presentations, I may use this as an option for students who want to practice giving online presentations. COVID-19 has clearly created a lane to where communicating in virtual spaces is more normalized than ever before. Students can see this as

an opportunity for professional development as interviews will continue to be conducted online. Students will have to become comfortable with presenting themselves and their work in online spaces. What better training grounds than the classroom?!

COVID-19 made higher education embrace online instruction, course design, and online learning. Many of us did this “on the fly” and there were variations of success. Personally, I enjoyed the challenge of finding ways to simulate my in-seat activities in an online space. If anything, I will continue to find ways to make my assignments more “virtual-friendly” and specifically with course content accessibility. For me, some of my students did not have access to a laptop and could only access Blackboard using a mobile device. Blackboard Ally is a great tool that instructors can use to scan documents and receive an accessibility report on the document’s “readability”, and Ally also provides alternative formats to improve the accessibility of the documents. These alternative formats to increase both flexibility and inclusivity for students were perfect for me to help my students, so I chose alternative formats of the documents to increase course content accessibility across devices. Ultimately, increasing accessibility of course content is “virtual-friendly” and will be an invaluable asset for higher education moving forward.