

**From Digital Gap to Digital Canyon:
Insights Gained from Pedagogical Pivots in a Pandemic**

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Picture it. You are teaching a lower division Social Problems course with a heavy focus on interaction and engagement beyond the classroom. Suddenly, a pandemic disrupts teaching and learning in unprecedented ways. Once you take away the interaction and engagement dimensions from this “Social Problems” course, you are simply left with “Problems”. The terror of the widening digital gap (both in terms of access and skills) coupled with the potential loss of the social made us pivot to make a lifeline, where we decided to turn these problems into opportunities for course redesign. In this collaborative narrative, we share our experiences teaching this course during the exigencies of the pandemic, which highlighted the digital inequities that our students faced. These experiences inspired pedagogical adaptations, including an extensive peer review process and an expanded sense of community, that we will keep for future implementations.

Before the Pandemic

Before the pandemic, we taught a course entitled Social Problems in which students designed media projects that encouraged them to develop research, critical thinking, and creativity skills as well as to engage with social problems in the community. The class was very interactive, both in the classroom and in the community, as students interacted with local organizations to investigate social problems and propose potential solutions. This learning task culminated in the design of media projects that highlighted the social problems and the proposed solutions to share with multiple audiences. The media projects also required that students learn a technology that none of them had previously used. In the past, the research, critical thinking, and creativity skills needed for the students to complete this project was a challenge for many of them. The final product was mixed in terms of quality—some were outstanding while many were inadequate. This allowed us the opportunity to learn what strategies were effective, what needed improvement, and spurred on a desire to continue learning from the students to provide them with the necessary tools for success.

Pandemic Pivots

This desire was exponentially expanded because of the pandemic, where several pedagogical pivots had to be addressed. The first thing we wanted to establish for our students was what we felt as a primary lifeline during this pivot—the sense of community. Equity centered our adjustments as we explored ways to successfully implement interactive and collaborative

media projects in a course taught completely online via Zoom in a Central Appalachian university with an evident student digital divide. While we taught our students to seek equity in society, how were we going to seek an equitable solution to this digital divide in the classroom? How were we going to maintain a sense of community in the classroom? How were we going to help students continue to feel connected to the social issues around them? These questions centered on a critical dimension of the adaptation of the course: i.e., how to maintain the strengths of the previous iteration with the social concept removed. The digital divide for the media projects went from a digital gap to a digital canyon.

Innovations

Realizing that we now had a digital canyon coupled with general technology issues from presenting the media projects in the middle of a pandemic, early in the semester we created a digital community of learners around the media projects. In doing so, we decided to expand our concept of social both within and beyond the classroom. Within the classroom, we had to find new ways for students to interact and form a sense of community. We used this classroom community as a way to bridge this digital canyon.

Supporting from Within. Students served as peer reviewers on other students' media projects multiple times throughout the semester. Everyone was responsible for helping their fellow students succeed. Not only did students get feedback more often on the content of their projects, but they also received more assistance on how to use the technology. The results were more equitable technological expertise and addressed issues related to the digital divide which led to much better media projects overall. Thus, we shifted to focus on the internal community of the classroom along with a emphasize a global perspective. As a result, students overall produced their best collection of media projects. During the previous year, a few featured projects were selected to participate in our university's Research Day. This year, it was a difficult task to select the best projects because of the overall increase in quality.

Expanding Outside. Beyond the classroom, we took the opportunity to expand students' sense of community from just local to global. While students could no longer safely visit social agencies in our community to discuss social problems for their media projects, they turned to virtual platforms to explore even wider spheres. Our students' community was now global in that they could reach out anywhere in the world as easily as they could to their local community. This meant that many of the media projects took on broader social problems than in the past.

Lessons Learned and Moving Forward

Although the pandemic provided several challenges to teaching, it also offered an opportunity to give our students time to explore other ways of learning and engaging with the sociological concepts anchoring our course. These changes created a shared experience for students. While simultaneously recognizing and discussing the pandemic inequities, it created a sense of urgency for everyone to work together. It gave us a foundation for expanding social

empathy in the classroom and beyond. We were able to discuss that while we all were experiencing the pandemic, the impact varied by social categories (e.g., class, race, gender, type of job, geographical region). As student-centered educators reflecting on this experience, we celebrated students enacting their agency and widening their lenses on inequities.

Through these pandemic-related challenges, we found that an online Social Problems course can become both its own community and a way to engage virtually in the global community. Due to the frequency and dependency on which technology was used during the pandemic, this, in turn awarded multiple opportunities for peer review and collaboration which appeared in the higher quality of students' work. Further, this heightened sense of community in a time when social support was desperately needed, afforded students ways to connect and address the digital divide via extended communications and reflection. From this foundation, we plan to continue to develop a stronger sense of classroom community and integrate the multiple reviews of the media projects to help students narrow the digital divide in the future. Sometimes it takes a pandemic turning our digital gap into a digital canyon to force us to build a bridge across the divide. Once that bridge is built, it only makes sense that we continue to use the bridge as a lifeline.