Pedagogical Collaboration During Crisis

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Abstract: This narrative focuses on the need for more faculty collaboration on how to adapt our teaching to cultural shifts in the classroom. The authors include a course director, adjunct faculty, and full-time faculty sharing one issue they had and how it was resolved using collaboration. Cultural shifts in the classroom and in the training for the classroom must involve cooperation from various perspectives. The authors answer how we help each other by sharing the process they used, the positive results from a community culture, and the concrete outcomes others can use. Each was asked to reflect on issues, successes, and cultural ramifications of classroom practices resulting from a pedagogical collaboration process. The authors share those perspectives individually and then provide a unified vision for how to implement and best adjust to the cultural shift in the classroom and how pedagogical collaboration can help us adjust.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis of quickly moving to remote learning, educators continually asked what students needed from instructors (Kelly, Permyakova, Girardelli, & Claus, 2021). Instructors were faced with an immediate shift in pedagogical practices that required changing how they taught and interacted with students. However, the more pressing question that needs to be asked is, "how do instructors help each other meet this need?"

During the process of moving online, the authors of this article took it upon themselves to dedicate time to talk once a week about what they were doing in their classes, their successes, failures, and what they would change in their classrooms. But even after the online shift, those meetings continued because of their successes. This narrative is an overview of a group of instructors who all taught the same introductory communication course at the same institution. The meetings were scheduled to talk about successes, failures, and opportunities. The same team of individuals was always invited to the meetings. These conversations used a semi-structured agenda to share best practices in the classroom. The instructors talked about activities, technology concerns, policy issues, and anything that needed to be addressed as the semester went on. Sometimes, the instructors simply vented. Educators continue to ask, "What do we need to do to meet our students' needs during a time of crisis?" But also, how do we help each other

meet this need? Educators must find ways to discuss those needs. The authors of this article discuss how they did this and some solutions they found as a result.

Faculty meetings, department meetings, or even faculty teams dedicated to teaching a particular course should use their time together purposefully and discuss pedagogical shifts. They should be direct in addressing their own needs and how the classroom culture may never be the same. This narrative reflection shares the experience of four adjunct faculty and three full-time faculty members at a four-year private institution in the Midwest who collaborated throughout the first two semesters of the COVID-19 pandemic, which included Spring and Fall 2020. These collaborations continued after these first two semesters. Each author reflects on issues, successes, and cultural ramifications for the classroom. They felt the need to create networks for collaboration through diverse individuals, enabling a cultural shift in how we prepare and what the community of a classroom looks like (Lieberman, 2000). They share those perspectives individually. Finally, they provide a unified vision for how to implement and best adjust to the cultural shift in the classroom and how pedagogical collaboration can help us adjust.

Different Classroom Issues Faced

This section provides six perspectives on issues experienced with the faculty team all teaching the introductory communication course in the same four-year institution and how their collaboration community might have helped. The authors' section titles provide background at the institution and previous experience. Each section offers a quick takeaway.

First-Year Adjunct Faculty / Background in Health Care Communication

My previous experience with colleges and universities was that they were not as practical about addressing problems faced in the "real world" of healthcare or business in general. However, I had a much different experience during the Spring and Fall 2020 semesters. There was a problem, and our faculty team seemed to always find an answer. The director of our introductory oral communication course initiated weekly group meetings for all instructors teaching the introductory communication courses. The director modeled how to use Zoom and the lecture recording software by demonstrating its many features and allowing instructors to become comfortable with this very new application. During the weekly Zoom sessions that started the week before our students' spring break in 2020, we addressed how to best meet the course requirements and meet/exceed students' expectations with the current technological tools available. Additionally, the director created a tutorial video for our students on how to use many of the tools. This pedagogical collaboration helped guide me to the answers I needed for the technology of this class.

Takeaway

The value of modeling new technologies along with peer feedback in real-time, set our course apart from other courses on campus. I felt we were the experts on the technological tools

for the classroom. Our weekly meetings created a sense of fun when we shared our successes. We had fun, and our students had fun, because of our informal conversations about best practices.

Adjunct Faculty at Multiple Institutions

I worked at three colleges from 2020-2022 including a public state university, a small community college, and a small private four-year institution. I was particularly impressed by how one particular institution communicated the shared challenges of the pandemic. The introductory communication course faculty team and leadership at this particular institution asked questions, prepared for the worst, and emphatically hoped for the best. The meetings held every week gave me a sense of what other teachers were experiencing. I saw how each was handling the challenges that occurred with students struggling with technology, isolation, and a complete change in the way students had been prepared to learn. These meetings were not moments to gloat about new or innovative lessons, nor moments to complain about the issues that are often associated with teaching. These were moments to share challenges, brainstorm solutions, and rely on each other for support.

Community is not only important in the classroom, but also at the university. Through these meetings, I gained insight from fellow instructors into some of the concealed struggles and unspoken emotions of our students. These meetings and these instructors provided opportunities for me to grow in the ways I can best serve my students. They give me new ideas to build immediacy, relevancy, content, and more as we navigate a post-COVID culture.

Our faculty teaching team had to find new ways to reach out to each other, communicate concerns, and encourage success. One of our successes was that all instructors were intensely committed to the entire team's success. We had such collegial support from our fellow faculty that was fostered during these weekly sessions. Everyone's opinions, suggestions, and experiences were welcomed regardless of teaching status, i.e., full-time faculty member or adjunct faculty member.

Takeaway

Find ways to create community among colleagues with clear communication. This will then trickle down to a culture of community in the classroom. This was a truly successful byproduct of our community culture of sharing ideas informally.

Longest Serving Adjunct Faculty on Faculty Team

As hard as the sudden changes in Spring 2020 were, there was a certain sense of camaraderie present during that time that I believe had withered as the months dragged on and into the beginning of the fall semester of 2020. In the spring there was a sense that we - students, instructors, and administrators - were just trying to stay afloat together in the same boat. But somehow, some of that sense of "togetherness" seems to have shifted a bit over time.

If I had to choose a word to describe what it is like to be an adjunct instructor in the fall of 2020, I think I'd choose "lonely." Adjuncts always seem to stand on the periphery of the collegiate experience, allowed "in," but never fully "in." In some ways, it's a lonely existence even in the best of circumstances. But 2020 will leave its mark, and I suspect the effects will be felt for a long time to come. Our weekly meetings helped address that sense of loneliness. Another reason I am happy those meetings continued beyond 2020.

Takeaway

Find ways to decrease loneliness moving forward. Stopping by offices or holding productive collaboration sessions help with this, especially for adjunct faculty. The faculty team fixed problems quickly because of a conversation that involved everyone and didn't include a top-down directive.

New To Team's Institution Adjunct Faculty / Legal Community Background

What saved our faculty team was outstanding leadership from our director, but also his implementation of weekly small group meetings whereby all instructors teaching our university-required first year course gathered to share our concerns and difficulties as we worked to incorporate new technologies necessary for online instruction.

From spring to fall 2020, the faculty team moved from addressing preliminary issues concerning technology for online learning to tackling larger concerns – how to monitor students; how to manage a hybrid online/in-person class; and how to keep students motivated when they had mentally withdrawn. Further issues included how much discretion to give students suffering from COVID-19 or simply worried by the crisis, how to create interest in learning, and how to structure online lectures to maintain interest, maintain participation, and continue to provide quality educational information. We could gain insight into struggling students, explore solutions, and learn the technology needed to maintain the requirements of the course. These meetings continued when we entered the 2020 fall semester, and again, instructors found them to be moments to listen more broadly to the narrative of our students.

Takeaway

Having immediate feedback from numerous instructors in the same position helped spot emerging issues and provided a means to quickly assess solutions, which unquestionably facilitated a more rapid implementation of solutions. Acting individually, none of this could have been accomplished. This new way of teaching and learning was a transition for both instructors and students. Making this transition needed the insight of others making the same transition. The community culture helped make the transition.

Full Time Non-Tenure Track Instructor

Transitioning to online teaching due to COVID-19, forced all of us to reconceptualize our teaching persona and behaviors. Online, I could no longer look students in the eyes when I asked a question. The pre-class "small talk" was much harder to facilitate. Remembering student names, while once a breeze, was now an amalgamation of blank video feeds with tiny white text. The homework reminders, the greetings while walking on campus, office hours, the laughs, the classroom banter--all of it has changed for the foreseeable future.

Fortunately, I work at a university with a small group of faculty that teach the introductory communication course. We touched base on how our classes were going and brainstormed solutions to any obstacles experienced by one or many of us. Through conversations with my colleagues, I felt prepared for my online teaching experience. Some of the many realizations, epiphanies, and adjustments I made were a result of these meetings.

I am an energetic teacher. I don't think anyone would call my classes boring or that I lack energy. Thus far in my 7 years of teaching, I've been able to rely on my energy as a way to engage students and motivate them to listen. On the first day of online teaching, I knew I'd have to change my approach. The same energy wasn't greeted with the same level of engagement. I found myself putting more energy and time into my lectures. Many of the lesson plans we had pre-pandemic needed immediate adjustment because of the circumstances. Our teaching team figured these adjustments out by having extensive conversations about best practices.

Takeaway

Share strategies to supplement or replace the things that once were the foundation of our success as a teacher. We walked away from meetings with small mechanisms that could change the interaction in our course.

Second Year Full-Time Non-Tenure Track Instructor

As one of the few Black instructors at the university, I pay special attention to marginalized and first-generation students. During my second week of employment, I attended a faculty forum themed around Diversity and Inclusion. This forum discussion was held to understand what ways the institution created barriers to success for first-generation students.

We did a brainstorming activity in small groups, coming back to the larger group for a discussion. The underlying question was, "Who's responsible for training us on diversity and inclusion?" Simply having conversations with colleagues about our backgrounds and differences will help address issues of culture in our classrooms. Leaving this forum, it was abundantly clear to me that many institutions had shown little interest in recent years in understanding how "diversity and inclusion" function in the classroom.

However, we did have these conversations during our weekly meetings with the faculty team. When teaching our introductory communication course, we used very specific "Get to Know

You" assignments asking a range of questions. Faculty also created a tracking log suggested from our meetings to track all students of concern and logged dates on which we spoke and that they said they would have their assignments completed. We were able to diagnose the source of students' anxiety (the barrier to stable internet and a quiet, "presentable" space in which they could record speeches). We were able to accommodate their needs, and they were able to complete most assignments remaining. These small mechanisms can help guide students. These were all a result of our conversations as a faculty team.

Takeaway

Build a coalition of resources to address marginalized students and share them amongst the faculty team conversations. Build specific time and dedication to these conversations. These disparities were highlighted during the pandemic. Create concrete mechanisms put in place to address and help students who need it most.

Concluding Remarks

The pressing problem is how instructors navigate and improve their classroom culture (Kelly, Permyakova, Girardelli, & Claus, 2021; Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2002). The guidance we provide in this article includes voices rarely heard in academic work (adjunct faculty, non-tenure line instructors). Think about the process that you as instructors use. Think about the community culture you create. Think about the final results and outcomes you intend to accomplish.

The worldview that we hold about teaching must shift to include voices in the research, the pedagogical suggestions, and the everyday conversations in our faculty meetings. This narrative includes voices often left out of the conversation of how to create a classroom culture (Kezar, 2017). If there is something we gained from this pandemic, it is the emphasis on how important all of these voices are to success. Those voices were heard and affected by the change because of our collaborative weekly meetings. This was a deliberative attempt to help navigate crises and improve pedagogy. There is a need for developing new and accessible faculty development opportunities (Crespín-Trujillo & Hora, 2021). This can be as easy as having a scheduled conversation to talk about pedagogical issues. This meeting gives the authors and other educators the motivation to think and reflect on the importance of collaboration. We should all think about our role in giving all educators, students, and stakeholders a voice in the pedagogical process. We experienced this as a faculty team, had conversations, made changes, and improved our pedagogy with just an open conversation.

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