The Revitalization of Student-Centered Pedagogy: Lessons Learned in Professional Development from The Covid-19 Pandemic

Eric Belt   Chris Hakala   Gabrielle M. Salvatore

Springfield College

In March 2020, higher education changed forever. We had all heard about the pandemic, and we all had ideas of what was going to happen next. As the staff of a small teaching and learning center at a college in Massachusetts, we were faced with a daunting task: help faculty understand how to navigate from traditional face to face teaching to using technology to deliver high quality education. We were concerned. However, we learned several things that gave us a glimpse into how the learning environment would change and student-centered pedagogy that could be carried forward post pandemic.

Chris, the center director, had been at our institution for two years when the pandemic hit. For context, our institution is a small, comprehensive college of about 4,200 students scattered across several schools and campuses. We offer undergraduate and graduate degrees and are known for our philosophy of educating the entire student in service and leadership to others. In that sense, we had a tradition of working together for the betterment of the student. And, like most small institutions, folks were used to wearing many different hats.

Prior to the pandemic, our center consisted of two part-time graduate associates, one director (a full-time staff person), and loose affiliations with the Academic Technologist and Instructional Design Team. We did not have a great deal of overlap. The Center ran face-to-face teaching events on campus, the Academic Technologist worked directly with faculty, and the Instructional Design Team worked with our regional and online faculty to help create courses to be delivered in either a blended format or completely asynchronous environment.

On March 12th, we received a call which changed our perspectives on teaching and learning forever. The Senior Associate VP of Academic Affairs informed us that there would be a meeting the next morning with all faculty to discuss closing campus and the subsequent transition to digital learning. Our job, as the Teaching and Learning Center staff, was to explore how objectives could still be met and how faculty could transition to remote teaching in a way that did not sacrifice quality. We had to reassure faculty that there would be resources to help them pivot to teaching in a digital environment and make that promise a reality. Many of our faculty members did not have direct experience with online teaching. They were familiar with putting their material online via the learning management system (LMS). However, there would need to be changes in classroom engagement and content delivery.

To understand what remote instruction would look like, a task force was used to guide our transition. We recruited the CIO of Information and Technology Services, Office of Academic Technology, and the Instructional Design Team with a plan of mapping out a strategy for talking with faculty and providing necessary resources to guide faculty members in moving all course material to a remote setting. Our office contributed a theoretical structure to work from that we called, "The Four Pillars of Pedagogy;" 1) Content delivery, 2) Assignments to support content, 3) Feedback to reinforce content, and 4) Communication of class goals, policy shifts, etc. The idea was to suggest that teaching is teaching, and this transition was merely moving what faculty normally do to a different modality.

The next morning, March 13th, the task force presented a unified front. We spoke to the audience about the four pillars, and we offered support to the faculty from our office (including the graduate associates), the Academic Technologist and the Instructional Design Team. Understandably, faculty had many questions. There was discomfort and angst about pivoting to a new modality of instruction; fear of the unknown and the amount of work that needed to be done over the short time. Without a doubt, we could not have had that conversation with the faculty if we did not have that support around us. Immediately following the meeting, we hosted a variety of virtual workshops, and developed countless resources to support faculty as they quickly pivoted from face-to-face to remote teaching. At first, we encouraged asynchronous teaching, but we soon realized that students and faculty alike wanted some "real-time" interactions, so we changed course and described how to use resources that would allow faculty to interact more effectively, and in real time, with their students.

The lessons learned from this rapid transition, and the long term impact of that transition, will remain with our institution for the foreseeable future. First, our office developed very strong connections to those folks who work with digital resources. In fact, now, the Instructional Design Team sits within the Center. Second, we also learned that to be an effective Center, we needed to work hard to have a consistent message across faculty development constituents. That is, the IDs, the Academic Technologist and the Center all had to use the four "pillars", so our faculty had a common language to talk about remote teaching. Also, that message had to be grounded in scientific understanding of teaching and learning. This proved to be one of the most difficult parts of the entire process. The simplification of complex concepts around pedagogy had pros and cons. Nevertheless, faculty responded positively to this unified message, despite the challenges of ensuring all support staff were on the same page.

In the end, faculty taught, students learned, and, although the process wasn't perfect, we believe we provided a cohesive set of materials and resources to effectively support student learning. And, as we re-imagine the world of face-to-face teaching, we believe that faculty will continue to use technology to enhance their courses. We have seen an uptick in interest in exploring the features in our learning management system, we have more faculty considering online instruction, and we have an administration that has developed a flexible model for how faculty can teach (i.e., more support for digital tools like Jamboard, Camtasia, etc.). The seismic shift in instruction forced faculty to assess their instructional methods and seek assistance from our center. We are optimistic that the engagement with simplified and direct programming

revitalized faculty interest in developing their skills as educators. We believe the students will, ultimately, benefit from the hard work that went into this transition; a re-birth of student-centered pedagogy.