

An Educator's Metamorphosis

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In the “before times,” I taught primarily face to face or hybrid courses with undergraduate preservice teachers, and I taught graduate level courses for teachers seeking a master’s degree. My graduate level courses were typically taught fully online in an asynchronous manner. I took great pride in my use of technology when teaching online or hybrid courses; at times, I even looked with pity at those instructors who did not have a level of comfort with incorporating technology tools. And then March 2020 arrived. I was teaching a seminar class on a Friday afternoon when we all received an email that classes would be suspended for a week while faculty moved coursework fully online. My students immediately started to panic about an assortment of issues related to finishing their time in the field at local school placements to moving out of their dorm rooms so quickly to absorbing the news that their athletic seasons were ending as well. My first thought that afternoon as I packed up some materials to take home was that I was perfectly prepared to move my classes online.

I was not prepared.

I started to initially move face to face classes into an online environment by setting up virtual meetings during our regular class times. That worked until my students started getting sick with the virus or were supporting family members who were sick. Some students lived in rural settings where their internet connection could not fully support virtual meetings for the length of a class meeting, and they could not pay for the data needed to use mobile devices. These types of issues upended my lecture-with-discussion style of teaching. I could no longer fully gauge the response of my students through body language or facial expressions. Numerous roadblocks popped up when I tried to have students work in small groups and share back with the class because some had background noise that was distracting, and I could not facilitate the groups as efficiently as I did in a traditional classroom setting by simply walking around from group to group and listening to their conversations. The distractions of younger siblings, background noise, and pets were overwhelming at points. Even though I had previously worked with online and asynchronous courses, this situation was different because my previous experiences had been with students who had chosen that type of instruction, and because of that ability to choose, those students were typically prepared to work in an online setting. They had previously worked out logistics for online meetings with family members who would also be in the house, and we rarely encountered major distractions in their environment. The other problems such as connectivity were also not typically a problem because students had sufficiently

prepared for an online course. Previous online teaching experience did help me pivot from my face-to-face teaching strategies to online options, but I found that students were not able to pivot with me as quickly. They had become accustomed to the strategies I had been using with them for almost three months in the classroom, so employing different teaching strategies meant they needed to rethink how they interacted with me and classmates in the class.

I had to make changes. Quickly.

By the second week of April, I realized we would not be returning to campus that semester, and I needed to rework my strategies and tools I used to provide a quality learning experience for my students. My first reaction was to start researching, but we did not exactly have a Pandemic Pedagogy Playbook out there to access. So, I did what I tell my preservice teachers to do when they find themselves needing help or support in a classroom – I reached out to colleagues for collaboration. They did not have easy solutions or magic bullet answers to my problems, but we created an informal support network where we were talking and sharing daily through text messages and email. That collaboration helped me discover options and alternatives to my established teaching styles, and I started implementing changes daily and evaluating effectiveness at the same time in a type of quasi-action research approach.

The change began.

The very first change I implemented was to do what we teach preservice teachers to do starting on day one – train your students on your expectations. I realized that my students were trained to react and interact with me in face-to-face settings and did not fully know my expectations for interacting in an online environment. I made a list of what was acceptable, and I created a short video explaining how to better communicate to me what they were and were not understanding as well as navigating issues or distractions that were often out of their control. Having my students come to me with such issues meant that I had to work with them to problem solve how to overcome such challenges; the result was I learned so much more about my students' learning styles than I ever knew before the pandemic. We had to come up with solutions together to figure out how to find better learning spaces for them to access or how to implement good time management.

My next change came with our discussion threads. I have never seen this tool as anything more than simply having students jump through the hoop of posting and then responding to a certain number of classmates to earn their points for the assignment. I needed for these discussion threads to work because I did not have the safety net of classroom discussions anymore. The problem was students were posting thoughts or ideas in an isolated manner without much connection to other posts, and responses were vague or superficial. I brought this problem to my colleagues who explained that I was missing from the equation. I needed to be more present in these discussions; I needed to model how to make connections and respond to posts. Once I heard this suggestion, I realized it was so obvious; I would be that present in a

traditional classroom discussion so leaving these discussion threads to my students to navigate alone was equal to leaving them in a classroom alone without any direction or support. I set aside a portion of my office hours each day to responding to the discussion threads, and I saw changes in my students' responses by the end of the week. The discussions transformed from obligatory posts and short responses to back-and-forth dialogue that helped explore the content.

The last major change I implemented, and will continue to use, is so simplistic that I am almost embarrassed to include it. I began to ask for student feedback weekly, and I read it, thought about it, and used it as a catalyst for change during the next week. In the past, I have read student feedback at the end of the semester, but I rarely found it particularly helpful. Also, student feedback never led to any level of substantial changes or revisions in the next semester of the course. In early April 2020, I spoke with a colleague about how I wondered if my students were utilizing certain resources, etc. that I had provided. Her response was to ask them. If something was not working, she suggested I change it – immediately. We had the freedom to make changes if needed, so we should capitalize on that. I did capitalize on it and found my students became more willing to give feedback once they saw it materialize into almost immediate changes that helped them.

Ultimately, I found that moving so quickly into a fully online environment had very few connections to issues with technology. I never found applications or tools that solved all the problems of communication. I did find that my style of teaching was challenged, and I had to do more than adapt – I needed to morph. The changes I made were rarely about learning new types of technology; instead, my changes were about how I could find different ways to connect with students and design my courses to have that level of flexibility for offering options they needed. I will continue to seek regular feedback from my students because that was so helpful in keeping my courses relevant and connected to my students' needs. I will also continue to use what I learned about online discussions with my asynchronous classes because transforming those discussions and helping students give and reap more from them is vital to my students learning better in that type of course. The situation the pandemic created for educators required me to step outside of “what had always worked” and investigate new ways of viewing both my classroom interaction with students and what I expected from them. This experience forced me to remember what I have been teaching preservice teachers to do when they first enter the classroom: establish expectations and train students on them, listen to what students need, and make changes immediately when learning is not happening. These are not amazing or insightful practices I started implementing. In fact, the biggest change that occurred throughout 2020 was that I became more reflective and more willing to help my students learn. I needed to be pushed into a metamorphosis as an educator, and the best result is that my students can now have a richer learning experience as I emerge on the other side.