Journal of Teaching and Learning with Technology, Vol. 10, Special Issue, pp. 80-87.
doi: 10.14434/jotlt.v9i2.31409

Residence to Online: Collaboration During the Pandemic

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Abstract: When 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) arrived with vengeance, face-to-face colleges were scrambling to brainstorm and problem-solve how to best deliver the curriculum in a physically safe manner to complete the semester. At Air University, the intellectual and leadership development center of the Air Force, eSchool of Graduate Professional Military Education (eSchool) is the online graduate college, which offers Squadron Officer School (SOS), Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), Air War College (AWC), and Online Master's Program (OLMP). SOS, ACSC, and AWC all have residence colleges too. At the fully in-residence graduate college—Air Command and Staff College—adult learners, who are airmen, geographically move to attend the college. The instruction has always been fully face-to-face, so they did not have online curriculum nor are their professors trained to effectively teach online. In order to best meet the students' needs for in-residence ACSC, the eSchool was asked to help. This is when brainstorming sessions started as to how to pivot instruction during the pandemic, followed with sharing of resources, expertise, and faculty training. As a result, ACSC in-residence students received the second half of their semester courseware online, which followed significantly more best practices than if a collaboration of the online and residence colleges had not occurred. Perhaps there was a silver lining in the pandemic that may bring about additional educational options in the future.

Keywords: pandemic teaching, professional military education, online learning, online teaching, collaboration, teamwork, residence to online, adult learners

Introduction

In March 2020, Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), the United States Air Force's Intermediate Developmental Education (IDE) graduate college, was facing the real possibility that Air University's in-residence schools would suspend classes due to 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19). This is the same concern that overcame most (if not all) in-residence civilian universities. Air University, a major component of the Air Force's Air Education and Training Command and lead agent for Air Force education, is headquartered at Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. Air University was beginning to implement base-wide health protection measures and was signaling to its co-located residence schools to plan for the possible shutdown of their academic operations. However, with only one core course remaining for the academic year for these students and over 500 learners already having spent seven months away from their operational jobs and duty stations, finishing the 2020 academic year on time was necessary. This is the same concept at civilian universities where students were already three-fourths of the way through their academic school year. As faculty conversed about various options, a recommendation was made to leverage the distance learning faculty expertise and

distance learning ACSC curriculum from the eSchool of Graduate Professional Military Education (eSchool) to finish the semester from a distance.

The eSchool and Air Force Officer Professional Military Education

The eSchool is the only non-resident arm in the dynamic system that is Air Force officer career education. This would be similar to a civilian graduate college having one college that focused on the online learning modality. As a military institution with an academic mission, Officer Professional Military Education (OPME) institutions of Squadron Officer School (SOS), Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), and Air War College (AWC) are the keystones of Maxwell Air Force Base's 'Academic Circle.' Selected officers from across the services (and eligible federal government civilian equivalents and international officers) attend in-residence to receive their primary (SOS), intermediate (ACSC), and senior level (AWC) OPME. Students whose lifestyles do not support relocating to Maxwell Air Force Base for the required time or those who were not selected to attend in-residence earn their OPME via distance learning by enrolling in the respective eSchool program (SOS, ACSC, AWC, or the Master's Degree). The eSchool teaches approximately 13,000 globally-dispersed learners per year. The programs are designed to meet OPME requirements as established by the Air Force and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and to foster life-long learning habits to support the profession of arms. ACSC, both in-residence and distance learning, are Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) Phase I accredited, and Air University (as a whole–similar to civilian universities) is regionally accredited through Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

The eSchool serves predominantly captains through colonels and federal government civilian equivalents. The Online Master's Program (OLMP), one of four eSchool programs, is what we focused on in this situation. It is designed to produce more effective Air Force majors and lieutenant colonels serving in operational-level command or staff positions. It covers topics such as contemporary Air and Space Force operations, national security, leadership, and joint warfare. The program consists of asynchronous, instructor-facilitated courses that are each eight weeks in length and take approximately 18 months to complete. This is a common set-up for an online master's degree at civilian universities, where courses are eight weeks and students focus on taking two courses at a time. Upon successful completion of the program, learners are awarded a Master's of Military Operational Art and Science Degree (MMOS). The OLMP is offered with an option of four concentrations, although some are only options if the learner is a prior graduate of two other Air Force education programs. The four concentrations are: (a) joint warfare concentration (awards both the MMOS degree and JPME Phase I credit), (b) leadership concentration (awards the MMOS degree and is for captains only), (c) operational warfare concentration (awards the MMOS degree and is available only to Air Force weapons instructor course graduates), and (d) the nuclear weapons concentration (awards the MMOS degree and is available only to Air Force nuclear weapons effects, policy, and proliferation certificate program graduates). This is a similar concept to civilian universities where graduate degrees are offered with an emphasis or a minor.

Air Command and Staff College

The ACSC resident curriculum is a 10-month graduate-level program taught through small group seminars and engaging lectures. The curriculum covers topics that include the profession of arms, war theory, leadership and ethics, joint warfighting, airpower, and the international security environment. Additionally, learners have the opportunity to conduct research and participate in elective courses that

explore different topics relevant to the nation's defense. Successful completion of the ACSC resident program are awarded JPME Phase I credit and an MMOS degree.

Description

With in-residence ACSC's decision to seek assistance from the eSchool, the respective leadership of both colleges met within a day to discuss the scope of the challenge and the most effective and efficient way to proceed. This would be similar at a civilian university for the deans and leadership teams of two colleges, one being focused on online learning, to meet to discuss this same concept. Gaining the eSchool's agreement to assist was immediate, with the first discussions and the brainstorming sessions that followed being fairly straightforward and productive given the already established close relationships with some of the individuals of both colleges. Such collaboration at the start was straightforward as both colleges reported to the ACSC Commander (i.e., the Dean's supervisor at a civilian college), and both of the intermediate developmental education programs share similarities since the programs are to meet the same OPME requirements. This would be similar at a civilian university to having degrees or courses that had similar program outcomes, but one was taught online and another was taught face-to-face. In addition, some eSchool professors teach courses for in-residence ACSC, so they are familiar with the in-residence curriculum and were accustomed to working collaboratively with the faculty. Seeing this in action supported the importance of soft skills. Emotional intelligence is incredibly important for instructors and adult learners to develop or improve, which includes teamwork (Majeski, Stover, Valais, & Ronch, 2017). These pre-established relationships proved critical when addressing the challenge before them and bridged the connections for those who had not yet met.

The Team

As with any team tackling a problem, the members—with their different skillsets, attitudes, backgrounds, experiences, and motivations—had a strong impact on team dynamics and overall effectiveness. In this situation, a positive team dynamic was established almost immediately given the trust and sense of accountability many members already had for each other due to established working relationships and the mutual respect each had for the other's organization given their shared missions. In addition, two to three eSchool professors volunteer every year to teach this last in-residence course for ACSC. As part of their preparations, the eSchool faculty members participate in and sometimes lead resident faculty development sessions. This experience built mutual trust and knowledge in the content and delivery of similarly-themed courses in both institutions. At a civilian university, there are various methods to cross-collaborate across colleges or modalities, but someone usually needs to initiate it as it is rarely required.

The shared experience and comradery made for a solution-focused team that trusted the expertise each brought to bear on the problem. Furthermore, both ACSC's and the eSchool's Deans included their respective personnel with the best knowledge, skills, and experience in the initial discussions on determining the scope of the effort. This inclusive approach created an open environment for everyone's input from the beginning of brainstorming, and it resulted in inherent buy-in for the selected solution as those who would execute it were the ones responsible for the development. From the eSchool, these included course directors (i.e., subject matter experts)—who were responsible for eSchool courses that addressed similar outcomes and covered similar materials as the course remaining for ACSC resident faculty to deliver—a curriculum designer, learning management system (LMS) administrators, and leadership. From ACSC, this included the department

chair, course director (subject matter experts), deputy course director for the last resident course, learning management system administrators, and leadership.

The Learning Challenge

The eSchool and resident ACSC faculty and staff met several times over the course of three days to brainstorm potential courses of action for online delivery of the last resident course. The first considered possibility was using Air University's Microsoft Teams account to deliver the resident course as it was designed—synchronously, but online instead of in-person. This is an option that many civilian universities incorporated. However, accounts were not fully provisioned at that time, so using it was not a viable option. Next, the team considered the synchronous delivery of the resident curriculum using video conferencing tools such as Zoom. The idea was still to replicate some sense of the in-person experience that both learners and instructors were comfortable with overall. However, with so many learners quarantined at home with their families (with childcare being a key concern given the closing of daycares due to the pandemic), synchronous options quickly fell out of favor (although early on during execution, some faculty did add optional synchronous sessions via Zoom to facilitate group discussion). In the end, these early brainstorming sessions resulted in all parties agreeing that they could not move the last resident course online. Not only did the available technology not support such delivery, but the impact on the learning experience due to stressful life situations thrust upon their learners was a serious concern. Therefore, it was determined that leveraging the asynchronous design inherent in the eSchool's OLMP program was the best course of action. Online education increases the opportunity to have more frequent interactions between students and with the professor, albeit less intense interactions than face-to-face learning (Holley, 2017). With COVID-19 risks, it was allowing interactions to still occur between the student and instructor and amongst other students, which is best practices.

In making this decision, the question that needed to be answered before any further progress could take place was which OLMP course or course(s) would best serve as a replacement for the resident course, which was six credit hours delivered over 10 weeks. Two OLMP courses providing six hours of credit each and together covering similar concepts and objectives as the resident course were immediately considered.

The first option explored included the possibility of having the learners take both of these OLMP courses but on an accelerated timeline to meet all six credit hours of material covered in the resident course. However, after discussing the merits of such a plan, concern grew again over how effective an accelerated approach would be given that learners would be taking the courses while hastily adjusting to life in the 'new normal' of being at home (often with family members who were also attending school and working from home) learning online instead of what they were accustomed to, which was face-to-face learning. Research, reflection, and evaluation supports that first-time online students need scaffolding (Ainsa, 2017). With concern about the effectiveness of the learning and the wellbeing of the learners, this option was rejected. Furthermore, there was a concern for the resident faculty. They were not trained to facilitate online learning, nor were they familiar with the structure or curriculum of the OLMP courses. As such, the idea of having them teach an accelerated curriculum starting immediately and without any prior experience was clearly problematic.

Our Solution

As a result of these brainstorming sessions, a second option coalesced that addressed these concerns: (1) Have learners complete one of the OLMP courses as designed with a few minor assignment modifications to more closely replicate the in-resident experience to which they were accustomed; (2)

Address key concepts required by the resident course that were not covered in the OLMP course where learners would also conduct a self-study on select course material from the resident course and write short essay responses to prompts that would have otherwise driven in-person discussion; and (3) Learners would develop and be evaluated on small group case study presentations from the resident course, with individual contributions being more heavily weighted than if in the residence class.

The first action was coordinating the move of a copy of the OLMP course from the eSchool's LMS sub-account to the ACSC resident's sub-account. These are details that LMS administrators manage in a civilian university, as well. On successful transfer, the eSchool's course designer and LMS administrators collaborated with the ACSC LMS administrators to configure and ensure the quality of the transferred course, which included making it a template course that would be used to create each of the 36 course seminars. As ACSC predominantly uses the LMS only for course content sharing, message/announcement boards, and the gradebook, this collaboration was rather critical so that no time needed to be spent on training the resident course LMS administrators on features not used in resident courses. After all setup actions were complete, the resident course director and deputy director were able to share the course and discuss its structure and curriculum with their course development team. This led to a number of discussions with the eSchool's course designer and its course director on what was possible in regards to quickly and easily adjusting the course without impacting the curriculum so much that it would ruin the design.

In accordance with the previously published resident class schedule, learners would spend the first nine days of the course doing the self-study reading assignments and submitting their daily written responses to lesson prompts (designed by the resident course team) via email to their instructor. Other changes to the OLMP course included the removal of the requirement for submitting assignments through a student work similarity checking tool and the adjusting of assignment due dates to accommodate the inclusion of the resident course case study assignments, as both course calendars overlapped with certain assignments. In addition, adjustments of due dates were incorporated to give faculty inexperienced with facilitating online learning some welcomed breathing room so that they could adjust their teaching practices to the new environment. The end result was curriculum that met the intended outcomes of the resident course and was approximately the same length but was able to be delivered 100% asynchronously online.

Faculty Development and Support

To prepare the resident faculty for teaching the OLMP course, eSchool personnel developed a multipronged training and support approach. This included conducting synchronous faculty development webinars prior to execution; distributing weekly guidance, best practices, and recommendations during execution; and providing just-in-time advice during execution, as requested. As they graded and provided daily feedback to the learners' daily self-study submissions, these first nine days of the course also served as the learning space during which the resident faculty who had previously prepared to teach the resident course would spend time reading and reviewing the lesson materials for the OLMP course they were now going to teach.

Unfortunately, there was not enough time for the resident faculty to take the eSchool's seven-week Instructor Orientation and Certification Course (eIOC) that would have prepared them to be facilitators of online learning and familiarized them with eSchool courseware. This is a similar practice at many civilian universities that offer online courses or degrees; new online instructors must take an online faculty development course to learn best practices in teaching online and to practice the requirements of that particular university as a student and an instructor. In place of the eIOC and given the restrictions on gathering in groups due to the pandemic, the OLMP course director and a curriculum designer conducted three, two-hour webinars via Adobe Connect. These webinars—

attended by all 36 resident faculty, the resident course director, and the deputy course director—provided familiarization with and lesson-by-lesson 'how to' training on the OLMP course they would teach. In addition, materials were extracted from the eIOC course and made available to the resident faculty via a module in the course that only they could access. This resource included guidance and best practices on facilitating online discussions, establishing and maintaining presence, making course announcements, providing effective feedback, and grading with a rubric.

For management and communication, the resident faculty were divided into three teams of 10 to 12 personnel. The eSchool had the three faculty who were also assigned to teach the resident course spread across each of those teams in order to more easily answer any resident faculty questions or requests for assistance that could arise as they taught the course. Additionally, the eSchool provided each team with two (six total) of its most experienced contract instructors who could provide additional faculty support and advice on the details of OLMP course delivery. Moreover, the OLMP course director conducted weekly 'just-in-time' faculty development for the current and following week's lessons, provided copies of the announcements he used in his own course seminar, and made himself available for any direct questions on a broader basis. One form of beneficial professional development for new online instructors is to have an experienced instructor to directly support the new instructor (Holland, Sherman, & Harris, 2018).

Evaluation

One may expect that hastily shifting from a planned resident graduate course to an online graduate course in a quarantine environment during the early months of a global pandemic would negatively impact faculty and learner surveys of their experience. However, even with these challenges, both the faculty and learners generally gave positive feedback on the curriculum, and learners praised faculty members' efforts. Both also offered thoughtful and constructive comments for consideration in future courses. In addition, many expressed great appreciation for the asynchronous approach as it allowed them maximum flexibility in supporting their individual and family efforts in adjusting to the 'new normal.' Consistent predictors of academic success in online courses is high self-efficacy and positive self-regulatory behaviors (Bradley, Browne, & Kelley, 2017).

The most significant takeaways from this experience that are applicable to a military or civilian university setting include the following:

- Previously established collaboration built by the eSchool faculty teaching the resident course facilitated a high degree of trust between the resident and eSchool team members.
- Communicating clear expectations to learners and faculty early and often eased tensions and calmed concerns.
- It is helpful to have the online course team share best practices and offer prewritten course announcements to lessen the learning curve for faculty inexperienced in online delivery.
- Continuing to support the faculty for the duration of the event and frequent faculty development sessions were worth the investment.
- To ensure inclusion of a potentially diverse set of students, be prepared to support non-native speakers that now find themselves in an environment that relies heavily on written communication.
- Give resident faculty the opportunity to see what they will experience and do so guided by a seasoned online instructor and/or course subject matter expert/developer and designer.
- Establish and maintain resident and online college relationships, from the senior leadership to the faculty levels.

- Include instructional designers and education technologists early in the discussion. It is important to know beforehand what is technologically possible, what resources are already available, and what could be quickly built as you are brainstorming possible solutions, not after decisions are finalized.

Conclusion

The cliché, 'cooperate and graduate,' is frequently heard in professional military education institutions. Although there are different ways to interpret that phrase, in our experience, cooperation between and amongst students, faculty, and support staff is what makes the positive impact. This was especially evident in the 'emergency' change of plans required to address the sudden quarantine of in-resident academics at Air University. While the situation created an environment where many faculty and staff had to leave their comfort zones to perform duties and tasks they normally would not do, no one involved ever stated that what was thrust upon him/her was 'not their job.' In addition, the positive impacts of pre-existing relationships that the in-resident and online colleges had with one another, from the senior leadership level down, cannot be understated. These relationships, both personal and professional, drove highly productive and efficient brainstorming sessions that made the pivoting of instruction during the pandemic and the sharing of resources and expertise seem completely natural. Furthermore, constant open communication, agile thinking, and a willingness to adapt as the situation unfolded allowed the team to not only resolve and implement solutions, but to also make just-in-time adjustments to execution when they were required. As a result, ACSC in-residence students were able to complete their master's degrees online in a manner that followed significantly more best practices than if collaboration between the online and residence colleges had not occurred. Most importantly, the students recognized how important their learning experience was to the faculty, which is a testament to the professionalism and determination of all of those who were involved.

Epilogue

The unforeseen canceling of resident instruction in spring of 2020, due to COVID-19, necessitated collaborative efforts between the resident college, Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), and the online college, eSchool of Graduate Professional Military Education (eSchool), at Air University. Given the requirements and the swift execution of our efforts, we collectively traveled united along unchartered paths during our collaboration. At that time, it was unknown if our shared efforts would benefit the greater Air University going forward. Other resident colleges, possibly encouraged and informed by our example, shed trepidations about moving some of their curriculum online, and despite an enduring pandemic, are continuing to support their students via a distance. In fact, shortly after the ACSC effort was underway, Air University's six-week resident Squadron Officer's School (SOS) pursued asynchronous, remote delivery of their resident program for summer 2020. Just as with ACSC, the eSchool assisted SOS in developing a plan and preparing their instructors to facilitate eSchool courses. Not only did this afford the opportunity to apply lessons learned from the ACSC effort while still fresh in our minds, but this time, SOS resident instructors took the eSchool's Instructor Orientation and Certification Course (eIOC) as part of their preparations, which provided additional lessons learned. It is our sincerest hope that the COVID-19 experience not only raises a flag signaling how we must be proactive in preparing for disruptive events in the future, but it also illuminates the art of the possible when high functioning teams come together with a common purpose – to do what is best for their students.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Christopher Weimar and Lt Col Travis Eastbourne at the Air Command and Staff College, as well as Dr. Jay Varuolo and Mr. Mark Burge at the eSchool, who were instrumental in making this effort a success.

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