

A PANDEMIC CASE JOURNAL OF ONE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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To offer order during a rapidly growing pandemic, in mid-March 2020, various academic leaders at a mid-sized, private institution communicated directives to the university community. Faculty largely adapted quickly to the inundation of email and confusion by finding their students, learning technologies on-the-fly, and triaging their curricular plans. By fall, the plan changed again, this time requiring HyBrid and HyFlex with limited face-to-face delivery while simultaneously live streaming to the rest of the class over Zoom. Teaching at an epicenter of the crisis where the university resides, faculty's emotions were high in a time mental health suffered tremendously. This journal of events was written by an interdisciplinary team of faculty.

Multiple digital devices, cameras, audio peripherals, plexiglass, masks, rubber gloves, hand sanitizers, and seating charts emerged as the new COVID-19 back to school supplies for teachers in August of 2020. Chairs arranged facing the front of the room with requirements for learners and professors to stay 6-feet apart became the norm as they reverted to the 1900s teaching style. While proceeding as if it were business as usual, professors walked back into classrooms with trepidation poised to serve students with the caring mentality and human touch (now figuratively) for which their university was acclaimed.

March 2020 marked the closing of physical classroom doors for one midsize private higher education institution in the southeast as the graphs for COVID-19 in the state increased. Hybrid classes with all content in the univer-

sity's learning management system (Blackboard), offered a seamless transition to remote teaching for face-to-face classes using Zoom. Classes were spent as a platform for everyone to share their anxieties, feelings, consolations, compassion, and an introduction of the new classroom that would be used from this point forward that spring. For several, it was their first time using the synchronous webinar room (Zoom). University faculty promptly responded during their spring break to the initial need to adapt their originally planned face-to-face classes into remote learning and to share their expertise to support their colleagues, rapidly revising courses to be delivered remotely. According to the students, throughout the university teachers were prepared while others needed training for this new delivery method. An inundation of email

began week one with resources for online learning.

By the third week, regular updates about teaching through a pandemic and opportunities for online instructional design and technology became available both externally and internally within the institution. Prior to spring, the university was effective and poised to deliver courses in a hybrid and online environment with a systematic process in place. This included specialized training required for all professors selecting this type of course delivery. Once courses were designed to be delivered as such, approvals from departments, deans, and provost, and a rigorous review from an online teaching and learning Committee composed of faculty using courses with standardized rubrics for quality was required. Although prepared with this process in place to offer online learning, the institution prided itself on a history of offering small face-to-face classes, attracting students from across the nation and world. Having *all* classes move from face-to-face to remote learning in spring and summer was unprecedented.

Summer courses that moved to online delivery saw an escalation in enrollment followed by fall classes that moved back to hybrid delivery (requiring at least 50% face-to-face time) saw a decline in enrollment. Summer classes planned and approved for online delivery saw positive results quantitatively in student grades and qualitatively through student evaluations. Zoom rooms were observed to be an efficient use of synchronous delivery with an hour and a half sufficient engagement time for the learners at any one given time. Consistency was the key. Asynchronous learning offered students videos, engaging interactive lessons, readings discussions and peer-to-peer work incorporated an array of technologies including LinkedIn groups and GroupMe as assignments were submitted in the institution's Blackboard learning management system. Students demonstrated critical thinking, learning new technologies, and taking accountability for their learning.

In an effort to communicate order during a period of chaos in a rapidly growing pandemic, supervisors communicated directives and guidance to the university community beginning when the doors first closed to face-to-face learning on campus in March of 2020. By fall, faculty were required to have a plan to offer classes remotely while still returning to the classrooms face to face at least half of the time. The initial transition to remote learning in spring of 2020 saw a rapidly rising number of COVID-19 cases in the state. According to the Florida Department of Health (FDOH), by May, 46,000 tested positive (2020).

By September 2020, the state rose as an epicenter. The numbers continued to grow to 717,874 positive cases in Florida, with over 43,000 cases in the county of the university by this point, and close to 15,000 deaths in the state (FDOH, 2020). Faculty projected a professional business as usual image to move forward, but emotions were high.

As the institution moved into fall, doors were reopened to serve students accustomed to that face-to-face delivery. Faculty turned into superheroes to accommodate students who met the CDC vulnerable population and COVID-19 symptoms by returning to the classroom face-to-face and morphing face-to-face and hybrid classes into HyFlex classes. They were charged to wear masks (along with their students), assuring social distancing, and engagement of students in face-to-face and online classes concurrently. They coped and continued in the face of adversity. Local colleges offered classes mostly online or closed their physical doors after opening them due to contracted cases within the first week of school. Most of the state's universities planned to offer classes online after Thanksgiving to allow students to return about their homes without concern about bringing the virus back to campus after travel.

As the fall classes unfolded and students contracted the virus, they were directed to let their professor know and contact the tracing agency. Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act requirements prohibited faculty from

informing students when classmates contracted the virus. This caused malcontent at times among some who were required to remain in the classrooms when students returned to sit next to their classmates and shared the information personally with them. Students had the authority to determine when they should return based upon their understanding of doctors' orders or testing results. False-negative results proved to cause issues with these decisions at times. Regularly scheduled classrooms met the needs of graduate students by providing 4-hour classes; however, wearing a mask and lecturing induced anxiety and physical headaches at times. Classes that had too many to be in a COVID-19 socially distanced classroom had to split their classes or duplicate teaching time to serve students safely. Faculty had to evoke creativity using digital technologies like Padlet and Zoom breakout rooms to encourage peer-to-peer work to bring the teaching back to the 21st century style of learning (Vygotsky, 1997).

The initial move from face-to-face classes to remote learning in the spring revealed a partition of two mindsets.

- They first blamed the teachers and administration for transitioning poorly and they were frustrated with investments paid for different expectations.
- The second took ownership of their learning and rose as the self-regulated learner (Bandura, 2000; Hu & Driscoll, 2013). With all coursework embedded within a learning management platform. By fall, these same students continued harnessing their education, moving through the modules prepared with assignments and coursework.
- By close to midterm of fall, the new normal was becoming rote as students entered their classrooms, wiping down their surrounding areas where they were assigned to sit week after week and logging into the Zoom room to be able to communicate and share their classwork without ever having to leave

their seat. Regularly scheduled guest speakers could still attend online, and all peer-to-peer work continued in breakout rooms.

Project-based learning, research, and instructional design birthed a whole new focus on COVID-19 issues and health and wellness to overcome mentally and physically observed detriments the pandemic brought to the world. Students now have access to more university licenses to create their own videos and become producers rather than just consumers of the learning. Teachers have incorporated health and wellness activities into their classrooms. Wearables like the Fitbit or Whoop are visibly evident as more students and faculty are using their personal data to track the correlation between their personal efforts toward health and performance. Of critical note are the learning outcomes and civic engagement demonstrated by students in a graduate level course whereby they stepped up to the plate producing outcomes to support the local community during COVID-19. The pandemic has tipped the scale for learning as we know it. For example, a student who balked at ever using the intricate software the university offered (Articulate) told his classmates he was going "to quit the class due to COVID-19"; instead, he was encouraged to apply the skills he learned about the software during the first half of term to his real-world struggle during the pandemic and placed his high school classes online. Not only did he succeed, but he ignited his own students' interest and understanding of the science content ending the course with "Thank you for that [feedback] that sent electrons to a mental light bulb." Even after the term had ended, another student continued to send emails expressing, "I just wanted to tell you that some of my SMEs' [subject matter experts'] colleagues asked for the link of my training and my SME and I provided it to them! Thank you so much. It feels very good to help others during these hard times!"

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