From Face-to-Face to Online Overnight: Bridging the Gaps and Setting Your Course on FIRE

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged all instructors to adjust their course structure for online delivery. How can educators with little online experience pivot to this new environment? By not simply reacting to the situation, but seeing it as an opportunity to use innovative teaching strategies to allay the fears and trepidation of students who face some of the greatest stress of their lifetime.

I come to this challenge from a unique educational perspective. I have taught only three online sections over the past 18 years. FIRE – "Flexibility, Innovation, Rigor, and Engagement" – has been the hallmark of my teaching career. My challenge was to bring that same "FIRE" to a completely new learning environment; a learning environment that far too many assume the students of today embrace.

The Challenge

Instructors must first consider the "humanistic" elements of switching to online modalities. Are they mentally and physically ready for this change? How will it impact family members and others living in the home? Will the online course structure still provide students with the resources they need to succeed? Before preparing online lessons, instructors must consider the ramifications this pandemic brings to their world and begin to work outward to develop pedagogical strategies that propel students toward completion.

The Data

During the first week of teaching online, I conducted a survey to measure my students' overall comfort with the online format. Nearly 76 percent were uncomfortable with the switch to online learning. In the open-ended comments, students wrote that they would have never chosen an online class and did not intend to take them with any regularity in the future. These data question the assumption that students feel natural switching to online modalities. Therefore, instructors should exercise caution when assuming the experience and comfort level students may have with online learning.

Moreover, instructors should gauge their own level of comfort with online learning and address any gaps they may have. An important part of my classes is the Socratic experience. So, I attended professional development webinars that discussed tools, advice, and "dos and don'ts" of online discussions..

The Execution

Our main goal as online educators is to bring students across the finish line with as close to a face-to-face experience as possible, using all the best available practices and tools to help. Instructors should begin by assessing their syllabi and asking themselves how online tools can be used to ensure grading remains consistent. For instance, if participation is a part of students' final grades, instructors can continue to provide participation points by requiring students to post on daily discussion boards. Instructors can also incorporate digital tools such as Kahoot and Padlet for interaction and engagement. Multiple-choice exams can be reformatted as essay exams if instructors are worried about cheating. Instructors can give students essay prompts ahead of time and choose a couple to appear on the actual exam.

Keeping regular office hours is an important part of maintaining your accessibility and recreating face-to-face interaction. Instructors can host virtual office hours via Zoom, WebEx, Google Hangouts, or Skype to provide students with the opportunity to engage with the material, ask questions, and feel tethered to the mother ship.

The Accomplishment

In times of stress and change, our greatest discoveries take place. By relying on their experience in the seated classroom and incorporating technology, instructors who feel like "newbies" in the online classroom can create a rich learning experience for all students.

Methias Plank, Department Chair, Government

For more information, contact the author at Lone Star College-University Park, methias.w.plank@lonestar.edu.