Creating an Engaging, Synchronous Online Experience

When Tallahassee Community College moved its classes online in response to the coronavirus pandemic, many educators, including myself, were forced to teach online for the first time. TCC conducted the last six weeks of the spring semester asynchronously, and a majority of students expressed that they didn't like this format. In order to succeed in future online courses, students needed more structure and engagement. In response to this feedback, TCC administration developed a synchronous online format, branded it TCC LIVE, and tested it over the summer. Classes met online using Zoom at scheduled times throughout the week. Students responded positively to the new format. This fall, 60 percent of classes are being offered via TCC LIVE.

When I learned that the courses I was scheduled to teach would be among the TCC LIVE offerings, I was concerned. While my students and I had successfully navigated the final six weeks of the spring term online, the expectation of teaching online for the entire semester, and maybe the entire year, filled me with anxiety.

In my 17 years of teaching at the high school and college levels, I always felt my strengths – and my favorite parts of teaching – were interacting with students and producing assignments that showcased their creativity. Initially, I was at a loss for how to effectively incorporate these strengths online. However, after the reality of the challenge before me began to sink in, I resolved to deliver the highest quality instruction possible in my TCC LIVE courses.

Building Community Is Essential

In any class taught online or face-to-face, it's important to build a community in which students feel comfortable with you as the instructor. In our online format, I create as many opportunities as possible to interact with my students – before class, during class, in Zoom breakout rooms, and after class.

It's also important for the instructor and students to become acquainted and for the students to get to know one another. They often learn better from each other than they do from the instructor. A first-week introduction message board works well for this purpose. I have my students post a short introduction of themselves and ask them to select and comment on two other students' introductions.

During the first week of class, I also survey students using Google Forms to find out what they did and didn't like about their previous online classes. Students have indicated they like the flexibility of working at their own pace. Many echo TCC's findings that the lack of structure and engagement is a challenge. In that same survey, I ask students to submit a "walk-up song," a favorite song they would choose to be played while approaching home plate to bat during a baseball game. Using their feedback, I create Spotify playlists for each class. In Adobe Photoshop, I make a playlist graphic with students' names next to their song selections. The graphic and playlist link are shared on Canvas. "It's a good way to start off the class to wake everyone up a bit," one student shared.

Breakout Rooms

During my first year of teaching high school, I had no textbooks or other teaching materials. Students looked to me as the main source for all their learning needs, and that was a problem. I solved this issue by using computers, digital tools, and the internet. I learned that the best way to keep students engaged is to have them work on assignments during class. At TCC, I have observed that giving students class time to work on assignments makes college more manageable. Seventy percent of students at TCC work at least part-time. "I work two jobs and having time to do assignments in class reduces stress and allows me to learn better," one student shared.

Breakout rooms have become my go-to Zoom feature to help facilitate active learning in class. I use them in almost every class session, assigning no more than three students per breakout room. I have found that students are more likely to ask questions in breakout rooms than they are in regular class sessions because they feel less intimidated. In addition, once students start working on an assignment in a breakout room, they may discover questions they did not have when the assignment was explained to the entire class.

Using Computers, Digital Tools, and the Internet

Varying activities in synchronous online class meetings is vital to keeping students engaged. I begin each of my classes with general announcements and an overview of Canvas items. Then I provide an explanation of the day's lesson, followed by activities in breakout rooms where students discuss the day's topic and answer questions in small groups. I circulate among

the rooms to answer questions. When students have had enough time to work in their breakout rooms, they return to the main Zoom room. Sometimes we play Kahoot!, an online game for which I have created quizzes based on material covered. We play it like a TV game show with me as the game's Steve Harvey. I also designate a few class periods each term for individual conferences to discuss students' written work.

Google Drive is my general app of choice. I require students in all classes to send me their Gmail address at the beginning of the semester so I can create one shared Google Drive folder for the entire class, and one folder for each student that is shared only with me. The shared Google Drive folders allow me to do some things that I otherwise would be unable to do. For instance, during my individual conferences with students, we review and edit their written assignments simultaneously in Google Docs.

In two of my courses, I take traditionally written assignments and ask students to create videos that demonstrate their knowledge. Anticipating that most students have no experience with such projects, I walk them through the step-by-step process of creating videos. In my College Success course, each student produces a video that provides an overview of their reasons for enrolling in college, lists their strengths and weaknesses, and outlines their short- and long-term goals. Research has shown that students who are aware of their purpose in college are more likely to overcome obstacles, stay motivated, and graduate. In my Survey of Mass Media course, students create a video presentation that highlights the importance of the First Amendment, its relevance today, and how it shapes the role of the media in society.

Manufacture Opportunities to Interact With Students

A colleague taught online synchronous classes for the first time last summer and provided me with this suggestion: Begin Zoom classes early and stay late. It was sound advice I took to heart. Now I launch my class Zoom session five to ten minutes early to chat and socialize with students. After class, I stay online to answer questions and provide technical help. The students appreciate the opportunity to talk with me one-on-one and avoid the stress of asking a "stupid question" in front of their classmates. One by one, students leave the Zoom session as their issues are resolved. Students seem to appreciate the help, and it is another opportunity for me to interact with them individually. This strategy also increases my efficiency because fielding those same requests via email would be much more time-consuming.

As the semester has progressed, I have created other opportunities to interact with students individually, in small groups, or as a class. I invite my students to introduce their pets or share their hobbies and interests. We discuss music and other media-related topics. Some of these techniques are gleaned from my colleagues. Others are impromptu. After all, let's face it, some of what we are doing in this new normal of expanded online instruction is making it up and learning as we go.

Revisit Course Policies

In the first two weeks of the fall semester, it became clear I needed to revisit my late work submission policy. Previously, I allowed students to submit a designated number of assignments up to three days late. I thought this was a reasonable expectation as many of those assignments were started, and often completed, during class. However, because of the disruption caused by the pandemic, it only made sense to relax my deadlines.

My new policy allows students to submit most assignments up to a week after they are due, without penalty. No justification is necessary. If students have an excuse that is recognized by the college, such as a documented illness, I deal with those requests separately. For routine requests to extend assignment deadlines, I require students to stay behind after class to talk to me instead of sending an email. This creates another opportunity for me to interact with my students.

Conclusion

While my planning time has increased dramatically, I am pleased and a little surprised by how well this semester is progressing. In a recent survey, a majority of my students indicated they are satisfied with their experience and the delivery of instruction. Ninety-seven percent of students said they found my course as enjoyable, if not more enjoyable, than other online courses they have taken.

"Having struggled with online classes this summer, I was extremely worried going into this, but I have now found myself thriving," one student said. "Thank you for caring and devoting time to make the class not only fun, but an incredible online learning experience."

I would never have anticipated that I would do some of my best teaching during a global pandemic. But crises necessitate change, and although that change can be uncomfortable, it can also be a motivating factor for trying things that we might not do in traditional circumstances. Sometimes the lack of comfort is a catalyst for creativity and innovation.

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