INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Let's Show Compassion and Empathy to Our Students While Diversifying Our Online Courses

The pandemic thrust many instructors into an online environment for which they were unprepared. Prior to COVID-19, teaching online required several hours of training and time spent designing course content and a course website. The past eight months have necessitated on-the-job training, with many of us struggling at times, learning through failure, and spending countless hours creating new online materials such as recorded lectures. With so much change, it can be easy to overlook the fact that our students, too, have been thrust into a new online format without receiving proper training.

Student needs shift drastically in the online classroom. They may need more time to complete assignments because their access to the internet, computers, textbooks, and the college library is limited. They may suddenly be unable to meet during class time because of family commitments. First-generation students, low-income students, and minority students may be struggling with additional stressors. The online classroom creates more than just a digital divide. It creates a divide between students who can afford to study without a job and those who cannot; a divide between students with dependents to care for and those who are on their own; and for all students, it creates a divide between what college was like before the pandemic—when they could see their peers and instructor in person, visit the library, attend campus events—and what college looks like now.

Self-Motivated Versus Unmotivated Students

In any classroom, there are motivated and unmotivated students. Some students come to the classroom ready to work, while others need to be encouraged. Oftentimes, the key to turning an unmotivated student into a motivated student is taking time to understand their preferred learning style.

My classes all have more than 30 students from diverse backgrounds with different learning styles and personalities. To address my students' unique needs and promote inclusion, I create small group activities in breakout rooms on Zoom to help students be creative and work on assignments collaboratively. Other helpful activities that cater to a range of learning styles include video assignments, asking students to journal or write a short article, creating 3D models, or creating posters. Students are asked to share their finished projects on a discussion board and are encouraged to comment on one another's work.

Many textbooks have online content that can be leveraged in the online classroom to supplement lectures and textbook readings. Other technology can also be incorporated into the online classroom to increase participation and motivation. iClicker can be used to measure how well concepts are being learned in a PowerPoint presentation and provide students with the opportunity to give feedback to the instructor. Nearpod, Sacrative, Polldaddy, and Kahoot! all offer great options for polling students through a fun and interactive interface.

One barrier to student motivation I have observed is assigning an excessive amount of course materials in an effort to make up for time lost by not meeting face to face. While instructors may think that an increased workload will accommodate for missed time, the extra assignments can make students feel lost or behind, and can even make them lose interest in their career path.

Let's Show Compassion

Over the past eight months, students have had to rearrange their lives, habits, and daily activities to adjust to our new normal. They may still be teaching themselves how to navigate the LMS with little to no training. Some students may be working long hours to support their family, as well as teaching their children from home. Some may be dealing with family members who are sick.

Many instructors are facing these same difficulties. We can help by listening to students' concerns and providing ways to cope with online experiences, allowing additional time to complete assignments, and guiding students to the necessary resources on campus to eliminate any barriers to success. By extending compassion to your students, you encourage them to do the same for you.

Andrea McDonald, Assistant Professor, Health

For more information, contact the author at Prairie View A&M University, anmcdonald@pvamu.edu.