Chapter 8

(Re)Imagining Remote Teaching and Learning: Meeting Students Where They Are

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In March 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 forced the majority of higher education institutions to close campuses and pivot instruction to remote learning in the United States. As a result, many educators were scrambling to develop engaging remote instruction while experiencing fear, anxiety, and a sense of uncertainty. As a teacher educator at a mid-sized master’s comprehensive university in the eastern United States, I quickly realized that I needed to overcome several obstacles to teach my courses effectively and to promote student learning. First, I had to exercise cognitive reframing to redirect my anxiety and confusion (Morin, 2020). Cognitive reframing is a strategy that can be used to help create a different outlook on stressors in order to promote a more positive life. By looking at the present situation from a slightly different perspective, I was able to alter my perception of the pandemic, which in turn helped me focus on my students and their needs. This technique empowered me in my decision-making and contributed to enacting change in my instructional practices. Second, I had to re-evaluate each course’s objectives to determine which ones were building blocks for other courses and were not prone to changes. Third, I had to capitalize on a wealth of online resources offered by vendors and publishers in response to COVID-19 in order to select appropriate materials and textbooks.

Situated in the conceptual framework of high-impact practices (HIP) set forth by Kuh and his associates (Kuh et al., 2013) and adopted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), this chapter aims to discuss what one teacher educator did to identify and build on student strengths in order to successfully finish the 2020 spring semester courses. In addition, the chapter will highlight what students thought promoted their learning and sustained their engagement. While much of the research on HIPs has been conducted on undergraduate residential campuses, new evidence that HIPs can be implemented successfully in online environments (Linder & Hayes, 2018) is emerging. Collaborative projects and undergraduate research, which are part of 11 HIPs, were the focus of the outcomes in my courses in which students created group lessons and individual unit plans, as well as individual inquiry research projects. These activities required higher-order cognitive skills based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Bloom et al., 1956).

Realizing that in order to continue teaching content, I needed to consider my students’ social and emotional learning first (CASEL, 2020). The saying “Maslow before Bloom” became even more prevalent in the midst of a global pandemic. One of the canons of education is that learners have to be ready to learn. Maslow’s (1968) Hierarchy of Basic Needs asserts that to
reach the highest level – self-actualization – learners’ previous four levels have to be satisfied. While the first two levels of physiological needs and safety/security could have been met when students traveled back home and stayed with their immediate families, the needs such as belonging and esteem became the driving force when redesigning my spring semester courses. This sudden turnabout further underscored the challenges of making these needs the priority for remote teaching.

The section that follows provides specific examples of how I used cognitive reframing and took these challenges as opportunities to meet my students where they are in order to promote their engagement and learning outcomes. These ideas became reality and were made possible due to Broome’s (2020) Higher Ed Learning Collective Facebook group that focused on aiding college and university educators transitioning from in-person to online instruction. This group has become a community of global educators who share their cognitive capital and experiences to support educators around the globe. My gratitude also extends to all my students and colleagues who continue to grapple with being vulnerable while trying to make meaning and having a sense of purpose in the time of a pandemic.

Lessons Learned

Polling students offered important reactions to the pivot. The following will discuss the lessons learned throughout the pivot. There was a need to shift thinking in order to keep a community of learners that was engaged and self-managed. This was accomplished through scaffolding, monitoring for understanding, and providing feedback.

Polling

Using technological affordances and capitalizing on formative assessments, I first polled my students anonymously using a Google Form to explore the types of resources and technologies they had at the time of transitioning to remote learning. Based on their responses, it became apparent that their textbooks were left behind in dorms and their preference was for asynchronous remote learning due to low Internet bandwidth and poor connectivity in their homes. The results from each polling were shared out in a class announcement on Canvas, our university’s learning management system.

(Re)Creating a Community of Learners

Consequently, the type of teaching, i.e., asynchronous, was dictated by my students’ needs and experiences. However, regular check-ins through either virtual office hours using WebEx or individual phone calls were implemented to alleviate student anxiety and uncertainty associated with COVID-19 and to connect with each student individually. As evidenced in this anonymous course evaluation response, creating a safe learning environment was my utmost priority:

She worked so hard to create a safe learning community in our classroom and demonstrated exactly how to teach through her teaching. I also want to say that she went above and beyond to communicate with all her students after the COVID situation and set up personal WebEx conferences with each of her students to check in with them and get feedback on the transition to online.
Lessons from the Pivot

As educators, we should create remote classroom spaces where students feel their voices matter and they belong, thus mitigating a sense of loneliness found on so many campuses even prior to the pandemic (Twenge et al., 2019). To build relationships and to create a sense of community, Darby (2019) has suggested three relational levels for remote courses, such as the relationships that instructors have with students, students have with instructors, and students have with each other.

To assist in building these relationships after pivoting to remote learning, I created an introductory video on FlipGrid and posted it in Canvas inviting students to join me in creating their videos addressing the following task: “Choose a peer and record your 90-second video cheering them up and sharing your ways of staying positive in the current situation. Your peer will return the favor to you as well.” Imad (2020) has proposed seven ways educators can help students thrive in class in times of trauma with the first one working to ensure students’ emotional, cognitive, physical, and interpersonal safety. This simple but powerful strategy facilitated peer support and fostered authentic discussions online.

Providing Self-Management & Scaffolding

Furthermore, a detailed weekly schedule for each course that outlined tasks, objectives, due dates, points earned, and assessment procedures was created and shared with students on the announcement page in Canvas prior to the start of each week. Suggested preparation times for activities mapped with certain days of the week and locations to submit assignments were an integral part of each weekly schedule. These detailed weekly schedules served as part of self-regulation and instructional scaffolding techniques and were highly appreciated by all students, as evidenced in the following anonymous student course evaluation statement: “In the online section of the semester, I had more work in this class than other classes but it was the least stressful because the schedule was so clearly defined.” Lowering anxiety through established structure and routine helped students to work smarter and more efficiently, which in turn contributed to their overall academic success as measured by each course grade and student satisfaction on student course evaluations.

Promoting Active Engagement

To ease students into remote learning, activities that capitalized on social interaction and positive interdependence (Johnson et al., 2007) were emphasized. Focusing on (re)establishing a community of learners and providing students with a real audience, such as their peers, became an integral component of each course. This, in turn, promoted student self-esteem, which is an important aspect of psychological health and a higher level of Maslow’s (1968) Hierarchy of Basic Needs. As Johnson et al. (2007) have asserted, “The studies that have been conducted at the college level found that cooperation promoted higher self-esteem than did competitive (effect size = 0.47) or individualistic (effect size = 0.29) efforts” (p. 20). Even though these collaborative activities took much more time online, they were perceived as beneficial and necessary by students. One of the examples of active engagement was creating lesson plans in small groups and providing group peer feedback to other groups. Each lesson plan was evaluated based on instructor and student (self- and peer) feedback. Students had opportunities to revise their lesson plans in light of this feedback prior to submitting it for a final grade.

Monitoring and Checking for Understanding
Interactive technologies, such as FlipGrid, Kahoot! and Nearpod, were integrated to promote a sense of belonging as well as to instill structure and mutual accountability for students and the instructor alike. These also served the role of periodic formative assessments and became paramount to ensure that students were engaged in their learning and to monitor their understanding of content and their progression toward meeting each course outcome. These low-stakes assessments were used and regularly evaluated using individual and whole class check-ins in addition to feedback supplied via anonymous Google Forms.

Figure 1 depicts an example of how students were surveyed on their perceptions of the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the first six statements using a five-point Likert-item response (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) as well as their overall satisfaction with FlipGrid using an open-ended response in question seven.

**Figure 1**
*Example of Questions on the Use of FlipGrid*

1. I find FlipGrid useful for learning.
2. FlipGrid helped me develop confidence in the subject area.
3. I find FlipGrid easy to use.
4. Using FlipGrid is a bad idea.
5. FlipGrid makes learning more interesting.
6. I would like to use FlipGrid in future modules.
7. What in particular did you find useful about FlipGrid? Is there a way that the use of FlipGrid could be improved?

Student survey responses, as shown in Figure 2 for question five, were overwhelmingly positive. Over 77 percent of students (22 responses) saw tremendous value in using this technology to connect with others and to build a sense of belonging, as garnered in the following anonymous response: "I think this is one of the best modules we’ve used throughout online learning! They [FlipGrid posts] are relatively simple to make, and is the closest thing we have now to a real class discussion."

**Figure 2**
*Example of Student Responses on the Use of FlipGrid*

Choose a statement that you identify with: I enjoy FlipGrid assignments in this class.

22 responses
Similar surveys based on the use of Kahoot!, Nearpod, and Canvas discussion boards were administered to gather student perceptions on the effectiveness of these technologies to engage them and promote their learning.

**Instructor Preparation and Feedback**

Planning out each weekly agenda and schedule, albeit overly time-consuming, was a necessity for successful remote teaching and learning. DeBrock et al. (2020) have postulated, “Effective online teaching often requires more planning and more overall effort than traditional classroom teaching of the same material” (para. 8). Keeping in mind time frames, rearranging student groups, and scaffolding activities from lower to higher levels of Bloom’s taxonomy required undivided attention to detail, an understanding of students’ backgrounds and experiences, and a keen desire to help each student succeed.

This support was provided through timely, relevant, and specific instructor and peer feedback on student drafts of assignments. This feedback was grounded in clearly delineated rubrics and checklists with specific prompts for feedback. Figure 3 depicts the checklist for the inquiry/action research project that shows key elements students needed to attain in order to successfully complete this assignment. It was also used to provide peer feedback on a draft of this key assignment.

**Figure 3**
*Checklist for Inquiry/Action Research Project*

Directions: Please fill out this checklist and provide written responses to help your peer revise their inquiry/action research paper. Remember this is not an evaluative checklist, but rather a formative way of providing feedback. You will upload this checklist to the discussion board under the peer’s name you were assigned to.

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Lessons from the Pivot

The paper is free from all but an occasional grammatical error.

All references are well cited in text and in the references using the current APA style.

Positive comments:

Constructive comments:

Written comments were shared on uploaded assignments in Canvas or using comment features in Word or Google Docs. Through individual check-ins, students were able to meet and raise any concerns or questions online if needed. In addition, general feedback as it applied to the whole class was provided on each weekly announcement in Canvas. These observations concurred with the findings from a mixed-method study conducted by Rodriguez and Koubek (2019) that revealed the importance of constructive feedback on assignments as one of the essential components of student engagement and learning.

Conclusion

The experience with pivoting to remote teaching and learning made me question the priorities I set forth for my students and course outcomes. Utilizing cognitive reframing (Morin, 2020) empowered my instructional choices and enacting change in how I approached teaching and learning amidst the pandemic. Establishing a sense of belonging and self-esteem took precedence over trying to cover each course’s objective. To move forward, I had to meet students where they were, which meant (re)imagining activities and tasks that focused on asynchronous learning and abandoning some of the in-person activities I planned originally.

Students’ social and emotional competence (CASEL, 2020) became an integral part of my teaching which manifested itself in first and foremost actively listening to my students in order to provide an equitable learning environment based on their specific needs and contexts. Capitalizing on cooperative learning and project-based learning in which students’ personal and cultural experiences were incorporated promoted a sense of unity and interdependence among all of them. This in turn supported students’ identities and needs and elevated their own agency through an inclusive classroom environment where students became co-constructors and partners of the educational process.

Relying more on the technological affordances and formative assessments, I focused on polling student opinions prior to (re)designing tasks and activities, (re)creating a safe learning community, providing self-management techniques and appropriate scaffolding, promoting active engagement, monitoring and checking for understanding, investing time and energy in each week preparation, and providing constructive and timely feedback. Although time-consuming and demanding, these techniques reaped dividends in the way students felt cared for, appreciated, and valued, and in turn were able to focus on high-impact practices, such collaborative projects and undergraduate research.

Educators’ focus should be on their students first and their social and emotional learning as we continue to navigate through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting the needs of students must be the primary objective at all educational levels. Without “Maslow before Bloom” being at the center of instructional practices, learning opportunities would be lost and student engagement would be a distant goal.
References


