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Communicating to Improve the Lived Experiences of Learning During COVID-19



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The spring 2020 semester and the subsequent ones have truly been like no other due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many aspects of the college experience were delivered online via learning management systems or online sharing platforms. The interpersonal relationships between instructor and students and students with their peers entailed re-examining how communication and information were shared between parties. Many reasonable people would agree that education continuity during a global pandemic is a trying experience for all involved. Thus, making purposeful changes to increase effective communication ensured that students' academic experience would be as close as possible to being on campus. Careful attention to the channels through which thoughts and information were shared between sender and receiver; what was taught; and how the messages were delivered helped inspired confidence in students as they learned independently at home. Instructional videos and audios posted to the learning management and course website were more effective than written communication, and they supplemented the online delivery modality. The instructor identified frequently asked questions and sections of the lecture that required demonstrations for clarity, examples of video titles created were: Narrowing Searches, Algorithmic Bias Impact, Controlled Vocabulary and Rubric Performances. These recordings served to enhance the more spontaneous direct exchanges that occur in the physical classroom and to create aids that were accessible at will. Therefore, posting visual tools helped to demystify content and serve as a mitigating strategy for the unexpected change to distance learning. Instructors are committed to their students, therefore implementing multiple communication methodologies and technology that improved dialogue in the distance learning environment benefited learning (Drange & Kargaard, 2017).

Though students were fearful of the uncertainty that laid ahead when the college closed its classrooms in March of 2020, they capitulated to the new online modality of online instruction. To meet the goals for a smoother transition, students' peer-to-peer communication remotely consisted of, making a space for them to converse,

share their stories and course concerns about their lived experiences during the pandemic. Adopting assignments to reflect the current unprecedented events gave student an opportunity to participate in active learning organically and holistically (Moosa, 2019) especially in the first year of study. However, few of these initiatives have focused on the classroom context even though classroom engagement is a prerequisite for success. The purpose of this study was to ascertain what classroom surveys could reveal about student engagement. In addition, it aimed to advance the notion of engagement to include what students and lecturers do in the classroom to make classroom learning more effective. An exploratory case study research design was used, which drew on Tinto's (2012). One such change was having students form self-enrolled groups at the beginning of the semester instead of doing so after the mid-point of the semester to work on their group projects which were a course requirement. Changes to group projects involved students co-moderating, and swapping roles within and between the groups until a cut-off-committed date. The reflective instructional changes employed lended more support to students (LaPrade et al., 2014). Also, it encouraged them to build better group dynamics (Khalil & Ebner, 2017). It was a provocative move by the instructor with the threat of the arrangement descending into chaos. Students were guided on how to depersonalize themselves from the task. To help keep the focus on the group task the students were encouraged to use video diaries to log the group's activity. The group guidelines stipulated that member's role was in the group and what their task would be. This facilitated swapping because as students moved around for intrinsic and extrinsic reasons the tasks and the charge to be executed, within the group remain unchanged and unaffected by the incoming person. An example of a transcript from a student video diary "... I am tasked with researching two industries impacted by Corona, so far I have downloaded two articles from the New York Times. They are not peer reviewed." Another, similar recording is "My role is technical, I will be spearheadin [sic] writing notes for the group on how to work in Dublin Core." As students cross-pollinated between groups, the posted video diary served as an accountability logged and students were able to see immediately the group status and make informed determinations. The video diaries were useful in transforming the students in class who would normally be taciturn and unsociable. This helped students to embrace the lived experience of a digital space thus increasing their comfort with education continuity in an unintended learning environment (Watts, 2016).

The instructor in the course emphasized adding and using technology to enhance student learning. Slack, the online messaging platform was introduced into the course to promote students' interactions with the instructor. The flexible accessibility of Slack from anywhere and the option to upload multiple types of files improved the messaging communication with students. The advantage of Slack was the higher activity within the shared community. The posting and commenting of work were more prolific. Using Slack as a class meeting space allowed for greater collaboration and it was a good medium for professor's feedback to student. It was evidential that

visual communication and feedback to students worked because they incorporated changes into their assignments more than when the feedback format was written communication. Instructors are attached to the physicality of written feedback. However, students do not always respond to those detailed written notations meant to help them.

After a final review of the course, the instructor and students felt that the efforts put forth collectively was successful in keeping communication channels open. All involved learned a lot. The Student Evaluation of Teachers (SET) score was used as a qualitative assessment of the engagement of students (Raman & Nedungadi, 2020). During such an unparalleled time in the second semester of distance learning this data from students was useful. As higher education institutions plan for a post COVID campus instruction, returnees are alit with hope for the familiarity of campus life. †

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