COMMENTARY

Perspective from a Teaching and Learning Center during Emergency Remote Teaching

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities around the globe frantically switched to emergency remote teaching. This commentary provides the perspective from a teaching and learning center about the difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning, plus suggestions for preparing for an online fall semester.

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In teaching and learning centers across the globe, faculty developers, instructional designers, and educational technologists have spent the last few months frantically assisting faculty, staff, and graduate students to make the shift to emergency remote teaching. They offered workshops, provided one-on-one consultations, developed resources, and troubleshooted issues. But, did you realize that this is what teaching and learning centers always do? The last few months have simply been for more faculty and more quickly. One of our educational technologists alone offered 50 workshops attended by 1650 faculty, staff, and graduate students over a 6 week span during the spring semester. In contrast, across the entire teaching and learning center we typically train 2000 individuals annually.

While centers for teaching and learning have enjoyed the opportunity to work with and train so many faculty, staff, and graduate students over the last months, recently during conversations with teaching and learning colleagues around the globe similar wishes were expressed. All of the wishes revolve around the desire to advance learning through better teaching. As Ackoff and Greenberg so aptly point out in “Turning Learning Right Side Up” “the objective of education is learning, not teaching.”

Some of you have probably heard my story about the cartoon I had hanging outside my office in which one boy tells the other boy he taught his dog to whistle but when the second boy points out that the dog is not whistling, the first one says something along the lines of “I said I taught him; I did not say he learned.” The story I often tell is about the day that I heard two students in the hallway discussing the cartoon and theorizing what it meant. One student thought it was my statement that I felt students were too ignorant to learn anything that is taught to them; conversely, the other student thought it was my statement that I felt faculty were too incompetent to teach in a way that allowed students to learn. Too bad for the students but I was sitting in my office listening to their conversation. This prompted me to invite them in for a discussion about the real meaning behind the cartoon. They probably rue the day they had to listen to me explain that teaching and learning are two different concepts. As the cartoon demonstrates, simply because teaching occurred does not guarantee learning did. Conversely, learning can occur without the need for teaching because the learner can gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes through experience or by studying. Therefore, teaching is not the most important aspect of learning so the student should remain the focus of the learning environment, rather than the instructor.

While technology provided the ability to transition to teaching during the spring semester, what was provided for the remainder of the semester was emergency remote teaching, not online learning. Teaching and learning centers observed faculty attempting to pretend nothing had changed and transition their course without revision. Some faculty even asked how to provide a 3-hour synchronous lecture or 3-hour asynchronous video. Even during the best of times, neither of these is ideal without including activities during that time which provide significant student engagement with the content. During remote teaching, relying on synchronous attendance proves especially challenging due to technology, connectivity, accessibility, and time zone issues.

In contrast to emergency remote teaching, online learning is bound by many standards to ensure optimal learning. Online learning provides opportunities for community building among students and with the instructor; online learning provides opportunities for learner engagement with the material through realistic practice, spaced repetition, real-world context, and feedback; online learning provides opportunities to support learners. Online learning focuses on the achievement of learning objectives, rather than covering content. Online learning also creates a safe environment that
addresses the needs of all learners, including accessibility. Even with courses that they have taught face-to-face for years, faculty who work with our instructional designers typically require 6 months of diligent course design to create an online course that meets all of the standards established by Quality Matters.

Over the years, numerous faculty have commented that they “do not believe in online teaching.” The two most common reasons expressed are: 1) because students will not learn that way, and 2) because students are not engaged online. Research has found these concerns to be unfounded. In the US Department of Education’s meta-analysis of online learning, researchers found students in online courses performed better than those who learned face-to-face. They also found the effect size was larger when online learning was collaborative or instructor-led, rather than independent learning. In research analyzed by Thalheimer, he found that it is the teaching method, not the modality, that produces the difference in learning outcomes. If the learning method is held constant then online learning and face-to-face learning produce equal results but when the learning experience is designed for online learning then the outcomes are better with online learning than with face-to-face.

In reality many institutions will face a fall semester that is either fully or partially online. Now is the time to prepare. What was acceptable as emergency remote teaching will not be appropriate for an online fall semester. Rather than attempting to replicate face-to-face lectures utilizing technology, quality online courses require engaging students with the content, providing collaboration, and creation of community. As any teaching and learning center will tell you, while there are many steps in creating an online course, the first step in preparing for an online course is to clearly define measurable learning objectives. Another important aspect of designing an online course is being flexible. An online course will not look identical to your face-to-face class. Online courses tend to be even more engaging and interactive than a face-to-face class so students will interact heavily with the instructor, the other students, and the content in a meaningful way. Flexibility is also encouraged in the types of assessments incorporated in the course with the addition of more formative assessment and projects. If an online fall semester is mandated, flexibility will also be needed with students who continue to have technology, connectivity, time zone, and mental health challenges. Technology will be a larger component of your online course so, as you select technology tools to support instructor-to-student and student-to-student collaboration and interaction, find a colleague with whom to practice using the technology before trying it with students. Now is also the time to get any videos made to share content. Videos should be short (ideally less than 6 minutes), engaging, and preferably include you on the screen in addition to content. All videos must be captioned, not just for student with an accommodation but to benefit all students. Asynchronous course content is preferred for online courses to allow students to opportunity to watch it when they have connectivity and to re-watch it to deepen learning. Synchronous activities should be restricted to collaboration or office hours.

During the chaotic shift to emergency remote learning, many of you may have turned to your teaching and learning centers as a source of pedagogical and technological knowledge and skill. As we have heard from many faculty we have worked with over the last few months, you may have been surprised and impressed by the amount of knowledge and expertise contained within the center. If you have not been routinely availing yourself of the support offered by your institution’s teaching and learning, why not? As a faculty friend likes to point out, being a faculty member is the job you did not train for. Most of your training prior to your first academic position related to your discipline. Training for best practices and theories related to teaching was often limited or non-existent. Many faculty we work with admit that they simply replicate what they experienced as a student even if they did not feel it was an effective learning experience. Teaching and learning center staff are trained on best practice and theory so take advantage of what they have to offer. The goal of teaching and learning centers is to advance student learning and, therefore, would be happy to have more faculty seek assistance to ensure you have an effective online course, rather than continue with emergency remote teaching.

REFERENCES