

Chapter 19

Rolling With the Flow: Online Faculty and Student Presence in a Post-COVID-19 World

Jim A. McCleskey

Western Governors University, USA & Houston Community College System, USA

Rebecca M. Melton

Western Governors University, USA

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 created a paradigm shift in higher education (HE), speeding up a process that was already underway and forcing institutions and instructors to develop the competencies necessary to offer effective delivery and resources online. Student reflections on Spring 2020 suggested that institutions were not always successful in their transitions. Students saw gaps in crucial areas, including online instructor presence, social presence for instructors and peers, and instructor immediacy. The purpose of this chapter is to propose best practices for instructional practice and technology in the online virtual education space to increase student engagement, instructor immediacy, and online social presence. HE institutions must embrace or enhance a variety of techniques that will improve the student experience. HE continues its shift toward cutting-edge technology to scale, streamline, and improve student engagement and interaction while creating new ways of establishing instructor presence and immediacy.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented disruptive force impacting every facet of modern life. While the world still feels the effects profoundly, attention has turned toward predicting a post-COVID-19 environment. Thoughtful experts can disagree about the new world created by the virus, but they unanimously predict that it will not return to normal. Education in general and higher education (HE) specifically experienced a seismic paradigm shift in spring 2020 as 86% of HE programs moved online within three weeks (Patch, 2020). That transition rapidly accelerated a trend in the growth of online delivery that

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began years prior (Lederman, 2018). This shift is part of a more significant trend away from traditional classroom teaching toward online modalities with the latest technologies and represents “a digital disruption from within” (Thomas & Thorpe, 2018, p. 63). Once the Spring 2020 semester concluded, most of HE remained online for fall 2020 and spring 2021. Although all the universities and colleges rolled with the flow and made strides toward improving their online delivery, not every university or college moved its programs online successfully from the viewpoint of its students. COVID revealed the strengths and weaknesses of an education system facing the challenges of digitalization (Valverde-Berrocso, 2020).

Students expressed disappointment in the engagement with both faculty and peers while expressing a positive view of the attempts by their institutions to provide valuable learning experiences (Patch, 2020). These opinions resulted in an opportunity for HE professionals, educators, and administrators to create a larger community of care around students, take stock of what is valuable, transform and improve online delivery. As the consumers of education, students’ views of online delivery and interactions drive that change. Understanding instructors’ and peers’ online presence and immediacy in the virtual classroom are critical. This chapter presents a discussion of student views of the online delivery of HE programs in a post-COVID-19 environment, instructor and student presence, instructor immediacy, and a glimpse into the future of applied HE technology as a mode of delivering on these promises.

Student Views of Online Learning Experiences

Many surveys conducted during 2020 provided insight into students’ feelings about the quality of the education they received during COVID-19. The findings revealed that although 65% of students felt that their university was handling the crisis well, only 15% of respondents felt that online classes were at least as practical as in-person classes (Patch, 2020). A survey of 955 college students showed that a third of student respondents were concerned about losing contact with their instructors, and 31% were concerned about being isolated from their classmates (Pinkus, 2020). Pinkus (2020) found that 87% of students rated instructor virtual office hours as at least somewhat beneficial or very beneficial. This finding is counterintuitive as the authors note that instructors who hold virtual office hours often find themselves sitting alone in a virtual meeting space. Other findings included that video/chat conferencing is ranked as the second most popular option for communication with instructors and peers, while email ranked number one for instructors and texting ranked number one for peers (Pinkus, 2020). In April 2020, a one-question survey found that 75% of students felt they were not receiving a quality e-learning experience from their HE institutions (75% of College Students Unhappy..., 2020). Supporting that 75% figure, a survey of 3,000 students by tophat.com found that 78% of students rated the online class experience as unengaging, 75% missed the face-to-face interactions with students and faculty, and 38% did not enjoy or see the value in synchronous online learning (Top Hat Staff, 2020).

Additionally, McCleskey and Gruda (2020) conducted an online survey of 500 college students across various HE institutions. The findings showed that 45% of students did not think they received a quality learning experience from their university or college. Further findings included 59% of student respondents rated online learning as less effective than in-person learning, 17% were dissatisfied with instructor preparation, 20% were dissatisfied with the quality of instruction, 26% were dissatisfied with student engagement, and 22% were dissatisfied with the overall learning in their recent courses (McCleskey & Gruda, 2020). What does this mean for the future of HE programs?

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