Chapter 68

Engaging Graduate Students During a Pandemic:
Critical Thinking, Creativity, Communication, and Collaboration in Emergency Remote Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the application of multiple technology-driven learning platforms to engage graduate-level students in emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors stress the importance of integrating creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking while teaching and learning at the graduate level. Multiple platforms, technology, and other tools of engagement created a plethora of opportunities for critical thinking, use of various communication styles, various learning styles, and the creative collaboration of students to work together without being together physically in the standard brick and mortar classroom.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid 19 Pandemic has forced many institutions of higher education to seek alternatives to educating students. It is no surprise that many institutions were not prepared to take on such a task. For some institutions, the spring semester started with traditional face-to-face classes. However, after spring break, institutions were suddenly forced to offer courses remotely, intended to be similar to online classes, but

seemed more like emergency learning with Zoom. Professors, instructors, adjuncts, and graduate teaching assistants were given very little time to prepare for the sudden change in course delivery and to teaching from home, disconnected from all that entails university life.

Although technology and its increasing use have transformed life, access to information, and communication, it still takes skills and knowledge to take a face-to-face course and make it into an online course that meets the same objectives as the face-to-face course. Changes involved in integrating technology into the online environment presents challenges to faculty in higher education as they attempted to implement new practices that they may have never used in their face-to-face courses.

Brookfield (1986) states that the purpose of facilitation is to assist individuals to begin to exercise control over their own lives, their interpersonal relationships, and the social forms and structures they live in (p. 291). Giving adult learners factual learning concepts, semi-structured strategies, and most importantly, learning autonomy is important in higher education. Some would say it is what sets graduate students apart from others, which is an important note when designing a course is faced with multiple societal obstacles.

Teaching is not a neutral act (Freire, 2000). In fact, what occurs outside the classroom affects what happens inside the classroom with teaching and learning. Students' lives, facilitators' lives, and the social, cultural, and political happenings that occur outside the classroom do not stop when logging into the Zoom classroom. This can be seen today with the global pandemic and the civil unrest currently being experienced in the United States and on television, social media, and radio. These happenings are not forgotten when signing into the Zoom room. In fact, they can be very distracting because many have been impacted by the global pandemic and the civil unrest on a personal level. Therefore, facilitators need opportunities to critically think and reflect on how these outside social and political forces impact what happens in their Zoom classrooms and come up with strategies to engage students in learning. This will entail different resources since teaching is taking place remotely via zoom. Having opportunities to collaborate with a graduate teaching assistant is one way to be creative when it comes to teaching remotely during a pandemic and civil unrest. Making connections to what is happening outside provides opportunities for students to engage at a deeper level because it is something everyone is experiencing. By working with each other, the mentor can provide opportunities for the mentee, in this case, the graduate teaching assistant, to shine. Who better to understand what students need than one of their peers?

Mentors (faculty) come in many forms and offer a mentee (graduate teaching assistant) a guiding hand in learning, attaining, and applying new knowledge and skills. In short, they are a guiding hand. However, it is important to note, mentoring is more personally driven and intentional between the individuals participating (Zachary, 2009). If we think back to our grade school years, many of us remember one or two teachers or other individuals who made an impact on their life, who took the time to listen, teach and guide our path. They are quite possibly the reason we decided to pursue and accomplish a particular goal. These relationships work the same in adult life and learning. The relevance of mentoring translates into new mindsets and individual potential. As a result, new ideas are created, developed, and shared with the mentor. New mindsets are set, and together, the mentor and mentee are able to provide learners with a variety of platforms to demonstrate their understanding of topics in remote learning. The mentor and mentee are able to evaluate the impact of the various technological tools on small group activities, dialogues, and assignments in a remote learning classroom.

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