

Chapter 1

Just Put Your Class Online: The Realities of Going Online During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the experience of online education during COVID-19 at the university level with a view towards using that experience to guide online education going forward. It is the authors' argument that not only is it unlikely that online education will go back to pre-pandemic levels, but also that it is incumbent on academia to deliberately deliver quality online instruction. The focus is on college-level humanities courses, and the chapter considers both what universities did well during COVID-19 and what needs improvement in the future.

INTRODUCTION

We, Dr. Paula Reiter and Dr. Julie Tatlock, teach literature and history, respectively, at a small, all-women's university in Wisconsin. Our student body is the most diverse in the state. The majority are first generation students, and many come from traditionally underserved populations. Our class sizes generally range from 10 to 25. Although our online caps are currently set at a reasonable 15, that number is often around 20 students by the time a semester starts. We have published and presented numerous articles on online pedagogy—both individually and together—and we have been

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teaching online humanities courses for more than 15 years. We have participated in a prestigious research project on digital learning in the humanities and have chosen to base our chapter on our experience and expertise. While a chapter such as this might traditionally begin with a literature review, the pace of change in online learning has been so fast that we feel such a review would not be useful here. All of this is to say that our experience is located in a certain context, but we believe that what we present in this article is widely applicable across college environments.

THE STRUCTURES OF ONLINE LEARNING AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL: DID UNIVERSITIES CHANGE?

Until recently, online instruction at our institution was a small undertaking, with a few departments offering a handful of classes. There was considerable resistance to teaching online; most faculty strongly favored teaching face-to-face. Likewise, students took an occasional online class only if they needed to have the scheduling flexibility to allow an internship or to accommodate a scheduling conflict. Finally, there was a general sentiment that online instruction was inferior to in-person instruction. Faculty scoffed at online classes, and students assumed they would be easier.

All that changed when COVID-19 hit. In the short term, all faculty and students were forced to experience online classes. In the long term, attitudes toward online instruction changed dramatically. Now, many faculty and even larger numbers of students prefer to have classes online for the flexibility and creativity they offer. Our online classes fill first and have long waitlists, and faculty request to be allowed to teach online.

Yet we have not changed much else. In many respects, the university continues to view online classes as supplemental (that is, filling gaps in instruction) rather than as fully integrated into department and university curricula. Although many faculty and students have changed their minds about online education, other changes have not followed. There is a lag in building the structural support needed for a much more robust and sustained online presence. We suspect that this holds true for many other institutions. The current institutional structure does not reflect the much larger role that online instruction now plays at our university. The lack of support structure should be rectified if we want to continue to offer a significant portion of our courses online. This is a challenge for all schools, but smaller institutions with correspondingly small IT departments and lean budgets face an uphill battle.

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