Chapter 11

Supporting Student Success in Online Courses:
What COVID–19 Has Taught Us About Effective Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has offered many lessons for educators as this event has disrupted the lives of all students and teachers across the world. As all learning moved to some form of online instruction in early 2020, teachers and schools scrambled to modify current courses to move online and then to later design face-to-face courses to an online format. This shift to virtual instruction has not been easy, particularly for those teachers with little online teaching experience and for those courses that have not traditionally been offered online. This chapter offers some advice based on the author's experiences as well as an exploration of the current research, which suggests the best practices for online learning. It also offers three short cases that represent learning experiences that have helped shape the author's beliefs and actions.

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has affected teaching and learning across the entire world. In early 2020, all students across the globe migrated from face-to-face instruction to some form of online learning. For most educators,

this was an unfamiliar situation, as most teachers have had minimal training in how to teach in online environments (Forbes, 2020). Traditionally, teachers, particularly K-12 teachers, have seen online learning as an effective supplement to traditional face-to-face instruction. In 2020 however, online learning became the only viable way to continue learning for students across the world. Although this placed teachers in a new and uncomfortable position, it also left our students in unfamiliar territory. Many students encountered major challenges in adapting to online learning, and early evidence suggests that there will be major learning deficits in our students as a result of the move to online instruction (Angrist et al., 2021).

Even though the last few years have been among the most challenging times that educators at all levels have ever faced, it has also been a time for educators to reflect and evaluate their instructional practices. The necessary move to online teaching required educators to question what practices work the best for this mode of instruction. In addition, teachers needed to consider that their own traditional classroom practices which worked for in-school face-to-face instruction, might not transfer to an online environment. Thus, an entire new repertoire of teaching may have been necessary to effectively reach all students. This is particularly interesting because teachers are often very reluctant and slow to change their instructional practices (Weimer, 2016). In addition, not all online environments are the same, for example, synchronous learning is markedly different than asynchronous learning. Although these challenges have made the past few years extremely challenging, it has also offered opportunities for educators to learn and reflect upon their own teaching.

This chapter is an exploration of the changes in teaching and learning as educators transitioned to new instructional practices as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The focus is primarily with those engaged in post-secondary education, however much of what has been uncovered applies across all levels of education. In this chapter, the aim to explore what practices have been most effective in online learning environments using available research as well as personal experiences to articulate some of the most valuable instructional strategies. While effective instructional practices often focus on what the teacher does, we do not want to minimize the student experience. Thus, we will also explore the learner experience in online environments, and what conditions and conditions students have found to be most conducive to their own learning. I will offer suggestions for ways to successfully modify instructional practices to better align with the current and future learning environments which are likely to continue to rely on some type of online instruction.

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