

Redesigning a Course to Engage Nontraditional Students Both in and Outside of the Online Classroom

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Abstract

This case study illustrates my course redesign to adapt to pandemic-induced changes from face-to-face to online learning. Utilizing key concepts and strategies obtained from the High-Impact Online Teaching and Learning Practices (HIOTLP) course, my course redesign sought to create collaborative learning environments for nontraditional students, aiming at promoting student engagement both in and outside of the online classroom. A variety of digital learning tools reinforced peer interaction and peer learning, embracing new ways to gain knowledge and facilitate social learning. As we move post-pandemic, integrating many of the innovations that emerged from online teaching experience into face-to-face is also discussed.

Statement of the Problem

Ensuring active engagement is challenging in any classroom situation. But the past year's move to predominantly online teaching has presented unique difficulties for educators when it comes to teaching nontraditional students in a virtual classroom. Nontraditional students frequently have different characteristics than traditional students, experience different barriers, and have different instructional support needs than traditional students. While nontraditional students are eager to pursue a higher education, oftentimes they are uncertain about their academic potential to complete their studies successfully. Barriers related to academic skills demand individualized instructions and assistance. As a result, they tend to show hesitation or unwillingness to get involved in teamwork. Moreover, managing multiple conflicting responsibilities, such as shift work schedule and childcare, in addition to working full-time, debilitate their commitment to their studies. These situational barriers negatively affect their class attendance and engagement in class activities and discussion.

Most of my students are nontraditional students. It was my concern that these academic and situational barriers may be amplified as we moved from face-to-face to online class. In other words, the online learning environment might further weaken their engagement in learning. To cope with these challenges, this author redesigned a Human Behavior in the Social Environment course adapted to a virtual learning environment. My course redesign sought to engage nontraditional students both in and outside of the virtual classroom to achieve equitable educational outcomes. Drawing on central ideas from the high-impact

online teaching and learning practices (HIOTLP), my course redesign focused on encouraging peer interaction and peer learning, thus creating a cooperative online learning environment that promotes five key elements: (i) inclusion of each other to complete a task or solve a problem; (ii) each student's work is made visible to and assessed by other classmates; (iii) each student provides constructive feedback to classmates' work; (iv) students support each other's success and share or pool their resources; and (v) students improve interpersonal skills such as listening, communicating, building trust, and working through conflictual moments.

Methods

To create a cooperative online learning environment, beyond utilizing various digital tools, I made a variety of modifications to the content itself. I shortened my lecture but significantly added more discussion type lectures and hands-on-activities to the online class. Breakout groups in Zoom offered opportunities for students to engage about ideas and debate on discussion topics, as well as to complete tasks or solve problems for hands-on-activities. I used a discussion board as a students' assignment submission site. This made each student's assignment accessible to other classmates. Students could read and respond to each other's work. Student response could be in the form of agreement, disagreement, constructive feedback, or providing additional information or new resources. It was intended for creating healthy competition, encouragement, cheering, and collaboration.

Other important features in Zoom—chat, polls, emojis, and whiteboard—were also used to enhance student engagement. Chat apps gave students access to their thought bubbles during class discussion. Poll questions were used to check for students' understanding and reemphasizing main points of instruction. In sustaining cooperative learning outside the class, the course management platform played a significant role. Entire course materials and resources were uploaded in Moodle, applying a module structure containing content and activities organized to create a clear learning path for students. I also set up Flipgrid—a video discussion tool designed to allow students to speak to the group. I encouraged students to construct a 'introduce yourself' video to learn more about each other and to bring everyone closer together.

Outcomes

The pandemic-induced pivot to online learning gave me unique opportunity to incorporate more technology into the classroom and permitted my students to participate in more focused discussion. The inclusive online learning space was created through two main digital platforms—Moodle course management system and Zoom video communications.

In my virtual class, the discussion board was used for alternative purposes. My students submitted their assignments on a discussion board making their work visible to classmates. Stripping students' assignments could have been a daring idea, especially for students who are reserved or reluctant to share their work with other classmates. However, it was made possible because of the nature and scope of the course content in Human Behavior in the Social Environment. In this class, different perspectives are valued so there are no right or wrong answers. Each student brings his or her unique real-life examples into the classroom.

My teaching utilized the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge to real, tangible nontraditional students' life experiences. As they open more and share their views more, they appear to feel more valued and confident to be themselves. They had misbelief that they are not smart, but this open online classroom paved the way for students to find their hidden talents and academic abilities to thrive. Moreover, online peer interaction and peer learning promoted interpersonal skills, such as listening, communication, and relationship building,

proving that online learning could be social. Occasionally, after small group work, I asked students to post the group's major points to a discussion board, instead of representative's reporting out right after the subgroup discussions. This produced organized, thoughtful writing and kept students engaged outside the classroom.

In this class, I strongly encouraged students to complete assigned readings prior to class. The course has its own set of vocabulary. Encountering the terminology before it is discussed in class enriches students' learning experience. Completing assigned readings also helps students to gain different perspectives and to become independent learners. Regardless, students struggle with completing reading assignments. Some returned to school after years of being away from textbooks and needed extra support. Many undergo time restraints. To assist students' reading, I prepared animated video clips in Moodle that complement student readings (e.g., Piaget's 4 stages of cognitive development, Erikson's 8 stages of psychosocial development). Some videos served as a prelude to succeeding readings and others were a stand-alone piece of work that meant to provoke students' interest on new readings. Being explicit about my expectations about completing assigned readings enhanced students' readiness for class and fostered students' intrinsic motivation for learning.

Another important approach I used was requiring my students to turn their webcams on in class. I believe, while making eye contact in the physical classroom is important, it is more critical online. Of course, digital eye contact is hard. But I asked them to turn on their cameras wherever they were. That way, students feel like they are looking and talking each other, being fully present in the class, which makes it more engaging.

Plans for continuation/expansion in other courses and any impact on other courses
My course redesign emphasizing peer interaction and peer learning for the Human Behavior in the Social Environment course blossomed out because it entails sharing ideas and valuing diverse perspectives. I applied this approach to the Capstone Seminar course in Spring 2021 and have garnered impressive results—completing capstone project final papers and presentations.

The 2020-2021 was a year of risk-taking and experimenting. I tested out a variety of new online activities and teaching methods, and I put forth extra efforts to get to know my students. Reflecting on this experience leaves me thinking anything is possible. I can deliver as much content remotely as I can in a live classroom. The High-Impact Online Teaching and Learning Practices (HIOTLP) course not only introduced me up-to-date digital learning tools, but also taught me valuable lessons about the pedagogy process, the power of collaboration, and the social element of education. That afforded me insights that I can apply those tools to both virtual and physical classrooms for nontraditional students. As we are turning our attention back to in-person learning, I am convinced that on-campus learning can benefit from the experience and innovations that came out of teaching in a pandemic. I seek to apply a blended synchronous learning modality, in which in-person and remote students are together in one classroom environment. One of the biggest challenges I have observed, for nontraditional students, is maintaining consistent class attendance. This modality has a great capacity, among many other potential benefits, for improving student attendance and engagement.

Lessons learned and potential implications for future efforts

In adapting to new online teaching and learning environments under COVID-19, I modified the course requirements to become less demanding compared to those prior to COVID-19. I reduced the required readings but increased recommended readings. I included non-print, non-text-based media in the list rather than tough academic research papers. I created quizzes for students to potentially get perfect scores. These may have minimized student anxiety and stress, but I soon learned that it lacked rigor in terms of the intensity and the level of challenge. My other efforts included adding extreme flexibility on deadlines to accommodate students' life circumstances. I assumed most students already understand that there are consequences in the real world for missed deadlines. Instead of teaching my students that lesson, I wanted to model behavior that allows them to do their best work rather than meet a deadline I set. However, I have learned that late submission demonstrated lack of efforts, thus adherence to deadlines may be fair and help students prepare for the real world. My future efforts will include making course requirements rigorous yet achievable.

All in all, I am optimistic and excited for the future. This past year has given me a newfound confidence in high-impact online teaching and learning practices (HIOTLP), and I now have new skills that can be deployed as needed. More importantly, I can integrate those skills into face-to-face teaching. I will continue to test new technologies but keep it simple and focus on what is important for nontraditional students.