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Exploring Key Strategies to Navigate Online Teaching and Learning with Graduate Students

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Abstract: The rise of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the field of education forever. However, for many instructors, teaching online can be quite daunting, a feeling that heightened during the emergency of the pandemic. Though online learning has brought many challenges, it can be a beneficial tool for many graduate students to expand their horizons since the transition to a virtual platform can serve as a catalyst for them to create new and more effective opportunities for self-inquiry and self-discovery. This article aims to provide useful strategies for both instructors and graduate students to employ and reflect upon as they navigate both teaching and learning in online spaces.

Prior to the magnitude and intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic that significantly revolutionized the world, online or e-learning has been making waves and growing in popularity (ACCA, n.d.). In this paper, the terms online, virtual, remote and e-learning will be used interchangeably. For context and prior to the pandemic, world-wide educational technology investments reached over \$18 billion and the current market value for online education is now projected to reach \$350 billion by 2025 (Li & Lalani, 2020). Despite the rapid growth in this industry, relevant information on *how* to teach effectively online was limited but the potential outcomes were grand.

The Research Institute of America found that students retained 25-60% more material through online learning compared to only 8-10% taught in a physical classroom environment (Gutierrez, 2016). This was due to the fact that students appeared to learn faster online, with e-learning requiring 40-60% less time than face-to-face interactions (Chernev, 2021). Students who learned online tended to have better outcomes because they had more control over the learning process as well as the opportunity to revisit the training as needed (Gutierrez, 2016). Despite the positive uptake of online learning, many instructors have struggled to adapt to this teaching format. One recent study showed that 34% of faculty members described themselves as "not at all experienced" in teaching online before the pandemic and that only 22 percent described themselves as "very experienced" later in the pandemic (June, 2020, para. 7; Nworie, 2021). As instructors, the authors experienced a pivot to online teaching which challenged them in meaningful and creative ways in how to engage with graduate students within applied psychology programs (e.g., clinical, counselling). Their pedagogical approach to teaching, which refers to the theory and practice of learning, is influenced by social constructivism and considers the subjective experiences of all students irrespective of their instruction environment.

According to Kapur (2020), the understanding of meaning and significance of pedagogical approaches enables individuals to generate awareness in terms of teaching strategies (p. 1). Utilizing a social constructivist theoretical framework in teaching can create a safe space for graduate students to consider the social, cultural, economic and political factors that influence their ways of being and how they are able to make meaning of their lived experiences (Gergen, 1985). Transitioning our face-to-face graduate courses online during the pandemic was not an easy feat; yet this change to virtual learning allowed us to step outside of our comfort zones and reflect on our pedagogical positioning and how this was reflected in our work with graduate students.

This article provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our teaching during the emergency response period and how we were better able to develop as instructors, with the understanding that there is still room for us to evolve pedagogically. In this context, we offer readers five key strategies to help them navigate their online teaching space with graduate students with the caveat that these methods might not be applicable to everyone. First, we will address our learning curve with technology and willingness to ask for help. Next, attention will be given to inviting ongoing feedback from students

and integrating such insights into the teaching process. This will be followed by demonstrating professional humility in our engagement with colleagues to enhance efficacy in our teaching practices. We will then explore the importance of inviting experts to share their perspectives with students to expand their knowledge and stimulate learning within a virtual setting. The article concludes with thoughts for new instructors to carry forward in their work with graduate students.

Integrating Technology into Online Teaching and Learning

With the ongoing debate about whether or not online learning is a transformative force in education, technology has made significant strides in accessibility and development (Frecker & Bieniarz, n.d.). Yet, for many instructors, working with technology online can be a daunting and intimidating task. For individuals who do have appropriate access to and support with technology, there is evidence that teaching and learning online can be more effective than in a traditional classroom setting (Li & Lalani, 2020). This is because students can learn at their own pace and review materials (Li & Lalani, 2020). All the while, instructors can be more creative in their course designs and lesson planning using visual images, videos with captions, audio recorded lectures, and Breakout Room activities to enhance student learning (Leor, 2015).

Part of the first author's approach to teaching online is to be forthcoming with students during the first class with a disclaimer that *"I am not an expert with technology and might need to ask for help if I get stuck, so please be patient with me."* This form of transparency tends to reduce anxiety and injects humour into her interactions with students. Also, taking a non-expert technological stance helps to normalize the experiences of other students who may struggle with technology. Over the past year, we have been intentional by modelling to our students, some of whom are prospective future counsellors and psychologists, curiosity, kindness, self-compassion, and patience as we strive to improve our confidence with using technology. With our embracing of technology, we are learning to be more flexible and celebrate the small wins in mastering tasks. Increasing our technology skills as instructors has enabled us to work smarter, not harder, in planning high-quality learning activities that empower students in an online environment (Novak & Rowell, 2021).

Creating a Safe Space for Constructive Feedback from Students

Encouraging feedback from students invites instructors to demonstrate vulnerability and reflectiveness as they increase awareness of their students' learning challenges, preferences, and needs (Dixon, 2018; Le, n.d.). By asking for students' insights, instructors demonstrate their learner-centric mission to deliver pedagogical approaches that make unique differences in the lives of students to assist them in achieving their career goals (Le, n.d.). Our aim in asking for student feedback during online courses is to confidently assess and improve the effectiveness of our teaching approaches. As a rule, the authors usually invite students to provide feedback multiple times throughout their courses. For instance, after the first author's initial online lecture, students are asked to complete an anonymous feedback survey on Moodle that contains a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions. By using a learning management system that offers anonymity, students can be forthcoming with their true responses. Sample questions and prompts on the feedback surveys are included below:

- *Based on the format of the class, how well was the information presented or facilitated?*
- *Did the instructor provide enough opportunities for students to ask questions and participate?*
- *Overall, how was the pace of the lesson?*
- *How well did the Breakout Room activity and group discussions benefit your learning?*
- *Please comment on anything else that you would like to be adjusted about the course.*

Depending on students' inputs on this survey, the authors may modify the delivery of the course, whilst providing them with a clear rationale about any decisions made. The authors usually gauge student

learning to determine if another survey is warranted. Students are always given an opportunity to complete a mid-point feedback survey halfway through the course to evaluate their learning. This allows the authors to pivot in their pedagogical approach before the course ends. Based on the information garnered from this later survey, the authors might ask students to offer their thoughts to see if such alterations have been useful to their learning process. Lastly, students are gently encouraged to complete the final student evaluation to take ownership of their own learning throughout the course. The primary goal of the final evaluation is to get feedback to enable change.

Given the above outlined methods used to obtain students' feedback and integrate their voices into courses, we agree with Thalheimer's (2016) stance that if students are aware that instructors are invested in their holistic learning as growing professionals, they are more likely to provide thoughtful and accurate responses. As reflective and reflexive instructors, we strongly believe that students' inputs throughout online courses can be a powerful asset to improve course design and delivery (Dixon, 2018; Thalheimer, 2016). Here, *reflectivity* denotes how we as instructors use our personal values, lived experiences, and behaviours to make meaning in various learning contexts (Dixon & Chiang, 2020), whereas *reflexivity* underlines a practice of perceiving and positioning ourselves as active knowers within and beyond pedagogical settings (Dixon & Chiang, 2020).

Opening the Door for Professional Humility in Online Teaching and Learning

In conjunction with student feedback, we value and welcome peers' perspectives on our pedagogical practices as part of our demonstration of professional humility. We view *professional humility* within the context of graduate education teaching and learning as having both a generosity of spirit and a quiet self-confidence to understand that although one may know a great deal, one does not know everything (Educational Leadership, 2011). One must be willing to learn from others, particularly peers in the teaching profession where learning is most meaningful when observed in real time (Cargal, 2021). For this reason, the first author often invites colleagues from the Teaching Centre at her institution into her online classes to observe lessons for meaningful and affirming collaboration as part of her professional growth and development. We would argue that both asynchronous and synchronous observations can open the door for efficient communication with our fellow educators, thus, improving instruction through affirming practices to benefit student learning (Cargal, 2021). Being able to reflect on our teaching, collaborate with other peers, and integrate innovative ideas can greatly enhance graduate education (Cargal, 2021; Kapur, 2020).

The insights garnered from our peers during the online observation process, as well as how we facilitate discussions with students, often render fruitful contributions to course design, lesson delivery, and student engagement. These valuable peer contributions can lead to up-gradation of the teaching and learning methods that we implement in our graduate courses (Kapur, 2020). We are firm believers that through peer support, we are better able to create effective online communities for students to thrive and produce better outcomes in their professional development. Creating a culture that allows us to invest time into best practice teaching methods, and sharing ideas with peers, helps us build a shared sense of optimism and enthusiasm in an online teaching environment (Gonser, 2021).

Sharing Knowledge and Stimulating Learning Online Through Guest Lectures

Recruiting a guest lecturer who is an expert in a particular topic to enhance student learning can be challenging and rewarding at the same time. A key advantage of online classes is that lecturers no longer need to travel to campus amidst their busy work schedules. Given the accessibility to video-conferencing technology for many individuals, distance does not appear to be a major factor because guest lecturers can be located anywhere in the country or globally. In fact, numerous instructors are seeing less constraints on having guest lecturers and are increasingly utilizing them to maximize student learning (Stanford Graduate School of Education's Teaching Resources, n.d.). As exemplars of these

instructors, the authors have also taken the liberty to invite guest lecturers into their online classes and have experienced the positive feedback from student cohorts.

Despite the work involved in accessing them, guest lecturers bring significant value to the online teaching environment for students. They can bring out the human stories behind some of the concepts that might feel abstract or even alien to many students (Percy et al., 2019). For example, researchers have found that in certain graduate courses like theory and intervention, learning can be enhanced by providing concrete examples from the counselling field more so than from an academic perspective (van Hoek et al., 2011). Knowing that few instructors often maintain an active clinical practice, guest lecturers can bridge this gap and can provide increased credibility to course content (Miller, 2014).

Guest lecturers add interest and excitement to the classroom discussion, which can increase student involvement. This form of engagement, and the ensuing discourse, can add synergy to the online learning experience for students and target those who might not always be engaged in an online class format (Varvel, n.d.). This lack of cognitive engagement can be stimulated by guest lecturers since they can provide students with alternative perspectives, opinions, and personal experiences that can reinforce the teachings of the course instructor. For instance, the guest lecture may share stories or anecdotes other than those used by the course instructor to reinforce key concepts (Varvel, n.d.). Facilitating a guest lecture with an expert on a particular topic presents an opportunity to also incorporate alternative technologies and teaching techniques into the course. Such variation of methods in delivering course contents might remove the chance that repetitiveness and monotony could infiltrate the teaching environment (Varvel, n.d.). More so, guest lectures can stimulate critical thinking for graduate counselling students who are new to higher education (or those with low motivation) if they are encouraged beforehand to capture key areas of learning that can be transferred into their future practice. Hence, students should be responsible for mastering content from guest lecturers as they are for mastering the content instructors provide in their course lectures, since guest lecturers are not merely substitute teachers (Study International Staff, 2019).

To illustrate, after each guest lecture presents in the first author's class, *all* students are required to post three to five key takeaways from the lecture and this counts towards their final participation grade. Including this grading aspect into the course is a great motivator for students to be present and actively participate in the lecture. Essentially as instructors, we are tasked with the perpetual challenge of keeping each online class fresh, innovative, and interactive to enrich the online learning environment for a variety of students. As such, when seeking guest lecturers for our courses, we are not afraid to step outside of our comfort zones by doing thorough research, taking wise risks, and inviting diverse experts to impart their knowledge based on their specific area of competence. There could be benefits for all in this pedagogical exchange for professional development (Study International Staff, 2019).

Final Thoughts

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered instructors an opportunity to enhance their competency with online teaching and to improve the quality of remote learning for students. Regardless of our discomfort with online teaching as instructors, we have a responsibility to adapt to rapid technological change. This pandemic has provided us with an opportunity to remind ourselves of the skills students need to be successful, such as decision making, accountability, creative problem solving, critical thinking, effective time management, flexibility, and adaptability (Tam & El-Azar, 2020). As facilitators of professional learning in a virtual space, we have an incredible opportunity to design learning in a creative way to implement strategies that embrace the diversity and variability of our students. With the optimization of technology in an online teaching context, these strategies, can create authentic, meaningful opportunities for everyone including instructors and students to connect, learn, and grow (Martin & Novak, 2021).

As we move forward with our growing knowledge of online teaching and remote learning platforms, it is vital to remember that effective teaching depends on the instructor's ability to respond to the virtual classroom context and to adjust instruction to serve student needs. Such teaching requires us as instructors to be given the autonomy to be creative and collaborative in our pedagogical approaches, and that we be fearless in putting student learning first (Christenbury, 2011). The pandemic tested our resilience as instructors to execute online learning and adapt to unfamiliar technologies, and successfully meet the diverse instructional needs of our students (Nworie, 2021; Parrish, 2019). These experiences and lessons are critical and should not be discarded. In the post-pandemic world, we need to harness what worked *well* and use these experiences to empower ourselves to achieve excellence in learning, teaching, and leading. To this end, we will improve institutional practices for the benefits of our graduate students and facilitate their professional growth and overall development.

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