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‘Connecting with Students in New Ways’ – A Counselling professor on manoeuvring online teaching

DR. SANDRA DIXON AND JOERDIS WEILANDT

This conversation is based on a formal interview with the assistant professor and an educational consultant in the Teaching Centre.



Dr. Sandra Dixon has been teaching in the Faculty of Education – Counselling Program for the last three years, a period during which she has had time to reflect on and reiterate her approaches to teaching to better meet the needs of the graduate counsellors in training. She enjoys connecting with her students and seeing their different online personalities through the engagement in the online activities she sets up in ways to interconnect the course content, learning and her facilitation.

TC: What motivated you to design and teach courses online?

SD: Our classes in our program are offered face-to-face as well as online, thus the expectation for instructors and professors is to teach in both these delivery modes.

TC: Based on your experience of having taught online at the U of L for three years now, what do you consider essential when designing online courses?

SD: What's essential to me is to make sure that everything is ready ahead of time. I really cannot imagine having to plan my online lesson shortly before teaching them. That wouldn't work for me at all. I feel a sense of relief when the bulk of my lessons are in place, the course outlines are approved, and everything is uploaded on Moodle before the course actually starts. It gives me the confidence to be able to focus on my facilitation. If I have to tweak something minor while teaching an online course, I can easily do that knowing that it won't affect my facilitation.

What I've also learned is to set boundaries in terms of how much time I will spend online. That's something I had to wrestle with in the beginning, but now I plan that piece into my courses when I design them to make sure I find the balance between providing students with effective feedback and guidance, but at the same time also creating the space for me to get other things done in addition to teaching.

It's hard to know some of the challenges when you are starting to teach online. I spoke to different instructors to learn more about online facilitation before I started, but you don't realize how you would best go about it unless you're doing it. Even with all the examples from my colleagues, I had to learn for myself what works and what doesn't work for me. I have to admit the first year was quite tough, but the instructional changes I have made over the past three years have helped me put parameters in place that guarantee my deliberate teaching presence without having to be involved 24/7. Instead, students gain the opportunity to take responsibility for their learning and their feedback tells me that they appreciate the way I set up those learning opportunities in my courses.

Talking to my colleagues made me see the variety in approaches taken to teaching online. It was a huge learning curve for me; not only how to manoeuvre Moodle, but also to build lessons online and plan for my facilitation. It's such a different world of teaching, different culture and different ways of engaging students. It can be quite overwhelming.

I realize that teaching online for me means to keep learning and changing things as I move from term to term and from academic year to academic year. What's really interesting to me is how making instructional changes and experimenting with instructional approaches plays out so differently in different courses. It took me a while to get comfortable in that zone of learning, but now I really enjoy making incremental changes and observing the effect every time I teach.

I also involve students in that iterative process by inviting them to join me in improving my courses through midpoint feedback and final student evaluations. I am always mindful that students are active agents in their own learning, and I am intentional in creating pedagogical space for students to provide constructive feedback with the understanding that their voices are welcomed.

TC: How do you structure your course in terms of content, assessments, feedback?

SD: I divide my courses into weekly lessons. I will set up discussion forums that connect back to those lessons. In addition to aligning the discussion forums, I tailor the

assignments to fit the lessons as well. That way everything is connected to the goals that I have for each of the lessons and the overall course.

I plan my activities and the reading content for each session. I find that a lot of students do like video activities, so I incorporate those for students who have different learner preferences. For example, students were exposed to various approaches like client-centered therapy. I also integrate other teaching elements that speak to application of knowledge like audio recordings, video lectures, and web conference sessions via Zoom tool. The compilation of these sources helps to enhance students' learning. In fact, many students find the optional multi-media elements I provide significantly helpful because it's through the creative forms that the knowledge learned in the course is being contextualized.

More so, I appreciate the academic freedom we have here at our institution which allows me to plan my courses the way I see fit based on my pedagogical grounding that teaching and learning are a collaborative process that require flexibility and ongoing reflections. My work ethics demands of me to always make sure students are learning course contents that are applicable and theoretical to their counselling practice. As a reflective instructor who takes pride in my teaching, I am intentional in seeking constructive feedback from trusted peers and colleagues within and outside of the University context and the Teaching Centre to make sure I chose the best possible way to translate my professional intentions into effective online teaching and course delivery. Although there's no cookie cutter format in our program, we share certain key feature in our online courses, one of them being student engagement, for instance in discussion forums or presentations. However, the way they are set up and the roles students take within them differ from instructor to instructor. Students appreciate when you make an effort to share your teaching intentions with them and invite their feedback to inform the teaching process. In our program, we work with students throughout the duration of their degree, which means that they get to see that I am trying to act on their feedback, because I am making changes that affect them in subsequent terms.

TC: How do you guide students through group projects?

SD: I base the set-up on the feedback I get from students. When I taught an online course with a group project for the first time, students would do their presentation live with all of us present, which many students found challenging to schedule. So, I changed that setting and now the group presentations happen asynchronously instead. I make myself available to talk to the groups during the planning stage and give guidance to those students who need it before they hand their work in. Many students like that flexibility of me offering help when they need it. If they want, they can reach out, but they don't need to communicate with me if things are going smoothly. I want my students to be active learners who decide for themselves what they need and how they will get help.

TC: What kind of technology do utilize to teach online and what does the online learning environment look like?

SD: Clearly technology is the means to create an engaging online course, so I try to utilize as much technology as I can considering my teaching purpose and the ease of use for both my students and myself, because I don't want the technology to be too overwhelming that it impedes the students' learning experience.

The major technology I use is Moodle, where I show students the lessons and discussion activities as they unfold every week. I decided to open the content this way so that students can concentrate on those weekly elements rather than be confused by the abundance of information for the entire course, if the lessons and course materials are presented all at once. I am always mindful that there are some students who are proactive and like to get a head start on their readings and other course activities. Recognizing the ambitiousness of these students, and not discourage their eagerness to learn and participate online, I often open the weekly lessons earlier than the required start date to allow for access to the content before the new week starts on Monday. So, instead of Monday, I would open the upcoming lesson on the previous Thursday night. A set visible course structure and deliberate technology use help the students, especially those who haven't been in school for years or for whom online learning is new.

TC: How do you facilitate the learning activities and assessments in your online courses?

First of all, I put explicit timelines in place to ensure that no one is posting at the very last minute and thereby take away from the engagement process where students cannot read each other's post. I want my students to learn to be accountable, which is why I mandate that everyone lead a discussion at some point throughout the term in some of my courses. In addition to gaining leadership experience and enhancing their interpersonal skills, students learn to be more empathetic with the instructor who is usually moderating the discussions.

I am playing with offering different levels of expectations around the timelines in my more advanced courses. That can be a big challenge for some students who like the structure a certain routine like posting by a certain time provides. Other students, however, really like the flexibility where things are left more open. I always try to get a feel for those dynamics and depending on the cohort, but generally I am convinced that advanced cohorts are at a place of maturity where they don't need such strict timelines for posts and responses. There's an end date, but student decide the exact time on that day that they will be done with their discussion contributions.

Although I assess student contributions to the Discussion Forums, I don't grade every individual post because I want the discussions to be a space where students are focused, in which they can practice expressing themselves without stressing over perfection or anticipated points for each contribution. I want my students to enjoy the process of communicating their ideas and build a common knowledge base that way.

I enjoy the freedom to set up activities in unique ways, so our course don't come in a cookie cutter format. In our program, for instance, a key feature of the online instructions is the student engagement in discussion forums. However, the way they are set up and

the roles students take within them differ from instructor to instructor. In addition, we all implement individual instruction methods, for instance, I've experimented with student presentations quite a bit. Overall, students appreciate opportunities to interact because learning online would be quite an isolating experience otherwise.

TC: What kind of feedback do you get from your students and how do you respond to it?

SD: I have to admit that one of the toughest part of my job is the student feedback. To a new instructor, it can be quite anxiety provoking, especially when you belong to a non-dominant group, which as research shows these individuals tend to generally get lower evaluations than their white male and female counterparts.

With this research knowledge in mind, I am always intentional in trying to incorporate student feedback into my courses and I find it important to keep a good balance in doing that in the sense that I will go with what I see improves instruction for all, but I will also let individuals know the reasons when I cannot act on their specific needs. My way to address the potential imbalance is to ask my students frequently throughout a term rather than wait for the final course evaluations. That way I can build better rapport with my students and be very transparent by responding to their comments and providing a rationale for why I do certain things the way I do them to augment their learning.

Feedback is never easy to take, but as instructors we have to work with it. The balancing act is to understand when it improves our work or when it doesn't judge the course per se, but rather us as humans. Sometimes students don't seem to see the distinction. Especially as counsellors in training, our students need to build skills to provide constructive feedback.

One example of me integrating student feedback into my courses is the inclusion of synchronous web conferences around mid-point in a term as a Q and A opportunity for students to ask questions around the course assessments. Many students interpret assignment requirements in their own mind and I want to make sure their interpretations match my intentions. Instead of emailing me to ask their possibly redundant questions, we come together virtually at a specific time and can respond to each other's questions, comments and requests in real time. Everyone is invited and who can make it, joins us. It is mandatory for everyone to pose their questions and if they cannot come online to ask those questions themselves, they can send them to me to address during the web conference session, because I record those for students to access at their own convenience.

TC: You spoke about your intention to create spaces for enjoyment and collaborative learning earlier which leads us to ask what you enjoy about your teaching online?

SD: I think the enjoyment for me comes when I can connect with my students and see their different personalities. Unlike a face-to-face setting, I cannot judge by visible physical cues, but will see the engagement in the activities that I have set up for them and guide

them through I am glad when I see that students are benefitting from the courses the way I have set them up so that all content, learning and my facilitation are interconnected.

TC: What is one of the challenges of teaching online?

SD: One challenge is not being able to set boundaries and take time for self-care. If you are not intentional about boundaries you can easily just spend the whole day online and not get much else done. In the beginning, there was that feeling that I had to be there for my online students all the time. It took time for me to get to the in my teaching where I can finally step back from the discussion forums and set realistic boundaries for myself without feeling guilty about not being online 24/7. For instance, I am now intentional about being online for set times to engage with students, but not outside of those unless there are emergencies.

I am clear that I will support the students in very specific ways through focused feedback and frequent check-ins that demonstrate my availability and readiness to support them when and where necessary to advance their knowledge base, skill set and learning as counsellors in-training.

TC: How did you manage your time while teaching your online course(s)?

SD: I use an old school calendar that keeps me accountable and reminds me when I need to get specific things done. When teaching, I do brief check-in three times a day if I can on Moodle to observe students' engagements before I jump into the discussions and offer my insights. There are also occasions where I provide summative posts on the forums that emphasize general themes in the discussions. As part of my self-care, I don't work on Sundays and I am very clear in my course outline about that. I also try not to schedule any student interactions or course work Saturdays.

TC: What kind of support do the learners need to navigate your online courses well and complete them successfully?

SD: Since many of the students need to develop their research skills, I connect them with the library. In terms of technology, I let them know who they can contact for that. Putting that in the course outline makes it clear who our campus experts are for such services. I want students to keep me in the loop by cc'ing me in their email communications with support staff. That way, I know what their struggles are and I can build in respective resources into future courses iterations.

I also announce all due dates, and relating to the course content, I provide a set of strategies for academic reading and note-taking in some of my courses, especially for new students who might be overwhelmed with asynchronous online learning as a graduate student.

In addition to the abovementioned supports, our department also provides a pre-program orientation to our new students that exposes them to all potential features a regular course in our program can have.

TC: What kind of support do instructors need to do their jobs well? How can the university/ department help you enhance your work?

SD: In our department, we are assigned a personal mentor when we start, which I am really grateful for because I could build a working relationship with someone in my faculty, in my program, who has gone through the same things and could therefore give me some important pointers. In all fairness, I've enjoyed the open dialogue with all of my colleagues who have all been really supportive. If I had a question, I could email them or try to catch them for a chat. I never encountered anyone who didn't want to help.

I do have some trusted colleagues outside of the university that I touch base with because it's always good to get a different perspective from a different institution about how they do things. The Teaching Centre has been a great support as well in offering many consultations, course evaluations, and targeted feedback observations. The interactions with peers and campus support staff have helped me normalize things for me, especially in the beginning when I had just started teaching online and was sometimes unsure how to best go about things. All in all, I continue to learn, challenge myself, grow, develop, and reflect on my teaching as an instructor who values students' agency and engagement in a collaborative, respectful and ethical manner.