Remote Teaching Updates & Resources

1 message

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To:

Engaged Learning, Remote Edition

By Betsy Barre on Apr 02, 2020 06:29 pm

Wake Forest is known for small class sizes, personal attention, and creative pedagogies that prioritize engaged learning. Now that we've got two weeks of emergency remote teaching under our belt, it's worth thinking about whether our redesigned courses have been able to foster the kinds of personal and pedagogical engagement we know and love. What would it take for our newly-virtual courses to meet this bar?

Three Kinds of Engagement

To answer this question, we need to understand what engaged learning looks like and why it matters. In brief, we know that three specific kinds of engagement have particularly powerful effects on student learning.

- **Student-Material Engagement:** To state the obvious, students must

encounter our course material to learn it. But we also know that simply encountering the material is not enough. Students must actively *engage* that material to produce lasting learning gains. Whether they are asking questions of a text or practicing problem-solving, the more students *do* with the material, the better they will learn it.

- **Student-Student Engagement:** As we will discuss below, our students often enjoy learning alongside one another in face-to-face classes. But learning alongside one another is less important than learning *with* one another. Decades of research on collaborative learning and peer-teaching suggest that the more students engage with one another, the more they will learn.
- **Student-Faculty Engagement:** Happily for those of us who teach, <u>our presence matters</u>. But it is not simply our presence, or even the information we communicate, that matters most. What matters is the time we spend *engaging* our students by answering their questions, assessing their learning, and providing feedback on their work.

Let's pause now for a quick pop quiz (don't worry; you won't be graded).

- In which kinds of courses are you likely to see engaged learning?
    - ☐ Face-to-face synchronous courses, where students and faculty participate in learning experiences at the same time and in the same location.
    - ☐ Virtual asynchronous courses, where students and faculty participate in learning experiences at different times and in different locations.
    - ☐ Virtual synchronous courses, where students and faculty participate in learning experiences at the same time, but in different locations.
- Name

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How did you answer? My hunch is that you were likely confident about face-to-face, synchronous courses; less confident about virtual, synchronous courses; and least confident about virtual, asynchronous courses. This is, at least, consistent with popular perceptions. But how true is this perception? And what does it mean for how we think about the merits of synchronous and asynchronous modalities?

To Sync or Not to Sync?

The truth is that, however you answered, you were right. And that's because it is ultimately the course design, rather than the modality, that creates the conditions for engaged learning. Let's consider some examples.

- **Student-Material Engagement:** Imagine a synchronous, face-to-face course where a student sits in the back, listens to lectures, and only skims the material the night before each of two exams. Now imagine an asynchronous, virtual course where every student is expected to annotate the readings each night, solve new problems for homework each week, and apply course concepts to a group project. Which course is creating more opportunities for students to engage the material?
- **Student-Student Engagement:** Imagine a synchronous, face-to-face course where students are physically present with one another, but only interact with the instructor. Now imagine an asynchronous, virtual course where students are put into groups. Each group must discuss the course material in weekly forums and work together on a group presentation they record and upload for the rest of the class to view. Which course is creating more opportunities for engagement between students?
- **Student-Faculty Engagement:** Imagine a synchronous, face-to-face course where a faculty member is physically present, but never entertains questions and only provides feedback on two major exams/assignments. Now imagine an asynchronous, virtual course where students have 1:1 virtual meetings with the faculty member each week. In these meetings, the faculty member answers questions and provides personal feedback. Which course is creating more opportunities for engagement between the

faculty member and the students?

By now, you get the idea. The mode (and timing) of delivery matters far less for learning than the design of the course itself. But does that mean the mode of delivery doesn't matter at all?

Well, not exactly.

Context Matters

One of the first principles of good instructional design is that we should design our courses with our learners and their specific context in mind. This is because evidence-informed activities and assignments can fall flat if students aren't willing or able to engage them. To paraphrase a former Secretary of Education, the three factors that matter most in teaching are motivation, motivation, and motivation.

In keeping with this principle, it's important to think about how our students and this unprecedented context might be distinct, and what that might mean for how they will respond to entirely asynchronous modalities.

- "Nobody signed up for this." Although asynchronous approaches work extremely well in fully-online programs, students generally opt into those courses. In this situation, our students may not want to be learning online and may be more skeptical of asynchronous methods, as a result.
- **Routines are comforting (and hard to change).** Unlike a typical online course, our students transitioned into this modality in the middle of the semester. They already built a synchronous routine. In the midst of so much disruption, that synchronous routine (or something close to it) may be comforting.
- **Everyone is isolated**. In a typical semester, students aren't longing for connection in the way that all of us are in the midst of quarantine. We long to see our friends, and our students may long to see the classmates with whom they built community in the first part of the semester.
- **Preparation matters**. If we're committed to engaged learning,

asynchronous activities can take far more time to prepare. Expertly designed online courses are often asynchronous, but let's be real: no one who has redesigned their course in 5 days is teaching an expertly designed online course.

Now What?

By now, some of you might be thinking, "this is great, but weren't you the ones who initially warned us about a number of challenges with synchronous approaches to remote learning?" We were, and the contextual factors highlighted above don't make those challenges any less significant.

So, now what?

In classic academic fashion, we are going to recommend a synthetic answer. To mitigate the challenges of fully synchronous and fully asynchronous modes in this particular context, we recommend you consider approaches that combine the two, keeping in mind the following:

- **Institutional guidance.** Different schools and departments are adopting different policies on this front, so make sure that whatever you decide is in line with those expectations.
- **Student feedback.** In one of our earliest posts, we suggested you ask students about their availability for synchronous sessions. If you haven't done so already, you might ask them about their *preferences* and how they would feel if you introduced new, (a)synchronous activities.
- **It's not going to be perfect.** The message I shared in the inaugural post of this remote teaching blog bears repeating, "You're not going to teach a well-designed online course in this scenario. And that's OK."
- **Engagement matters most.** Finally, whatever you decide to do, remember that what matters most is creating significant opportunities for student-material, student-student, and faculty-student engagement.

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