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Pandemic Teaching: Exploration of Instructional Method Shifts

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Abstract

COVID-19 forced educators to unexpectedly move to distance teaching, requiring a shift in instructional methods. This study examined practices instructors integrated into their online and face-to-face facilitation over the long term.

Keywords: Instructional methods, Online teaching, COVID-19 impacts, Higher education

In the spring of 2020 almost every educational setting was forced to shift to some type of distance learning due to COVID-19, which resulted in many educators using distance formats for the first time or as relative novices (Cavanaugh, 2020; Mahmood, 2021). Adult and higher education were no exception. As a result, educators were also exposed to new instructional methods for delivering and assessing learning (Kebritchi et al., 2017; Ranga, 2020; Schultz & DeMers, 2020). For example, an educator who commonly utilized closed-book and timed exams may have had to use a different assessment technique due to the complexities of proctoring an exam at a distance. Or an instructor who relied heavily on lectures found that students learning from home did not have the internet bandwidth or data to download and watch an hour-long video lecture.

It is difficult to imagine that educators who experienced new teaching formats, and the associated changes in teaching methods, will all return to exactly their same teaching practices post pandemic restrictions (Andrews Graham, 2018). We know that one of the biggest hindrances to change is not that an individual does not see the possible advantages of the change, but that making the change itself is laborious and time consuming (Davis, 2002; Heath & Heath, 2010). The pandemic did not give instructors a choice in whether they wanted to shift to distance learning and the resulting exposure to new teaching methods. Thus, the pandemic created a unique opportunity to study what occurs when forced large-scale change occurs across all educational sectors.

While it is extremely likely educators used new instructional methods as they taught during the pandemic, we do not know which methods were most prevalent. And, even more importantly, we do not know if new methods are being retained, and if they are, why. A team of researchers, including the presenters of this session, are investigating the potential longer-term impacts to instructional methods in higher education. A quantitative survey was distributed via email to all faculty at the researchers' university who taught one or more courses prior to the Spring 2020 semester and during or after the Spring 2020 semester. Participating faculty (n=137) self-identified up to three instructional methods they added or changed in Spring 2020. For each method, the faculty member identified: various factors impacted by their changes, for what purpose(s) they used the instructional method, if they believed the instructional method achieved its intended learning outcome, and if they will continue to use the method once restrictions are lifted.

The major teaching practices that were adopted and retained post restrictions included:

- Assessments (low stakes, remote, alternative formats)
- Course processes (flexible due dates, allowing remote attendance)
- In-class methods (online discussions and activities, small group work)
- New technology (Jamboard, iClicker, Google Docs, Yellowdig, simulation tools)

- Increased use of Canvas the University's LMS (content, assignments, materials)
- Instructor/student interactions (online office hours, group help sessions)

The findings also revealed that faculty utilized more high impact, inclusive and accessible teaching practices as a result of teaching during the pandemic. These practices included items such as the use of a flipped classroom model, shorter and more frequent assessments, better alignment of course content with learning objectives, offering exams online, allowing remote attendance, flexible due dates, allowing for resubmitted assignments, and allowing learners to show content mastery through a variety of means. The majority of faculty who engaged in these practices saw their benefit and plan to continue to use them. But, of the faculty participating in the survey, there was also a group who do not plan to retain their new practices as they either did not meet learning outcomes or the faculty saw no need to make changes to their pre-pandemic practices.

This session engaged participants in a conversation about what this topic looks like in the participants' educational institutions and organizations. The longer-term goal for this research is to gather similar data from a variety of universities to gain a wider view of the effect of the pandemic on teaching methods in higher and continuing education. Adult education practitioners, whether they teach in higher education or other settings, have a solid understanding and application of effective teaching methods. Yet, they are not always recognized for this expertise. Investigating if exposure to new teaching methods has encouraged educators in other disciplines to pay more attention to, alter, and perhaps improve their own teaching could have an impact on the status and recognition of the field of adult education and encourage people to recognize and utilize our vast knowledge base.

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