

Date: 07-31-2022

COVID-19 and Examples of “Best” Teaching Practices from the Lens of Different Stakeholders

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted how we teach and learn at all educational levels. It created significant challenges but also some opportunities for various stakeholders we all can learn from for the future. In this editorial, we identify some of the “best” teaching practices that we have seen developed, improved, and that potentially can be further improved as the focus has shifted to add hybrid, HyFlex, and fully online modes of course delivery to the traditional F2F instruction. We focus on different stakeholders – students, faculty, and educational institutions. Based on review of the literature, we did not see much differences in terms of “best” teaching practices between the Midwest region and the rest of the country.

Keywords: COVID-19, “Best” teaching practices, various stakeholders

DOI: 10.17705/3jmwa.000074

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1. Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started around March 2020 in the US and around the world, all aspects of our lives, including how we educate learners, at all levels, has significantly changed. Around the end of April 2020, UNESCO (2020) reported that about 1.3 billion students were impacted by the closing of their educational institutions. Some students and faculty at colleges and universities were familiar with online education as early as 1994 (Alavi, 1994, Hiltz, 1994, Leidner & Jarvenpaa, 1995) and a lot of research on this topic has been done since then. In many institutions, even before the pandemic, hybrid and fully online modes of course delivery were relatively common. Even so, there were, and still are, some faculty and students who, for various reasons, prefer the face-to-face (F2F) mode of course delivery. Another point is that the sudden change to fully remote instruction, due to the pandemic, created significant challenges, such as the lack of choice for all involved. Besides, at the high-school and lower levels, there was little familiarity with fully online teaching and learning.

More recently, various studies have been conducted looking at the short and long-term implications that the new normal has created for students, educators, education delivery, and educational institutions. Pelikan et al. (2021) conducted a multi-country study of more than fifteen thousand students using self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), looking at the less structured nature of remote learning and its implications on the learners’ intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Kirk-Jenkins & Hughey (2021) looked at the sudden shift for faculty and institutions from the instructional process perspective. In particular, they looked at opportunities as well as challenges that the new normal has created from the equity lens, gender inequity, and opportunities for life-work related balances. Mothers in particular, had a harder time maintaining work-life balances.

Koch and Schermuly (2021) used an extension of the job-demands resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to look at the amount of stress placed on employees due to COVID. Educators and learners, most likely, are impacted by this kind of stress. Colclasure et al. (2021) identified five specific challenges “learning patterns, technology access, additional responsibilities, learning community, and mental health” (p. 1) associated with the sudden change to remote teaching and learning. A set of recommendations were made for each of the challenges (p. 18).

The purpose of this editorial is to identify some of the “best” teaching practices that we have seen developed, improved, and that potentially can be further improved as the focus has shifted to add hybrid, HyFlex, and fully online modes of course delivery to the traditional F2F instruction. We focus on different stakeholders, and in particular, look to see if some of the current teaching practices were influenced by the nature of our Midwest region.

2. Online Learning Challenges and Possible Opportunities for Various Stakeholders

The most obvious and impactful stakeholders are students, faculty, and educational institutions. There are, of course, other stakeholders including instructional designers, accreditation agencies, parents, Internet service and instructional technology providers. Not all these groups are affected equally by the shift to more online course delivery. We will focus on students, faculty, and educational institutions.

2.1 Implications for Students

Before the pandemic, many students were familiar with online and hybrid modes of course delivery, but some were not and preferred F2F delivery, in particular, in courses such as accounting. This is one of the reasons most institutions which had a larger number of learners offered their course sections using different modes of course delivery. When the sudden shift to fully online occurred, students no longer had any choice but online courses. This created significant challenges among them in terms of motivation and time management. It became necessary, more than before, for faculty and instructional designers to design learning assignments to increase students’ motivations (Pelikan et al., 2021).

The lack of technology availability and access to high-speed Internet, in particular, for low income and indigenous families as well as students who live in the rural areas of the Midwest created additional burden. This further added to the existing equity related problems that already existed in some school districts, colleges, and universities in the Midwest region. Some households had to share computers among family members for schooling as well as remote work. Some institutions tried to provide loaner laptops, and some Internet service providers in the Midwest provided low or no cost Internet access, at least for a period of time during the early stages of the pandemic.

Learners generally have different learning styles. Innovative faculty found ways to compensate for the lack of F2F instruction with more instructional videos and/or individualized audio/video sessions available for students on a demand basis. Regular and frequent faculty accessibility via online tools and technologies (online office hours), online and group discussions to increase students’ engagement, project and case study-based instructions, and generally providing some flexibility are other ways to remedy some of the challenges of the lack of F2F class meetings.

Assigning group projects, encouraging team work for group projects, and building learning communities to support students and improve outcomes facilitates and enhances engagement for the learners who are normally shy and do not actively participate in class room discussions. Introducing students to class discussions by starting with an icebreaker discussion question or similar concepts such as a “what’s up” section in the course content is helpful for students who are normally more reserved for class participation. Asking all members of teams to participate in their group projects’ presentation is another effective way to enhance communication skills of learners in online and hybrid courses. Improvement in communication skills of learners will also increase their career readiness.

The lack of social contact and athletic participation were other disruptions for many students that created short and potentially long-term effects. Again, paying attention to engagement and improving motivation may remedy this problem.

For students who feel comfortable with online and hybrid learning, some opportunities exist. The flexibility and commuting time and cost savings that online learning affords could potentially be significant. These will allow students to devote more time to real learning or other activities including part-time or full-time employment. Some employers, particularly in the private sector, have informed their employees that they could work remotely indefinitely. This will allow current students and future employees not only be able to do better future planning, but it also provides them some needed experience with potentially similar technologies they will use when they start working. As communication and team work is an important skill set for any employees these days, current students can use the experience they gain as they work remotely with their classmates in the group project assignments if they start working remotely.

2.2 Implications for Faculty

Many faculty members at different institutions were already familiar with online and hybrid modes of course delivery. Some faculty members, however, were opposed to teaching their courses in any delivery mode except fully F2F before the pandemic. When the pandemic hit, at many institutions, the sudden shift created significant challenges for this group of faculty members, their students, and their institutions due to the short time period over which transition needed to occur. Some institutions created new and enhanced already existing professional development activities in their instructional support services, to facilitate the learning and skills necessary for faculty members to be able to effectively teach online and hybrid courses. Developing instructional technology training is not sufficient. It is essential to provide training in online and hybrid pedagogy related skill set development. Team teaching with colleagues who were already familiar with online and hybrid teaching is an option used by some institutions.

More recently, some institutions, at least at the graduate level, have been offering their courses using the HyFlex mode of delivery, which affords learners the ability to attend sessions either F2F or online. This option, in particular, needs more planning for faculty who are not familiar with various instructional technologies. Team teaching would be very beneficial in this kind of environment with one faculty have the responsibility for F2F discussions and the other monitoring and incorporating online comments in class discussions. Engagement and active participation of all learners are essential in this kind of environment for effective teaching. Highly reliable technology is another critical necessity, as is readily available help from trained technical support staff.

Quality Matters (QM) professional development and certification is highly encouraged for improving teaching effectiveness for all faculty members, in particular, for those with less online teaching familiarity and experience. Carefully designed and clearly articulated syllabi are essential for all courses, in general, and for online and hybrid courses in particular. Developing and clearly articulating assignments’ rubrics facilitate effective teaching. Engaging students with real world examples and active learning practices, and inviting guest speakers to bring examples to the classroom that connect course contents to the real-world events in their respective organizations, help improve students’ learning.

The loss of work-life balances has been another aspect of the remote work that many faculty members and their families have been experiencing since the pandemic (Colclasure et al., 2021). For some faculty working remotely, a days’ work became more than an eight-hour work day -- rather it became a ten or even twelve-hour work day. For families with children, especially younger children, sharing computers and quiet space became a challenge. Given that in most households with children, female members of the family have the majority of the responsibilities for taking care of the children, the pandemic created significant challenges for female members of the family. The impact of remote work for families with children was felt a lot more by female faculty members and, of course, by other female professionals. There were cases where some females resigned from their positions or temporarily left the workforce to take care of their children.

Now that majority of faculty have experienced online and hybrid teaching, the hope is that this will create an opportunity to use some of the innovative practices and lessons learned from online teaching for F2F teaching as well. These practices include focusing more on a variety of students’ learning needs, increasing students and faculty engagement, flexibility, adaptability, innovative thinking in instructional design, team work and group projects, more frequently on-demand office-hours using communication technologies, and more technology-rich course contents.

2.3 Implications for Educational Institutions

Even before the pandemic, a large number of educational institutions at all levels around the world were investing in educational technologies to cope with the digital transformation of education. The pandemic expedited this transformation to a great degree. Creating online teaching and learning units and teaching innovation centers to provide training such as Quality Matters (www.qualitymatters.org) and help in the development of effective and accessible online course contents will facilitate overall online teaching and learning. Professional pedagogy training should also address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) contents. Creating classrooms equipped with the required technology to deliver courses in HyFlex mode of delivery provides access more broadly and increases flexibility for learners.

Some textbook publishers have programs (<https://www.bnccollege.com/academic-solutions/first-day-complete/>) to allow universities to add textbook charges to tuition and fees so that students will have access to the textbooks from day one of the semester. In some cases, the cost of textbook ordering this way is less, which is another benefit of this kind of program. This practice will allow students to have access to the required textbooks from first day of the semester.

3. Conclusion

Given the un-predicable nature of the world we live in, students, faculty, and educational institutions be better prepared for the next emergency, whether a pandemic or some other type of emergency. For students, remote learning creates an opportunity to become more of an active rather than passive learners. They can more frequently participate in group discussions and team work. They can improve their communication skills and team skills, which are often among the specific significant talents employers are seeking. Familiarity with remote learning and using related technologies gives students experience for working remotely in the future. A valuable experience for faculty teaching remotely is to use best teaching practices they have implemented for their F2F courses in the online instruction and vice versa. Increasing more variety of learning activities for students are among other advantages that familiarity with remote teaching potentially can afford faculty members.

Although technology is not the solution to all of our institutional challenges, no doubt the pandemic demonstrated that it can be used very effectively to moderate and remedy, if not totally eliminate, significant challenges. We need to make sure institutions allocate adequate technology and human resources to be better prepared next time around.

4. Overview of the Contents of this Issue

This issue of the journal includes three traditional research articles.

John Muraski and Jakob Iverson in their timely article look at the growth of information systems and technology related workforce demand over the last decade. As a result, they suggest that school districts are increasing their technical course offerings. In particular, they report on the collaborative efforts of three school districts in the Midwest with local industries and other institutions to increase technology skills of k-12 students.

Makato Nakayama, Charlie Chen, and Yoris Au in their interesting article look at the impact of remote work on workers productivity. Their study is based on the analysis of survey data collected from sixty IT professionals. Implications of their findings and some future research agenda is also discussed in their article.

In his important article, Robert Miller studies the inappropriate social media postings of college students and implications their action has for future employment. The article looks at friends’ group as a possible motive for this behavior. The article includes future research agenda related to this area.

We appreciate and wish to acknowledge the contributions of reviewers for this issue of the journal, including Gaurav Bansal (University of Wisconsin, Green Bay), Queen Booker (Metropolitan State University), Omar El-Gayar (Dakota State University), Deepak Khazanchi (University of Nebraska, Omaha), Barbara Klein (University of Michigan, Dearborn), Alanah Mitchell (Drake University), Kevin Scheibe (Iowa State University), and Troy Strader (Drake University).

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