

What I Really Learned About Hybrid/Online Classes

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It is natural to have fear of the unknown. The fear of trying something new can be incapacitating. After more than thirty years of teaching experience, online teaching was completely new and intimidating for me. The reason behind this feeling was my generation did not grow up in online learning environment, thirty years ago internet was not even existed. My biggest concern was if I could connect with my students well enough in digital environment. Another big question in my mind was, would my students be able to engage to the learning as well as in my face-to-face lessons which I used to?

“If you want to learn how to swim jump into the water”. Before all the world’s education system changed, literally overnight, by Covid19, I grew some interest in online/hybrid education and decided start teaching a hybrid class. That was the only way I could know if online teaching is for me. It did not take long to recognize that teaching online is significantly different than teaching face-to-face. I openly say now, this new way of educating the students is neither hard to fear, nor easy to take it lightly. It is completely different. In this article, you will find some practices to reach out and guide the students to have great learning experiences. Using my classroom practices, I shall point out the key of how we, as educators, provide highly effective, engaging learning environment for our students in this new digital setting. My main goal has been to keep my students engaged with the materials we study, and encourage them to actively involved in their learning. Particularly now, online teaching became necessary due to the worldwide school closings and demand is massive. It is no secret that online classes are not going away after all these we live through. In fact, clearly its popularity increasingly will continue even after Covid-19 pandemic is over. Therefore, to maintain high quality, satisfying teaching practices for ourselves, we need to find the way fits naturally to our teaching style. I believe many educators have the similar concerns of engaging students in digital environment that I had in the beginning. This work is to share some ideas which worked for me.

Certainly, there are many factors effect student involvement and their success in their education. Please allow me to discuss a few of them in here. The first component towards successful online education is our institutions. We cannot ignore the importance of the support we get or we should get from the institution we work. Their role is crucial on faculty performances. The second component is, us, educators. We are the one maintaining connections with students throughout the term, keeping them engaged, helping them to navigate course technologies, guiding, mentoring encouraging them to do their best. Educators have the most vital role in students’ life. Then the students, who are the center of everything we do, should have clear understanding what it takes to be responsible learners to fulfill their future dreams. Let us take a look at those components more closely.

Institutions Responsibilities: In a nutshell, to have a successful distance learning program, despite of any budgetary restrictions, institutions' biggest investment must be integrating new technology into classrooms and educate their faculty members for conducting successful online program. Updating "Learning Management System" (LMS), providing necessary tools are essential to delivering a good service to students learning. Technology is changing and improving extremely fast. Difficulties of catching up the new technology may frustrate faculty and students which may disturb teaching-learning negatively. Vast majority of existing faculty members have no or minimum experience with online teaching systems. Educating the educators is also significant necessary investment for the institutions interested in successful program in their curriculum. Since, as faculty, we do not have much control of what our institutions do, I would like to leave this component of effective online teaching right here and hope every institution will provide the best sources to their faculty and students.

Faculty Responsibilities: Faculty members are key to students' learning journey. Before having mandatory online education in 2020, many academics had not seen the value of online education. This was understandable since there were many motives for that, such as, most of the current academics have not trained as online teachers in their education life and they were not familiar. Even more likely, many of us may not have additional time to invest learning the new system. Also, there have been many criticisms towards online teaching. The biggest criticism is the quality of education due to the lack of face to face faculty- student interaction. After all, during the pandemic, schools changed their education form from face-to face to online in considerably short time. Many faculty members had to adjusted their teaching as quick as they could with trying their best. Since the online teaching became significant part of our education recently and we all seem adjusting the new style, I believe it will be also significant part of our future education. Therefore, we should make the best of it. We may start asking some questions to ourselves, such as, what should we do to become effective teacher in this new setting? How we can adapt our teaching techniques in efficient and sufficient way? to improve our teaching.

Here are a few suggestions from my experience to answer those questions, and some discussion about what we, as educators, can do to motivate and engage our students in online classes and enhance teaching.

Time is precious: First of all, we need to put aside our fear and doubts towards online teaching. We may not have proper training for the new settings up to now. However, faculty should believe in life time learning and skills development which in turn helps students. We have to be willing to educate ourselves and do research to improve constantly. This may take time from us, but in the long run it will be worth the investment. Faculty development has the potential to expand faculty effectiveness. There are many sources we may get the necessary information, such as workshops, seminars, conferences, particularly now after Covid 19, the number of sources increased significantly. In my opinion the best way to find information is collaborations with our colleagues. All we wish to do can be accomplished in shorter time if we communicate and collaborate with other colleagues who

already used and applied techniques we would like to know. We should not be hesitating asking help when we needed as we emphasize to our students, same rule is valid for us also. Being open to constant feedbacks from our students, is another convenient resource to get some directions for new ideas and way to increase our creativity.

Effective teaching needs a significant investment of time in preparing. Preparation and actual teaching online are not any less time consuming than face-to-face teaching. We need to dedicate and invest the time to adapt and prepare our teaching and to create learning opportunities meet the need of our students, especially when we are new to distance learning. In my experience one of the major time-consuming preparation component occurs when we actively research the ways to foster critical thinking, and maintain sufficient actual time for communication and interaction with our students. This consumes already significant amount of attention from most of us for face -to-face classes. An educator has to consider even more carefully in online settings how to foster critical thinking. We have to be aware of everything we do, such as the substance of the material and tone of our writing. Writing in capital letters is shouting, surprisingly many of people do not know that, we should avoid that as much as possible. Ultimately, teaching online course contains all the usual challenges of designing, leading, delivering the lecture with the issues particular to digital environment, such as students are missing information from vocal inflection, hands gestures and facial expression. To overcome this gap, we may set time and meet the students virtually, synchronously in our office hours.

Technical challenges cannot be ignored either. Knowing the technology, we use and we required students to use, well enough to be the main trouble shooter is a game changer. Our students, most likely, will contact us the first when they have trouble. We should be as ready as possible to guide them to solve their at least some basic technical problems in short time.

Faculty-Student Connection: Avoid seeing online teaching exclusively through the lens of face-to-face classes. We cannot simply take the course we are teaching face-to-face put it online, we just need to have different road to get there. Here are a few suggestions:

Communicating students with multiple formats increase the chance of reaching them. Each student may prefer different tools to connect. Email, chatrooms, embedded audios, screen casts videos are most common, going one step forward and even using text messages may encourage some students communicate more. However, while using too many different platforms it may overwhelm us and may be students too. It is important to pick a few, early in the semester, that satisfies the students and manageable for ourselves and use the same platforms until the end of the semester. All this effort shows to students that we care, and they recognize it.

Providing active learning opportunities must be in our radar always. Hands on learning is possible online settings. For example, group projects using some platforms such as Zoom groups, Blackboard Collaboration, or Google meet, is achievable and most of the students are enjoying such settings. Guiding and encouraging students to use such platforms also

create nice community in the classroom even students are physically far apart from each other.

Timely useful feedback improves student’s motivation in any kind of learning environment setting, online is not any different. Quick responses to discussion posts. Turning back the graded assignments keeps students engaged. In fact, students should never engage their next assignment without receiving feedback on the previous one.

Adding self-assessment opportunities, such as, grading their own quizzes, voluntarily sharing a homework to class grading benefits them to see their own mistakes more effective way.

Improving course accessibility is vital. Technology can be frustrating; students should be guided to technology they have to use for class. If we are making a video, captioning and transcripts would be useful for many of the students. Also, the class material should be organized and as clear as possible for example, students should see clearly what they need to do in what days and where the materials are. Here is a short example of two different ways to give the same information:

We may write only text,

“Students will have two assignments. The first one is Guided Practice, students are responsible to complete assigned reading, watching video, responding questions, working on activities, participating online discussions. Discussion board comments and questions should demonstrate clearly student engaged with the guided practices. Regular participation should earn up to 15 points for semester. The second is online homework which will be assigned on the WeBWork and grades also will be assigned by the system.”

Or,

We may write in table format,

Assignments	Assignments involve - Submission Method	Grading - Rubric
Guided Practice	Assigned reading, watching video, responding questions, working on activities, participating online discussions. Submission Method: After you study assigned reading and watch the videos, you should submit your questions and comments on Discussion Board.	Discussion board comments and questions should demonstrate clearly student engagement with the guided practices. Regular participation should earn up to 15 points for semester.
Online Homework	You will be assigned weekly online-homework problems from the WeBWork problems list at MTH 204-04 WeBWork . Submission Method: You may work on problems on a paper. However, your answers will be submitted to the system. Homework will be available every week Monday 1:00 AM-Sunday 11:59 PM.	Point grades will be assigned by the system

Clearly the table captures their attention more.

Students like to have choices, we may give them opportunities to draft some exam questions, pursuing topics of their interest in the assignments or discussion would increase their involvement.

It is easy to feel isolated in distance learning environment, be available for your students. Use skype, zoom, reach them with announcements, updates reminders keep stronger connection.

Be a mentor, supporter, facilitator. If you want student's attention you might want to highlight the progress not the decline. Instead of warning, social incentives works better to keep their attention. In fact, highlighting what the others are doing is strong incentive that we may use often. Immediate rewards rather than future works better.

Although that is our goal and ideal outcome but we all know how difficult to make all the students satisfied all the time. However, teacher should seek feedback as often as possible, this gives us opportunity to do possible adjustments sooner if necessary.

After all that's been said, educators and also students need to know that students have to take great responsibility for their learning also. Many students, particularly freshmen, do not know how to study effectively. Beginning of the semester, I gently remind my students their responsibilities. Giving a brief guidance to the students may pay off in the long run. Here are a few examples of my reminders.

Guiding Tips to the students:

First of all, assuring students that you are available to support when they need creates trust between students and the educator. This way guiding tips taken as part of the support not the extra work expected.

- Advise them to create a concrete plan as soon as they start the course, that will make them to recognize their time limits, and how to arrange their life around it.
- Self-assessing readiness to learn. This is important because students may need various skills, attitude and knowledge towards their successful study. Self-evaluation of their current situation, their habits, the support network they can get, is helpful to figure out where to start.
- Encourage them to set their learning goals, reevaluate and alter during the study if necessary.
- I emphasize, to focus on one, at most two things at the same time. The research conducted among students by University of Utah in 2020, supports this theory strongly.
- Engage in learning process, be self-motivated, clear the distractions as much as possible.
- Take good notes beyond the course, note taking most common method synthesis of learning. To keep information don't detract from you taking notes is effective, taking notes by hand is even better.
- Read or study out loud when it is possible. Little more than two years ago Waterloo University in their research observed four groups of students. First group is given

materials to read silently, second group had listened the materials read by someone else, the third group listen the same material from their own voice recorded earlier and the fourth group read the same material out loud and try to learn it. The fourth group had the higher learning and their knowledge remained longer.

- Communicate with the others, know your resources, ask help when needed.

These are a few guiding tips to my students. It may consume time from us but when you see the students are benefitting from doing everything said above and they also recognizing the impact on their learning is worth every minute we spend.

As summary, we need to spend time and effort to shape our students' learning. I hope everyone finds something useful and valuable in this article that you may use in your teaching. After all, we all dedicated to our student's success. If you would like to discuss more any of the suggestions here, please contact by e-mail provided.

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