

Rolling the Die, Learning to Teach

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Abstract: This essay reflects on one instructor's sudden pivot to online teaching and preparation for hybrid teaching prompted by campus management of the 2019 coronavirus disease pandemic. Focused on collaboration, technology, student feedback, and adaptation, the writer details a journey that is ongoing.

Keywords: online teaching, student feedback, collaboration, asynchronous instruction, synchronous instruction, hybrid learning.

In fall 2019, I finally made time to participate in a popular campus workshop: “Speed Dating with Learning Technologies.” Before attendees began their 10-min “dates” with the likes of Top Hat, Kaltura, and NameCoach, we played a game requiring us to roll a die that would determine a catastrophe preventing us from teaching in the classroom; this was intended to demonstrate the need for much of the technology we were about to encounter. The die included scenarios such as weather disasters, air travel delays, power outages, and my favorite, zombie apocalypse. Little did I know that within a few months, I would be scouring my notes from that workshop, searching for crumbs of information to help me transfer my public speaking class to an online forum. Suddenly, a zombie apocalypse did not seem all that far-fetched.

I have found that nothing beats a global pandemic to get me to examine and evaluate my teaching methods and, well, everything else. In this essay, I reflect on my journal entries from early March, when the possibility of campuses being impacted by the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) first entered my consciousness, through August, when fall classes began in a hybrid format. My attitude underwent a profound shift and is still evolving in this dynamic situation. I remain anxious and reflective, but writing about my experience has given shape to the chaos. My experience was most influenced by my initial reluctance to collaborate with colleagues and try new technology as well as my willingness to seek student feedback and adapt when things were not working. Now that I have learned to embrace collaboration and technology, I approach the next semester with a much broader view and loftier goals. Embracing a growth mindset is both overwhelming and comforting; doing so “allows for a different definition of success, and that definition can change daily” (Smith & Zakrajsek, 2020, para. 3). Let me describe how I got here.

March 2: Word in the hallways is that a shutdown of campus is likely after Spring Break due to the coronavirus. I announced to my 8 am section that I am preparing for virtual learning and assured them that we would not miss a step in our course should we be unable to meet in person. The looks on their faces prevented me from mentioning it to my next three sections at all.

When I initially heard of the possibility of transitioning to online classes, I had no fear. After all, I had been teaching for nearly 20 years—with 7 of those at an online university—and I was in my 3rd year of teaching my current course. Thus, I made my initial plans entirely on my own.

I went back a few years and evaluated my time spent teaching online. I examined the course design, posts, and assignments. I had taught it asynchronously and recorded no video or slide presentations. Occasionally, I chatted with a student on the phone, but all other communication was

through the written word. While teaching at the online university, faculty were identified as “facilitators,” and I fulfilled that role. However, although there is plenty of facilitating and organizing to do with an online course, I began the current semester as a teacher, and I determined to continue that way.

I realized quickly that “changing horses in midstream” presented a dilemma regarding student learning outcomes. Course goals and outcomes were established before the semester began. In Business Presentations, the course I teach, all major assignments are speeches presented to a live audience, so objectives set up for a face-to-face classroom seemed out of sync (pun intended) once that course was online. Not knowing how to deal with the issue, I ignored it.

I also did not deal with what was top priority for my fellow instructors: directing team presentations. Most were facing the challenge of assisting students in preparing and presenting team projects when they had little or no working knowledge of Zoom, the video conferencing platform. Because of my front-loaded schedule, team presentations were over, making virtual collaboration unnecessary for my students. While other teachers were taking and giving crash courses on Zoom in their final moments in person with students before the evacuation of campus, I was calmly assuring students that they would find everything they needed in Canvas, our learning management system, and to wait for my announcements with details. I felt no fear about the move online because I had attempted to eliminate the need for collaboration and technology. Each time a flurry of email exchanges occurred among fellow faculty or I encountered a colleague in the hallway, I felt like I had dodged a bullet. That was foolish.

July 24: With a few weeks to go before fall semester, I sent two emails, made a phone call, posted a comment online and attended two optional Zoom meetings—all in an effort to collaborate. The colleague I am now would be unrecognizable to the one I was last winter.

Now that I am planning a hybrid course for fall semester in which my students must present the same team project via Zoom, I wish I had learned how to collaborate virtually back in the spring when everyone else was going through trial and error together. Collaborating necessitates meeting, and this introvert has always despised meetings. I am a great listener, but it takes me time to process what I hear, and I am not typically comfortable brainstorming aloud or expressing thoughts I have not had time to examine. Therefore, meetings either frustrate or bore me, as I struggle to be gracious when others think aloud around me, and my own contributions are usually reduced to sharing facts and asking questions for clarification.

Additionally, I detest asking for help. Working toward independence and self-sufficiency my entire adult life, I only reckoned with my inability to do everything on my own when I became a parent. As anyone who has struggled to get an infant to nurse, a toddler to sleep, or a teen to talk can attest, raising a child takes a village, and I realized this very early. While I find it easy to admit a lack of expertise in my personal life, I am not comfortable doing so in my professional life. Through this pandemic, I learned that asking, “How did you do that?” does not convey I cannot do it; it merely seeks information about alternate methods.

When I began planning to pivot to online teaching, I envisioned a couple ways of doing so. Now, after months of sharing with colleagues, I know dozens of ways. Through discussions, observations, and (shudder) meetings over the past few months, I have concluded that my first idea is always inefficient, ineffectual, or just plain dumb. I have also come to appreciate that even if conversations and meetings last longer than I like, hearing others brainstorm and share ideas saves me time in the long run. Collaboration is still not coming easily to me, and I may always prefer methods that give me time to think before responding, but I am appreciative of others’ willingness to share.

April 6: How is it that I put the same information in three different places on Canvas and some students still don't see it? What are they doing?! What am I NOT doing?!

My resistance to collaboration was nearly as monumental as my resistance to experimenting with new aspects of technology. I had a basic grasp of Canvas, so why should I need more? As it turned out, I was not entirely fearless. I had to confront fears that ranked right up there with the virus itself. I was afraid of the time it would take to learn and feel comfortable using new technological tools. I was afraid of failing at using them. I was afraid of looking like an amateur in front of my savvy students. I was afraid technology would consume me and I would use it more than I needed to, thus losing the personal connections. Some fears have abated; others remain.

I now recognize that “teaching and learning are inherently social acts, . . . an eminently human enterprise” (Gannon, 2020, para. 22). Moving a course online does not change that. After all, “technology doesn’t teach; teachers teach” (Gannon, 2020, para. 22). Two days into campus closure, I realized that just adding written posts to Canvas was not going to be a sufficient substitute for in-person lectures and I needed additional technology to help me teach. Therefore, during the prolonged spring break, I figured out how to create narrated PowerPoint slides, which enabled me to recreate what I would have done in the classroom to some extent. I also recorded independent minilectures to prepare students for upcoming assignments. I was relieved to have little time for such recordings because I surely would have sweated the details if time allowed. I figured that a bit of stuttering, a glare on my glasses, and a shadow or two would not affect the message enough to matter.

I recorded a brief wrap-up of the course, as I do in the last class, in my son’s room in front of his Sonic the Hedgehog movie poster because it was the only quiet spot in the house that day. I did it in one take and kept it because I was pressed for time, even though I cried at the end, wishing I could be delivering my reminder—the most important thing a public speaker can do is smile—to actual smiling faces. I received emails from students who were touched by my show of vulnerability and some who conveyed they got teary themselves. I even got a Starbucks gift card for being the “Best Teacher Ever.” I had inadvertently done what Sean Michael Morris, a senior instructor in learning, design, and technology at the University of Colorado, advised: “teach *through* the screen, not *to* the screen” (Gannon, 2020, para. 22).

Working on the fly had its drawbacks, but it came with low expectations. Having time to prepare for another possible pivot to online teaching in the future is a whole new ballgame, though, as more will be expected. I finally set up a workspace in our guest bedroom and even hung some art on the wall to provide a pleasing background. I invested in an LED desk lamp to place behind my laptop for better lighting when I record lectures and appear on Zoom. I have taken to removing my glasses for the lectures, as the only way to reduce the glare on the lenses seems to be to hold my head in an unnaturally high position with my chin jutting out, which looks much worse than the glare itself. Without my glasses, I cannot focus on the screen and this helps me avoid looking at myself instead of the camera while speaking—a bonus. For my introductory video that I hope students view before the first day of class, I don my glasses and mask at the end, so they will recognize me when we meet in person. I have watched YouTube videos on how to look good on Zoom (including one by a woman called Angela on “Hot and Flashy”) and experimented with getting the perfect angle by propping my laptop in a dozen ways on as many different items. Computer on two notebooks and a LEGO Batman picture book seems the best.

August 3: The new e-textbook appeared in Canvas last week, and a colleague demonstrated how to link the chapters with established Modules. Trying to finish the online quizzes (never thought I would give quizzes in this course!) before meeting up with a few other instructors to simulate a live Zoom class where we'll practice sharing screens, enhancing security, and visiting breakout rooms.

Online teaching, even for a public speaking class, must be about more than appearances. Still, visual aesthetics are vital. I teach my students the fundamentals of making effective slide decks for their presentations, but I remind them to avoid spending more time on visuals than the speaking portion of their presentations. I practice what I preach: My slides are polished but not dynamic, and my course site is functional but not snazzy. After some Canvas tutorials, I now realize how crucial it is to put the time into making the course site attractive. While I did my best last spring to link everything together, I think that repeating content and directions in multiple places on Canvas actually served to confuse rather than clarify. When students saw content repeated, they may have decided it was sufficient to look just at Announcements and forgo checking Assignments, for instance. According to Kareem Farah in “4 Tips for Teachers Shifting to Teaching Online,” “Distance learning should push educators to think about how they can be leaner and more concise with their delivery of new information” (2020, Tip 1). I responded to my students’ confusion by learning how to integrate Modules in my course site last semester. It helped highlight exactly what needed to be done each class day. I continue working to make the site engaging and streamlined since it will be our actual classroom in online and hybrid learning. So far, this includes requiring students to post in online discussions, having a homepage with my personal introduction video, and using a university template that resembles other course sites.

Collaboration: Check. Technology: Check. The summer lockdown allowed me time to reflect on mistakes from spring and prepare for fall by creating what Farah called “simple structures” that “require rigorous work”: “Tasks with few instructions often lead to the greatest amount of higher-order thinking, as students figure out what to do within defined parameters” (2020, Tip 1). I never would have expected transforming a successful face-to-face course into an effective online course would require such rigorous work. I did some things well the first time, though, and look forward to continuing that work. One thing I found helpful was to solicit student feedback.

March 31: I am emailing every one of my 94 students to check in. Right now my goal is to maintain the personal connections and let them know I prioritize their mental and physical health. I plan to check in again with each of them in a couple weeks about the course itself once we have had time to settle into online learning.

Transitioning into an online classroom taught me many lessons, learned from both my students and my own children. As parent to two teens moving to online instruction the week before it was my turn, I was privy to student perspectives and how 13 very different public school teachers approached online education. My own children faced some common challenges in the new environment, even with my attention and support. All instruction was asynchronous. My seventh grader is extremely self-motivated and can figure out most things on his own. So when he could not get the right answer in Algebra, emailed the teacher, and waited for a response—waiting without being able to move on—frustration followed. That is when I knew I had to be “on call” during my waking hours, as well as include synchronous time in my instruction to prevent such frustrations in my own students. I scheduled regular Zoom office hours. I updated my settings so I received notifications on my phone for each new email and responded to students within an hour. This turned out to be as exhausting as helping my kids, but students were grateful.

My ninth grader had different challenges. He has been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, so the transition to online learning was met with anxiety and confusion—by both of us. Time management turned out to be the biggest challenge for him, and I anticipated that online learning for my students with executive function deficits or a lack of self-discipline would be potentially disastrous. This prompted me to send reminders to individuals

who struggled to meet deadlines, and I required outlines before presentations to prevent procrastination.

Some of my children's teachers posted requests for feedback, and I knew I would need to seek it from my own students more than I typically did. As our university dispensed with student evaluations for that unusual semester, I used the online survey platform Survey Monkey to craft my own evaluations and sought input two different times. Response rates were not great, but they were enough to constitute a consensus on some matters. One thing that I learned was that students wanted more real-time interaction with me. They did not seem satisfied by my virtual office hours and phone chats; many wanted live group instruction. This surprised me initially, as so many had expressed relief when told we would not be using Zoom. My theory is that, like me, they were afraid of the technology they had never used and did not want to spend time learning that in addition to the course material. Once they had to learn it for other courses, they realized it was a good way to stay connected.

I was anxious to see results from a survey the university gave students regarding online learning experiences; this provided general feedback in place of course-specific evaluations. The survey showed that "students think their education suffered when courses shifted to online instruction last spring. Most students responding to the study reported a decrease in understanding of course learning goals, according to preliminary findings from the university's eLearning Research and Practice Lab" (Reschke, 2020, p. A8). No surprise there, as I reckon I was not the only faculty member who could not make the new online assignments fit the old classroom course objectives. The study also made "a great many references to large amounts of 'busy work' in open-ended comments" (Reschke, 2020, p. A8). That made sense, as I had found new material that was timely (*Wall Street Journal* articles and TED talks) to assign in place of meeting in person. I abandoned that after a week because it felt like "busy work" to me, too. The survey responses confirmed for me that my students' experiences were common across campus. Even if the shift to online learning was imperfect, it was shared.

When teaching in person, informal and indirect student feedback is constant. When I lecture on the importance of speaking pace and use audio examples of Tony Robbins versus Henry Kissinger to illustrate my point, the smiles, head nods, and chuckles indicate the students get it. When I talk about using rhetorical devices in their speeches and ask them about the readings I assign on Winston Churchill's speeches, the glazed eyes and yawns inform me that I should look for new material. In addition to the nonverbal feedback I get in the classroom, I also have a chance to overhear students chatting about assignments, get asked questions that lead to other questions, and have students respond to my direct questions: "Is that clear?" "What do you think about that?" "Is there another way to approach it?" These moments are invaluable.

When such in-person feedback was unattainable and my emails went unanswered in the spring, I was at a loss. I valued all the responses I received and felt frustrated by the silence. One student, in particular, will haunt me. He always arrived early to the classroom, sat in the front row, and said little. He was quite engaged; he sat up straight, kept his focus on whomever was speaking, and took copious notes. That was before we pivoted to online teaching; when we shifted, he disappeared. He did none of the optional homework, skipped the extra credit, neglected to turn in items on time, and completely blew the first major assignment. I reached out to him via email numerous times. I was concerned that such a dramatic change in behavior must mean something serious was preventing him from performing at a distance as he had up close. Once his grade was irrecoverable, he finally replied. When I saw his message waiting in my inbox, I prepared myself for the worst, but a family member did not have COVID-19, he had not lost Internet access, and he was not forced to work full-time at Amazon—all realities of other students in my classes. He stated that he was simply interested in other things when working from home and had not devoted adequate time to our course. He had an A when our class met face to face. By semester's end, after 5 weeks of online learning, he earned a C-. Despite my efforts to offer support and resources, he never replied to me again. I was left wondering:

Did he make time for *other* courses? Could I have done anything differently to keep him involved? Will any of the changes I have now made to my course matter to students like him? I hope the last half of that semester did not wreak too much damage on his GPA or his psyche, and I also hope we all have a student who haunts us because that can be an invaluable motivation.

May 7: I have submitted final grades. Never have they been so high.

Students may have reported in the university's survey that their educational experience suffered with the switch to online learning, but spring semester grades did not reflect it. Like my own students' final grades, Indiana University students' grades were "on average higher than usual, according to a June 12 grade distribution report from the registrar" (Terbuk & Rao, 2020). In fact, grades of A were 10% higher last spring than the average of semesters over the past seven years. Additionally, failing grades decreased more than 40% compared with spring 2019 (TerBush & Rao, 2020). From talks with colleagues, I know I was not alone in going the extra mile to accommodate students as the global health crisis evolved. Of course, that is as it should be. I offered extra credit for the first time ever, extended deadlines without demanding explanations, and accepted late submissions without penalty—none of which I would do in a normal semester. I watched the grades for most students inflate over the weeks, but I knew I would not have to explain them during such an exceptional period and felt relief. Being flexible was the least I could do at the time. Now I wonder if my students and I might benefit from more flexibility *every* semester. Grades are the ultimate kind of feedback when they reflect how teaching affects performance. Spring grades certainly reflected the resilience of our students and the compassion of our teachers, but I have yet to determine what else they might indicate. Is it possible that some students performed better when relieved of rigid rules and stressful deadlines?

I am keenly aware that I should not seek feedback—from students or anyone else—unless I am willing to adapt my methods based on what I hear. I made changes right away in last spring's course based on student questions. When I realized students were not reading assignment instructions as closely as I expected, I recorded short videos explaining the assignments. When I saw students struggling with where to look first on Canvas, I streamlined the information into Modules. When several students emailed me the same questions, I began a Discussion for questions and answered them daily for all to see. When I felt like things were finally going smoothly, I solicited student feedback and found some needed more contact. So I taught myself enough about Zoom to integrate it for small groups, scheduled phone calls with a few students, and assigned an activity that required everyone to connect with a classmate. Revising what was in place and trying new methods was appropriate to show students the usefulness of improvisational skills in a course that emphasizes impromptu speaking.

July 8: Just received word that I will be teaching a condensed "rotational hybrid classroom." Trying to wrap my head around this, but I just keep thinking that this makes last semester look like a piece of cake.

Now facing a semester teaching half the course in person and half online, known as hybrid learning, I am embracing adaptation even more. In addition to generating synchronous and asynchronous activities that work in two very different environments, I must turn a 16-week course into a 13-week course. I am incorporating a brand new e-textbook, formulating quizzes, and replacing an attendance policy with professionalism points. As I research best practices, I am taking Flower Darby's (2019) advice on scaffolding, beginning with low-stress assignments to make sure students get the hang of the technology and continuing low-stakes work before major assignments (Tip 7). I

will “structure ways for students to explain new information to one another” to increase peer contact (Darby, 2019, Tip 8). I am working on making grading rubrics and instructions even clearer as a way of anticipating students’ isolation and planning for it in my course design (Darby, 2019, Tip 3).

But I am most concerned with something I had little time to prioritize in the spring: equity. I need to look back to plan ahead. My own sons had access to resources equally, but teachers and I had to provide more support to my disabled son to make things equitable. Equity “provides people with resources that fit their circumstances. . . . It means offering individualized support to students that addresses possible barriers” (Waterford.org, 2019, paras. 2, 6). When circumstances change, the type of support must change to meet new needs. Last spring, Edward Maloney and Joshua Kim (2020) warned that the move online would produce less equity in student learning if accommodations were not made (para. 7). As I generate new strategies, I ask myself what more I can do to discover inequities. Shawn Kim, director of digital learning solutions at the Stanford Graduate School of Education, recommended having students fill out a survey with questions about their accessibility to technology and their home setting. She insisted, “As an instructor, you want to understand the conditions your students are working under” (Spector, 2020, paras. 3–4). This seems a simple task with potential to provide valuable information.

Along with equity, I am intrigued by the notion of creating a potentially more democratic online classroom—one that fosters collaboration and group decision making (Colin & Heaney, 2001). When Stacey and Wiesenberg (2007) studied perspectives of those who taught both face-to-face and online at Canadian universities, they found that online instruction was considered a more “democratic mode” in that it is less teacher centered and enables more student collaboration. Those teachers, however, expressed concern over some students becoming less visible online. I saw that occur with my students, but I hope that building in more group work and peer communication will prevent this. I like to think that an online modality can level the playing field for some students.

Yet when I consider certain student situations from spring, it is obvious that environment affected performance in both positive and negative ways. The student who presented in a suit from his backyard gazebo contrasted strikingly with the t-shirt-clad student recording in a bare apartment bedroom. Both lived near campus, but the first was at his parents’ house and the latter stayed with friends instead of returning to China. One student who presented all his speeches in a rich, flamboyant way in the classroom posted a recording of himself looking small and sounding subdued in an enormous, regal white foyer. Meanwhile, another student’s video gave me a glimpse into a tiny shared bedroom with piles of clothes and books strewn everywhere. More than once, student videos showed family members walking through the recording spaces, including a parent walking right behind a student presenting in a laundry room. Instead of leveling the playing field, moving online seemed to illustrate differences in backgrounds more dramatically.

Part of striving for democratic environments is to design “learning-ready” classrooms that support the needs of all students (Summers & Beers, 2019, p. 77). I grapple with how to address the design goals of equity in online education. How do I establish and maintain a learning-ready setting online? The ways I assign and coach student teams will be crucial, in addition to the types of interactive learning I incorporate. When asked about inclusive and equitable online teaching, Vanderbilt University instructors shared methods. Lily Claiborne elected to forgo live Zoom classes when a single student could not participate: “It is important to me that all my students have an equal opportunity to engage with our course in these times” (Bandy, 2020). While I agree with this in spirit, it is not possible on a campus demanding its faculty teach synchronously. Another Vanderbilt teacher, Sarah Suiter, advised, “Collaboratively define new models of teaching and learning with your students, while being faithful to the goals and approaches of your course” (Bandy, 2020). One type of collaboration that I am now more than eager to continue using is seeking student feedback to adapt as necessary, even when it involves new technology. This may lead to the equitable and democratic classroom I desire.

August 24: First day of classes. Finally wearing that new blouse I bought in February, along with my school-issued mask. I hope students have viewed my introductory video because I only have 35 minutes with them today, as I am splitting class time to meet every student in person. Ready or not, here they come!

Right now, even with months of preparation, I feel as ready for the fall semester as I do for a zombie apocalypse. However, what I have now that I lacked in the spring is a healthy dose of fear that comes from awareness. I tell my public speaking students that we never want to eliminate the nerves—we just want to make the adrenaline work *for* us. New York University Marketing Professor Scott Galloway noted in June:

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste, and there is a huge opportunity. . . . We have, in just the last several weeks, come a long way. Leaning into the online experience will instill universities with a multichannel competence. (2020)

So I keep “leaning in” to allow the fear to work and add another layer of competence to my teaching. Leaning in to be ready for the next roll of the die.

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