From Online Teaching to Digital Formation: Lessons in Pedagogy from the Season of Covid-19

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Serving as both a campus pastor and an adjunct instructor, I know that web-based teaching can feel disconnected for the students I'm called to serve. I'm also not satisfied with this reality. Thankfully, neither are my colleagues. Together, we're learning how to better design our web-based content to move from online *teaching* to digital *formation*. Formation is teaching that is received and incorporated into the development of a student's knowledge, skill, vocation, or identity; all formation includes teaching, but not all teaching results in formation.

My desire to teach at the college level came from a yearning, even a calling, to connect with students in their critical years of identity development and vocational exploration. I want to empower them with reason, wisdom, and knowledge that they might find not just lucrative careers, but rewarding lives. In other words, I desire to teach in a way that promotes formation. Online education doesn't change that intent, but it surely changes the methods.

- • *Relate your pedagogy to student's priorities*. Many of my students now have entirely different schedules than when we were all on campus. Some are out of work entirely, while others are working twice as many hours in shipping centers and grocery stores to make up for job loss experienced by other family members. Expecting everyone to be available at the time we agreed upon when the world wasn't in the midst of a pandemic

doesn't work with the entirely different set of priorities that have emerged for them—and for us. Adjusting some class times and providing asynchronous modules has been essential in retaining student engagement.

- • *Reformat your office (on campus or at home) to enhance engagement.* There are many content creators who have helped us think through simple logistics to make recorded and live interactions more engaging to your audience. This short and particularly helpful clip from the VlogBrothers offers some insight into space, lighting, and equipment. Helping your students see your face, hear your voice, and appreciate your context provides multiple points of connection for those on the other side of the screen.
- • *Augment--or avoid--information dumps.* Information dumps are a mixed bag. For many of our courses, a certain amount of information is essential. Many of us are used to giving that information via lectures, while others utilize activities in class that require creativity. While it's relatively easy to record a lecture for students to watch, that doesn't necessarily promote content retention. Youki Terada provides a helpful literature review and provides five strategies to promote increased cognitive recall. I've found success with two of those suggestions in particular.
    - ◦ *Peer-to-Peer engagement,* a common tool in physical teaching, can still be accomplished in online learning. If meeting in a synchronous class, technology like Zoom allows educators to separate the class into smaller groups to promote discussion among peers and then return to the larger group for a report back on their discussion. In asynchronous models, additional assignments to meet outside of the lecture and reading provide students a similar opportunity. Students can record brief summaries of the conversation and send them to the instructor. This increases their repetition of the information as well as provides accountability for participation.

    - ◦ *Incorporating images* with teaching helps many types of learners access an additional reference point for the essential information. I've had particular success utilizing a core image to guide a theme, sometimes for one class, a section, or even an entire semester. This provides a sort of touchstone, to which other selected images then relate. One hint here: too many images can become distracting and reduce student interest. I only utilize images--and, at times, videos--for major themes in any given class (usually about 3-5 per class).

- • *Gamifying still increases engagement.* My mother-in-law, Kim Conti, is a math whiz and Senior Lecturer with SUNY-Fredonia. She taught me the wonders of Kahoot, a learning platform she's used to rave reviews in her classroom for courses like Math for School Teachers. Quizlet, another resource she commonly uses, reports that 90% of students who use it earn higher grades. These tools allow users to utilize content created by other professionals or create their own games. Initially designed for use in a physical classroom, they're introducing new features for web-based interactions.

In all of this, it's important to remember that alternative delivery methods aren't lesser delivery methods. We may, however, have less skill at these methods, which requires more of

us to learn and employ new ways of forming our students. That, then, is the key to doing this all well. Simply taking all of our in-person content and deploying it in the easiest fashion (for us) on the web can be called online teaching, but it doesn't necessarily promote digital formation. In periods of crisis--and indeed, in all eras of education--we ought to design courses in ways that promote true formation. The best online teaching utilizes web-based tools to create points of contact that foster digital formation. The above suggestions can enhance our practices in ways that promote digital formation through our delivery of online teaching.

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