

Existing online courses not immune to COVID-19 changes

On March 12, 2020, it was announced that UAF would extend its spring break and return with all courses delivered via distance. I wasn't worried. The class I was teaching, Instructional Design (ED F653), was already being delivered fully online.

This was naive of me. In the six weeks of instruction since we reconvened the semester, I came to realize that neither my students, nor I, were immune to the effects of our changed lives and our changed world. Online courses exist in the world of humans, and that world was not normal. But I continued to assume that my course would continue to be normal, as is clear from my announcement to my students on March 12:

For this particular course, this hopefully will not affect your studies beyond the timeline of the semester.

I continued that refrain in an announcement on March 18:

I look forward to us all getting back in the rhythm of the course, and perhaps even a sense of normalcy, next week.

I even attempted to acknowledge reality, but clearly failed to quite make it there:

Remember that just because this course is already online does not mean that it is disconnected from reality. Many of the skills you are developing (and will develop) in this course are directly applicable to the delivery challenges that hundreds of thousands of teachers and millions of students across the United States are facing.

I was arrogant to think that my course design was immune from the upheaval of our lives as we knew them. By March 22, the day before classes resumed, I started to come around but I still didn't quite get it:

As every other class at UAF transitions tomorrow to online delivery, our course is only slightly different. However, life is significantly different, so I am open to making the course as flexible as possible.

On April 2, as I realized that more than half of my students hadn't logged into the course in a week, I reached out with a major change to course policy:

We're three weeks away from the end of this course. I know this is a tough time. I want you all to pass and get credit for

the excellent work that you have done. I am waiving all point reductions for late work, for the entire semester.

I did do some other things that helped. I scheduled optional Zoom sessions called "Get Togethers" worth extra credit that were simply a place to chat. Half of the class joined and we talked about the class a bit, but mostly about life and our families.

I created a "Sharing and Supporting" discussion board for the rest of the semester. Students responded to this and offered each other support. It was honest and human and needed:

"My wife and I are both full-time students so this hasn't affected our jobs, but homeschooling four kids is something I wasn't prepared for."

"With me as a student and working full time as a sub, and my wife working in the medical field this has really turned us on our heads. With the baby due in the next 3 weeks all of the unknowns have left us a little shaken up. My laptop also died over spring break."

"I could not keep up with the demands of my own school assignments, creating school assignments for my students and teaching my own kids... while also completing my degree and undergoing chemotherapy."

In my responses I tried to strike a balance between flexibility and encouragement:

"We're going to get through this semester. Sometimes it's easier to navigate uncertainty together rather than doing it alone, and unfortunately being more alone than normal is the new normal. But here we are!"

This is not to say that rigor was left unaddressed. Each student created an online instructional module that is ready for their K-12 students to engage with. Students spoke of the value that they were able to find in the connection between the course and their teaching practices amidst current events.

I don't think my evolution is unique or worthy of commendation. I suspect every instructor at UAF this semester can share a similar story. If anything, it took me too long to realize what was going on. In the end, I feel I was able to support student success while balancing academic rigor and flexibility. And every student passed.