Re-envisioning synchronous "class time" through flexible small-group cohorts

Theresa (Tess) Evans
Assistant Teaching Professor
Miami University of Ohio
evanstm3@miamioh.edu
@tessmessage

See the opportunity in the new normal

Some of us are still hoping that we can go back to the way things were: Back to before COVID-19. But by the time things get back to normal, normal will have changed. You can't go back without a time-traveling DeLorean. So you learn Webex, Zoom, Google Docs and Slides, Jamboard, Flipgrid, VoiceThread, WeVideo, QuicktTme, Camtasia. Pretty soon you have apps overload. If one more person tries to sell you on yet another killer app, you just might lose it.

You're beginning to feel like a cyborg. Trapped in a dystopian "Max Headroom" virtual world. All your colleagues are now two-dimensional images on a computer screen. And what's worse is that you are starting to get used to it. And what about the students? Who lacks internet access or a digital device? What time zone are students in? Who keeps the video camera turned off? It's weirdly personal to see people in their private spaces. What's the etiquette here?

All the agonizing and planning seems pointless as the situation for fall 2020 keeps changing. Angst and anger, fear and foreboding, grief and loss. How do we find our way through the confusion and chaos?

Problems are only opportunities in work clothes. We're being forced to stop doing things the same old way. What if we come up with something that not only works, but is better than what we were doing before?

Find a better way by figuring out where you want to go

Like Alice, we have fallen down the rabbit hole. When Alice asks the Cheshire Cat if he could help her find her way. he replies, "Well that depends on where you want to go."

Where do I want to go? I know where I don't want to go—as mad as a hatter. That's what would happen if I tried to recreate a face-to-face experience. Students need straightforward

synchronous interactions that minimize technical complexities. So when my institution started talking about social distancing and reduced classroom capacities, I immediately looked to a hybrid format, which would move most of the course to an asynchronous format and still have students work in four small groups of five to six students (The roster limit is 23 students). I planned to meet during the regular class time with two groups on Mondays and the other two groups on Wednesdays. When classroom capacity was revised to an even smaller number, I realized each group would have to meet separately in 30-minute increments. I mapped out the new schedule for all my course sections, and I was ready to transition those face-to-face meetings to videoconferences, if needed.

Teaching and learning are a lot of work, but much of it happens outside the classroom. Students are often advised to expect two hours for each hour in class. My plan is to go mostly asynchronous with weekly 30-minute small-group meetings. It's a good thing I planned for the possibility of an online semester because that's what has happened. At least for the first five weeks. A few students have already asked to remain online.

Maximize the affordances of a real-time connection

We tend to forget that face-to-face teaching evolved the way it did because that was the only mode available. I don't want to replicate a face-to-face classroom. I want to maximize the affordances of a real-time connection.

In a large video-conference meeting, it's easy to feel more like a spectator--until you forget to hit the mute button. Smaller video conferences are less intimidating and less exhausting. When students work on team projects, I'll encourage them to communicate and meet on whatever platforms they choose. They will need to report to me in our weekly meetings, but they don't need surveillance.

Create an outlet for social learning in a socially distanced world

The best thing about small groups is that I get to know my students better. In large groups, it can be difficult to draw out students who are less vocal or simply want to hide. Synchronous small groups offer the best kind of social learning. Smaller groups are more intimate, like a gathering at a campfire, with shared work, regular rituals, and social bonding. And each student gets more of my attention.

Meetings don't always have to be about work. Now that students have fewer outlets for socializing, the play aspect of small groups is more important than ever. Meetings can generate good times, great ideas, and long-term friendships. Get to know each other, build trust, share ideas, and clear up misunderstandings. I'll end with a Haiku for small groups:

Collaborate, peers
Virtually together
Build trust
Change your world