

Professor's Perspective: Improvements to be Made in Online Learning

Amber Thomas, Kelsey Thornton, Taylor Jennings

Outline

Introduction:

A. Attention getter:

- a. Since about March of 2020, most people's lives have changed drastically, whether it was socially, academically, or personally, there have been many adjustments, most of which have been uncomfortable and not preferable.
- b. Many of us have experienced at least one thing that has changed and has brought negative consequences along with it.
- c. Let's face it, life since a pandemic started has been the exact opposite of what we would call normal.
- d. We have all had to adapt to new norms (wearing a mask, social distancing, and staying home more often), we've had to establish new routines because more of our lives are online, and we've all had to take on new responsibilities.
- e. Living life in a pandemic has made everyday tasks and things that are usually simple far more complicated.
- f. In particular, students, grade-level or college, have had to take on a lot more responsibility in regards to their changing academic environment.
- g. But, how much of this responsibility should be put into the hands of just the students? Shouldn't the professors also play a big role in the success of online learning?
- h. As college students, Amber, Taylor, and I have come up with a few suggestions on how online learning can become more effective.

B. Thesis statement: If professors changed and managed their online courses with the students in mind more, then students would be more apt to be successful in their classes.

C. Relevance to audience:

- a. Similarly to students, professors are also continuously learning to navigate online learning with regard to what works and what doesn't work.
- b. As this semester comes to an end, it is important for students to communicate with professors the strengths and weaknesses of online learning.
- c. This information will contribute to changes that can be made for next semester to make online learning more effective.

D. Preview Main Points:

- a. We will be discussing the various ways that professors can improve the online learning experience during the pandemic and even once the pandemic ends.
 - i. After all, it doesn't look like online learning will be going away any time soon and we were already headed in this online learning direction.

- ii. The pandemic has just forced us to pick up how to work in an online environment even quicker, and some mistakes have certainly been made!
- b. Since going through about a semester and a half of online learning, starting back in March, the three ways we think online learning can be improved is by our professors following the syllabus more closely, having an appropriate amount of assignments given the circumstances, and communicating announcements better, especially in hybrid courses.

Body

- A. With how things are so uncertain due to the pandemic, structure and set schedules have essentially been thrown out the window.
 - a. Like I'm sure most of you have experienced, we miss having a more consistent class schedule and our professors following the syllabus more diligently.
 - i. Many classes, including this one, have had some days be completely synchronous and others where we complete assignments asynchronously on Canvas.
 - ii. Of course, as some of our upperclassmen in this class understand, classes have been like this in past semesters, where class attendance will be replaced by a discussion board on Canvas because our professor was sick, at a conference, or whatever else, but it did not occur nearly as frequently as this semester.
 - b. This year has been chaotic enough without the added chaos that has come out of our online and hybrid courses having an inconsistent schedule.
 - i. Instead of changing the class schedule every week it would be best if professors stuck to the schedule in their syllabus as much as possible.
 - ii. Just to continue to use this class as an example, instead of arbitrarily changing things each week where some Fridays we meet synchronously and others we don't, it would have been easier if every Friday class took place via a module on Canvas so we, the students, can plan accordingly and not be wondering every week if we have class on Friday or not.
 - iii. I know there have been a few times where I've worried if I remembered correctly if we had class or not which gave a lot of unnecessary anxiety.
 - 1. I do have to give credit to Dr. Paal though, he was good about reminding us that we did or did not have class which was very helpful - I wish some of my other professors were as considerate as him!
 - c. Another thing professors do, though, that throws us off schedule, is when they add assignments on top of assignments we already have on the syllabus.

- i. If the syllabus says we have a paper due at the end of each week, then they should follow that rather than trashing it all together or continuously pushing the due date out farther so we get further and further off schedule.
- ii. Like I said, this is not unusual as it did happen occasionally in past semesters; *but*, it has never happened quite this frequently and disrupted our schedules quite this much.
- d. Of course, professors more closely following a schedule will help restore some structure in not only our lives as students, but in the lives of our professors.
 - i. I have personally seen a few of my professors struggle to manage assignments this semester, causing them to cancel classes unexpectedly and further disrupting our schedule.
- e. Following the syllabus more closely would help put students at ease, as there would be no surprises, and aid professors in not getting too far off track.

Transition statement: In continuing to help maintain some sort of structure, it is important for professors to take the present day circumstances into consideration when crafting the syllabus and planning for assignments.

- B. As Amber just touched on, within most online classes, professors have started to add more assignments and are giving a heavier workload; given the current circumstances, students shouldn't be expected to do more.
 - a. Some professors have added more online involvement assignments with the intent of keeping the class engaged due to lack of in-person communication.
 - i. These assignments sometimes fall under the category of "busy work" and may not have necessarily been given in past semesters, pre-COVID.
 - ii. In particular, many professors have added discussion board assignments as involvement activities to allow students to have the opportunity to become more engaged and get to know one another.
 - 1. Discussion boards are an amazing way to get students to introduce themselves, engage in a dialogue, and share ideas.
 - 2. This is important to have when we are lacking the opportunity to do so in-person.
 - 3. While discussion boards are a great way to achieve these things, sometimes in the new online learning environment, these assignments are either too frequent or do not serve a significant purpose concerning learning goals, leaving them to fall into the category of "busy work."
 - iii. Professors **should** ensure that online involvement assignments are not exceeding the appropriate amount of work for the number of credit hours the class is worth.

- b. Breakout room assignments are also not always listed on the syllabus and are spontaneous a lot of the times during zoom sessions.
 - i. Spontaneous assignments may seem like they are engaging and fair, but keeping in mind that students are experiencing this same type of thing in many other classes. This can become overwhelming very quickly and seems like extraneous graded materials on top of what they are already responsible for.
 - ii. To avoid overwhelming students with additional unexpected graded assignments, professors **should** list all zoom assignments on the syllabus so that students are fully prepared and aware of the workload within the class.
- c. Professors have used the online learning format as an opportunity to extend assignment deadlines/due dates into the weekend. This has essentially given us more of the zoom-graded activities to complete
 - i. Pre-COVID, assignments were rarely given on whim and due dates were strictly listed in the syllabus.
 - ii. The zoom-graded activities and online involvement assignments are taking the place of normal assignments within the week, however professors did not remove those assignments, they just added a different due date.
 - iii. With the online format, it is easy to take advantage of students' time and assume they can do work from their computer anywhere and anytime, however, it is important to remember that students have other classes.
 - iv. Thus, professors **should** stick to due dates within the week to reduce the amount of time that students are working on the weekend.
- d. If we are all learning to navigate a new online educational system, why would it be considered ideal for professors to start adding additional assignments with smaller deadline windows?
 - i. This is, in fact, not ideal and makes online learning far more stressful for students that are experiencing this in multiple classes as full or part time students.
 - ii. Professors **should** keep in mind the workload of students in an online educational environment and ensure that it is similar to the level of an in-person educational experience.
 - iii. We **should** make the online educational experience better for students by sticking to the syllabus with a normal or even a reduced amount of assignments.

Transition statement: With additional assignments being added, good communication is a necessity for student engagement and success, especially in an online learning environment.

- C. Within both all-online classes and hybrid classes, professors communication has not been effective.
- a. Particularly in hybrid classes, students on Zoom are not always receiving the same announcements or information as the students who are in-person.
 - i. This could be due to several reasons, such as the professor not starting the Zoom on time and beginning class without the students on Zoom, the professor ending the Zoom and then remembering something and sharing it with the students who are in-person, etc.
 - ii. Although this cannot be said for all professors, it has happened to too many students far too many times this semester which can confuse students on class announcements and academic information.
 - iii. However, Dr. Paal did a great job at communicating with us this semester about assignments and other class announcements which was very helpful and kept students to stay organized regarding our class.
 - iv. This ultimately causes more confusion and stress for students on top of the many challenges we are already facing.
 - b. Additionally, professors are creating assignments that not only are not listed in the syllabus, but are not being communicated to students.
 - i. There have been multiple times throughout the semester where not only have I experienced this, but many students have as well where a professor assigns an assignment on canvas but never explains in class prior to the creation of the assignment what it is, what's expected, and when it's due.
 - ii. This is extremely stressful for students to work into their already work-filled schedules when it was not expected nor communicated with students. Especially for those students who utilize their syllabus schedules to plan for their week and plan around other time management issues.
 - c. A solution for professors to avoid and resolve this problem is to use Canvas for all announcements to make sure that all students receive announcements. Professors can also utilize Canvas to provide detail regarding the announcements so that all students have the fair right to be informed at the same time as their peers.
 - i. All-online/hybrid class students are not the only ones possibly missing these announcements, but this also applies to students who are experiencing internet problems and miss part of class, students who are taking a mental health day or students who are sick, etc.
 - ii. These announcements can include the following: class schedule announcements, changes to the syllabus, changes to due dates, and only sending out announcements during “business hours” instead of sending out announcements at random times of the day where not all students may see the announcement in a timely manner.

Transition statement: With all of these suggestions for how professors can make classes better, it is important for professors to take these suggestions into serious consideration for the well-being of their students and the future of our education system.

Conclusion:

A. Summarize:

- a. We have all been impacted by this pandemic in various ways.
- b. We may not have expected or imagined living in a world like we live in today.
- c. Establishing new norms takes time and is going to be a trial and error process.
- d. The online educational system is going to have many strengths and weaknesses.
- e. However, we, as students, think that if professors become more loyal to the syllabus, stay careful not to overload us with extraneous assignments, and communicate more effectively, professors can contribute to an overall better learning experience.

B. Clincher:

- a. Responsibility belongs to all of us during a time like this, and it takes an effort on both the students' and professors' part to make online education easier.
- b. I challenge you to take responsibility for your education to ensure your own success, but to also openly communicate the flaws of online learning with your professors in hopes to develop a plan for change.