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The Priority for Teaching Online in a Crisis? Connecting with Students

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In March 2020, when colleges and universities across the United States and the world started rapidly moving all of their courses online, a few colleagues reached out to me to ask about best practices for online teaching. I have been studying online teaching and learning for over a decade and can provide links for inclusive online course design, peer-reviewed academic articles, and handy best practice takeaways. But the truth is, what we are dealing with right now is not a "best practice" scenario. Now is not the time to try to do everything you might if you had the time and mental space to plan for an online class. Nor can we act as if there wasn't a pandemic going on. What we are doing right now is emergency remote teaching.

Does anything we knew about online teaching in the before time transfer over to this crisis scenario? In a word: yes. The most important and consistent finding in all of my research has been that making real human connections with students in online classes leads to better outcomes. This is a lesson that not only still applies, but is more important than ever.

Building Rapport with Students

When faculty make an effort to reach out and connect with students, or build rapport with them, their efforts have a powerful impact. When a student has a positive relationship with their instructor, they are more likely to stay enrolled in the class, to earn a better grade, and, ultimately, to graduate.

When it comes to online teaching, however, many institutions and faculty members spend most of their time concerned with technology and far too little on human connection. The vast majority of institutional training programs focus on mastering the Learning Management System. Even in the midst of a pandemic crisis, many faculty members are concerned about uploading professionally-edited videos or learning how to use Zoom.

Being able to use technology is important, but once basic functionality is achieved, the focus should be on connecting with students. In a recent survey of thousands of students at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, only 15% of students said that they wanted their professors to be producing interesting and engaging content right now. More than twice as many students (31%), wanted professors who were available and answered their emails. The most popular response (42%), was professors who were flexible with assignments and deadlines. Thus, I would argue that the most important thing professors can do right now to ensure their students' success is to connect with them on a human level.

Techniques for Building Rapport

How can we build rapport with our students? Both long-term and short-term teaching experiments offer a few key strategies.

1. *Ask for feedback*. Students want to know that you care what they think. Connect with students through a short survey or even just adding an extra question onto the next quiz. Something as simple as "What do you want to ask me?" or "What can I do to best help you right now?" sends students a signal that you care about their input.
2. *Send personal emails.* Taking the time to personally reach out and check in on a student can make a world of difference. This can be time consuming, so start with the students who haven't show up for class in a while and may be struggling. There are mail merge tools available online that can enable you to reach many students without a lot of work.
3. *Humanize yourself.* If your class just moved from face-to-face to online, you already have an advantage. Your students know you are a real human being and not just a grade-generating robot. You can further humanize yourself by leaving markers of everyday life in your videos—don't edit it out when your cat jumps on your lap or your toddler asks for a cookie. Your students may have cats and toddlers too! These moments help them see you as a real person they can connect with.
4. *Be flexible*. The situation we are dealing with is not business as usual. Communicate to your students your flexibility on deadlines, adjustments you are making to the syllabus or assignments, and your understanding of what they are going through. Make sure they know that you are willing to work with them.

Looking Ahead

Building rapport with students is more important than ever during this crisis. But the empathy and understanding we are fostering now are attitudes we need to take with us into future classes as well. Right now, everyone is in crisis, so it is easy to be compassionate. But every semester, some of our students will experience personal crises that are at least as disruptive at

Covid-19. If we make real human connections with our students, we will be ready to help them be successful in our classes no matter what challenges they face.

Students at University of Arkansas Little Rock, photo credit: Larry Rhodes.

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