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Predictability (and Flexibility) in Times of Crisis

Gwendolyn Gillson, *Illinois College*

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What comes to mind when I say the word "predictable?" The comfort of knowing that you will walk into the same class every day? Or perhaps repeatedly teaching the same (boring) thing? Often the latter negative interpretation wins out. But I've never thought of predictability as inherently bad, and the current pandemic and scramble to move into new modalities reinforced the importance of predictability as a stabilizing mechanism in times of crisis.

Students crave a sense of normalcy in the classroom, which becomes apparent any time you want to try something new. It was particularly evident last spring when we had to swiftly switch to remote teaching and learning. I was able to make the transition relatively smoothly in large part because my courses were based around a few easily replicable principles: predictability and flexibility.

Predictability during Normal Instruction

Creating classes from the outset with these ideas in mind can help ease transitions between in-person and online learning. The most salient points are to:

1. **Integrate the Learning Management System**: Use the LMS as much as possible in order to familiarize students (and yourself) with online course structures. Post all class readings, handouts, and PowerPoints and make students submit quizzes, papers, and

tests 100% digitally.
2. **Use Diverse Teaching Strategies:** Mix activities in every class to engage student learning: shorter lectures, primary text reading and analysis, recall of previous course content, brief videos, and small and large-group discussions. This variety creates students who can navigate quickly among many different activities by drawing on a relatively large repertoire of familiar course activities.
3. **Utilize Universal Design for Learning:** UDL principles are key to shaping flexible in-person and online course structures. This can be done in part by using Backwards Design which helps eliminate extraneous work and streamlines classes down to the essentials to quickly convert between in-person and online instruction.

Predictability in Crisis

When we moved online, students adapted quickly, even remarking that they were happy the class could return to "normal" within three days, despite being completely asynchronous for accessibility reasons. To do this:

1. **Draw on Your Diverse Teaching Strategies:** In Spring 2020, I gave virtual lectures of about 20-35 minutes with enhanced slides, additional outlines, and at-home activities. I also posted videos and readings we would have had in-class with guided questions.
2. **Engage Directly with Students:** To replace in-class discussions, I created discussion boards on the LMS that I monitored and responded to once a week. I also created daily journals on GoogleDocs that I would respond to 2-3 times a week; this gave students predictable interactive time.
3. **Keep to the Schedule:** Aside from pushing back a few students' presentations, I kept all the due dates in the class the same. Students responded well by filling out their journals, turning (most of) their work in on time, taking quizzes, writing papers, etc.
4. **Accept Your Imperfections:** One of the key things to my success was that I did ***not*** try to make anything perfect. Instead, I was predictable; I was the professor I was in class, complete with silly jokes, awkward pauses, and mistakes.

By the time we made the switch, we had established a predictable yet flexible routine for learning that students could follow online. In fact, my classes were so predictable that when my videos didn't appear one day by 8 PM, I got multiple emails from students asking if I was alright.

What Predictability is Not

I want to be clear, however, that being predictable does not mean avoiding crisis. Addressing crisis can take many forms within a predictable structure: discussion questions linking course content to current events or forums dedicated to student views on what is happening. Predictability means acting like the class we have is the one we want to have. As instructors, it is important to remember that we might be the one solid thing in students' lives when everything else feels beyond their control. Making this fact central to pedagogical practice

means being predictable yet willing to change the class in predictable ways when necessary.

Using Predictability Wisely

In times of crisis, it is natural for people to seek something steady, and our classes can be this. Still, I'm not going to pretend this was easy because it wasn't. Predictability was and is in short supply, and the emotional and physical toll of the pandemic and recent campaigns for racial justice are extremely taxing, especially for Black, Latinx, Native American, and other minority groups. But the sense of normalcy in the class was good for both students and myself, giving us a structure to our days when everything seemed so strange. I'll take this into the coming year which is bound to be (un)predictable.

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