
Reflections, Challenges, and Strategies for Online Academic Instruction: A Faculty Perspective on the Rapid Transition from Face-to-face to Online Instruction During the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the challenges faced with the rapid transition from face-to-face to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight successful online teaching strategies. The challenges are presented in a question and solution-based analysis to help educators mitigate barriers for students who are engaged in online instruction. The strategies provide insight into a multitude of practical approaches for teachers and leaders to follow for online academic instruction. This paper also provides personal insight from a Faculty perspective regarding the transition to online class instruction.

Introduction

Faculty Perspective -Reflection and Background

In 2019, I graduated with my Doctorate in Business Administration degree in Accounting from Creighton University. I accepted an offer to become a full-time Assistant Professor of Accounting at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, starting in August 2019. Having over 22 years of accounting industry work experience in various areas, including general accounting, Internal and External Auditing, Higher Education Academic Instruction, and Administration, as well as, Entrepreneurship, I thought I was well prepared for any challenge. Then, the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic hit the world. Within a matter of days, our classes moved from face-to-face to online academic instruction. During this period, our University extended spring break by an additional week, which allowed professors time to prepare for online instruction. None of my historical challenges compared to the pandemic of 2020, which resulted in the rapid move from face-to-face to online instruction in a turbulent, uncertain atmosphere.

I was familiar with online instruction based on my recent student experience from my Doctoral program that included hybrid academic instruction (face-to-face and online) on topics such as research, teaching online (tools, innovations), and a teaching internship(s). Although I possessed previous teaching experience as an Adjunct Professor and was familiar with online instruction, the rapid unplanned transition was difficult. During the process, I identified the challenges and strategies that appeared to work well. The strategies were established based on my academic online instruction approaches and from observing the senior leadership within our organization. I identified the following challenges and strategies for success during the process. This paper aims to discuss the challenges and strategies related to online instruction to promote increased student engagement and a more effective teaching experience. If the challenges are considered, and the reader applies the solutions, it will increase student engagement and satisfaction, better student grades, favorable teaching evaluations, and higher teaching effectiveness.

Challenges to Online Instruction

Online instruction is increasing steadily over the past fourteen years (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018). It

will surge even more due to the COVID-19 crisis, which forced institutions to shift primarily to online learning. Kim, Krishnan, Law, and Rounsaville (2020) found that only 23 percent of students feel they can earn a quality education online, and approximately 19 percent are confident they can build relationships in a remote environment. With these bleak numbers and the possibility that educators will administer more classes than ever before through an online environment, it is essential to identify challenges in an online academic environment. Although there are promising strategies that one can acknowledge during the online teaching experience, the challenges can simplify the experience. There were various challenges to be addressed during the swift planning of transitioning from face-to-face to online instruction. These challenges were identified through a series of reflection questions to mitigate any obstacles to teaching remotely. After considering the questions, there were solutions developed to answer the challenges. The following questions were proposed and answered during the planning process. Table 1 exhibits the challenges and solutions to those questions.

1. How do I quickly adjust to online instruction after planning months in advance for face-to-face instruction?

To rapidly adjust from face-to-face to online instruction, I adjusted my mindset and focused on the positives of the situation. For example, online instruction is an opportunity to offer alternative learning methods for students, and it offers students and professors the ability to complete their academics for the semester. Additionally, teaching online classes increases online instructional confidence, and it presents more flexibility for students and Professors. A final key element to the rapid transition was to connect with the Instructional Academic Technology team at my University to obtain a refresher on all online tools available to determine the possibilities and which options were the best for the online instruction.

2. In what way can I make the transition better for the students?

Throughout the swift planning to online instruction, I was very concerned about making the transition better for my students. I found the transition easier for students by obtaining their feedback, being flexible, and using multiple engagement methods. I launched polls in Zoom to obtain students' feedback, including preferences on the frequency of class meetings. I also became more flexible with the timing of administering tests. For example, instead of offering the exam only during class times, I extended the exams' availability and expanded the time allotted for the exam to address any technical issues such as slow bandwidth. Also, I solicited advice from internal colleagues within my University and external contacts at other Colleges and Universities. I also structured class activities similar to the face-to-face experience, including group work activities and handwritten problem workouts. To assist students with the transition, I hosted a pre Zoom meeting before classes began online to answer inquiries, distinguish if there were connection issues, and communicate what students can expect during the online classes. Finally, I expanded my office hours in a variety of ways to connect with students.

3. By what method could I create a personalized experience online and incorporate the mission of the school into the online learning environment?

This question was one of the most challenging to answer since the online experience is not the same as face-to-face. According to Darby (2019), professors should be engaged with students by posting weekly announcements, explain expectations, and make the online class an exciting place to be. Cornish, Jameson, and Records (2020) indicate that professors should communicate early and often, share an introductory video message from the professor, require student introductions, consider an icebreaker, establish discussion boards every other week, rotate team members in small group activities, and reach out to students individually during online instruction to engage students.

During my assessment of how to create a unique experience, I focused on performing multiple engagement methods for students similar to my classroom setting. I also considered what elements would make them feel more connected to their classmates and our community and how I could carry out the school's mission. For example, I facilitated group work virtually by organizing breakout sessions in Zoom and recorded a light board presentation where students could view me writing on the "light board" to discuss an accounting concept. I visited campus during the quarantine to take a picture of my classroom and used the picture as a background in Zoom (see exhibit 1). Before class sessions started, I played music and displayed pictures of students and guest speakers who visited the class earlier in the semester.

As a final point, I consulted with colleagues internally and externally for approaches. These methods created a personalized experience and attempted to incorporate the mission of the school.

4. What challenges will the students face?

Assessing the challenges that students face is a combination of knowing the student population's unique aspects (i.e., demographics, citizenship status, race, and ethnicity). For example, if a student population is primarily international, first-generation college students, and/or from an underrepresented group, there will be distinctive challenges specific to that population. It is vital that as a teacher, we be aware and connected to these challenges so that we can mitigate any perceived and actual barriers between the academic instruction and students. To warrant that I correctly assessed the students' challenges, I solicited feedback directly from the students by launching polls in Zoom, offering multiple communication methods to provide feedback, including text, phone, email, and Zoom. Another critical element was soliciting professors' advice at my school who have more knowledge of the student population.

Furthermore, I consulted with professors from other Colleges and Universities. Lastly, I asked other college students and parents outside of my University about the challenges they noticed during the process. These discussions helped me determine whether the same challenges were present at my school or exclusive challenges existed.

5. How do I stay focused while working from home?

Although my schedule consisted of structured Zoom classes, one of the biggest challenges I faced was how to be productive in an unstructured environment. To ensure my productivity was enhanced during this time, I maintained a structured schedule, established a dedicated workspace, and planned daily and weekly goals.

6. Which is the best strategy to create a professional online atmosphere?

To be professional online requires an immaculate visual background and orderly meeting facilitation. For example, during my Zoom sessions, a class agenda was displayed so that students will know what to expect during the class (see exhibit 2). I also ensured that the virtual background was necessary and free of clutter. During the beginning of each meeting, I discussed meeting expectations and etiquette, and I wore either a professional business shirt or a school spirited polo shirt.

7. How do I teach a difficult topic online?

My subject of expertise is accounting, and many students consider this a difficult topic to learn. I utilized multiple engagement methods to capture and retain student interest during the online environment, including group work, launching polls, assigning homework, quizzes, and tests. Students enjoyed the group work as they obtained an opportunity for peer discussions about the material. It is important to note that while online, I visited breakout sessions when students discussed the group work problems and offered assistance if a group presented a problem and needed further explanations. Another method consisted of me assigning problems in advance to student groups, which motivated students to prepare for the class discussion and form a community to discuss difficult material with their peers. Finally, I created a systematic display of problem and a solution for students to view during my class time through screen sharing. For example, I displayed a step-by-step approach to solving a problem.

8. What is the best strategy to assist students who require special accommodations?

I found the best way to ensure accommodations are met is to ask the Disability Director how online education can help meet students' needs who require accommodations. Besides, since I was aware of which students required assistance, I monitored their weekly progress and made myself available for extended hours to address any concerns. Finally, I met with the Academic Instructional Technology team to examine how I can best use the technology tools for online academic instruction.

Students need to feel engaged and included. Although the expeditious move from face-to-face to online instruction was a uniquely exciting challenge, there were many strengths identified during the transition, which can aid in success strategies. The following represents a list of strategies that worked well:

1. Establish a strong Academic Technology Services Department.

Students experience specific technical issues such as weak internet connection, low digital competency, lack of institutional support, and outdated or incompatible devices (Qureshi, Khawaja, Zia, 2020). A robust Academic Technology Department, with resources and support for faculty and students (Rose and Moore, 2019) are critical for student retention and teacher success. Fortunately, I was familiar with this department before the pandemic because they helped me integrate the publisher platform content into our learning management system (Canvas) for my Introduction to Accounting class. Therefore, before and during the pandemic, the Academic Technology support team offered superior support. The Academic Technology Services Department held courses at various times and one-on-one sessions during the preparation week before classes launched online and remained available. Some team members were available after regular work hours to assist if there were inquiries. The courses included assistance with the set-up of University accounts, demonstrations on available technology features, including Zoom, Canvas, Kaltura, and assistance with organizing, uploading, and recording lectures and course information. Furthermore, the Academic Technology Services Department offered assistance after the semester by facilitating a required online certification program for all faculty.

2. Consider hosting classes synchronously.

Since there is conflicting research on whether students do better with online instruction versus the physical classroom experience, I chose the synchronous method to provide more face time. For example, some research suggests success with teaching an asynchronous course (Cornish, Jameson, and Records, 2020), and students can do well in either a face-to-face or online course (Bergeler & Read, 2020). However, in some cases, students do not do well in virtual environments. For example, Morgan (2015) found lower six-year graduation rates and decreased CPA exam success statistics. I chose to host classes synchronously during the online instructional environment during the regularly scheduled class time through the Zoom platform. Deciding whether to select an asynchronous or synchronous class was the most difficult decision because I was not sure which would be best; however, my goal was to offer my students flexibility. Students seemed to appreciate the structure presented with the Zoom session held during the regular class time. I also launched a poll in Zoom to inquire about the best instructional method, and the majority of students favored the Zoom sessions.

3. Create videos or upload other instructional videos for students.

Videos containing student readiness and course lectures can be helpful. Readiness activities discussing technological requirements and expectations in the online class environment can promote student retention (Jaggars, 2018). Although I hosted classes through Zoom, the class Zoom recordings and short videos demonstrating accounting concepts were prepared for students and uploaded into the designated Learning Management System (Canvas). The recorded videos allowed students the opportunity to review the lectures at a more convenient time.

4. Be available to students and faculty.

During the transition, I expanded my availability to the students and provided multiple methods of contact. For example, before the transition, I was available for face-to-face office consultations during designated office hours, phone, and email. However, after the transition, I was more flexible by expanding office hours from Monday- Friday 8:00 am – 8:00 pm, and Saturday 9 am – 12 pm through email, phone, text, and Zoom. Similarly, if a student emailed or texted outside of office hours, and I was available, I would still reply so that they could experience excellent "customer service." I aimed to reply to all messages within one business day; however, most responses were within a few hours or less. Students need to feel included, connected, and engaged, so it is crucial to reply to emails quickly (Stenger, 2020).

5. Include key stakeholders in current and upcoming decisions.

One of the pandemic's most memorable times was when I felt supported by higher administration at my University. This support was displayed when senior leaders sent the communication through emails, expressing support, and offered to listen to any suggestions that would make the transition better. During the pandemic, it was very unsettling to navigate through uncharted territory, however with the Chair of the Department, Dean of the School of Business, Provost, and President reaching out to Faculty and Staff, it made the experience a smoother one.

6. Have robust communication with students and faculty.

According to Meloni (2011), many classroom problems are due to communication issues. Through the transition, there were many inquiries from students, and providing answers to them appeared to give them a sense of encouragement. It is essential to communicate with students to minimize any anxiety. Whether administering polls to students so their opinion, conducting pre and post surveys, or hosting focus groups, an educator can gather a students' perspective to enhance communication. Furthermore, hosting test review sessions and inquiring about their challenges can minimize students' anxiety about their online educational experience.

Furthermore, during the pandemic, it was comforting to view an email with a status update to all key stakeholders, including students, faculty, and staff, participate in a Zoom staff happy hour, "Zoominar," or "Zoom meeting." The communication was frequent and precise. On a solemn note, when the University was required to cut costs due to the reduced budget from the COVID-19 crisis, the President sent official email communication in advance and sent follow up emails to keep all employees informed of issues affecting the University community. Regardless of the method, robust communication during uncertain times mitigates employees guessing what is next and properly frames the message.

7. Offer flexibility to students wherever possible.

Before the pandemic, there were set days and time frames to take the exams in class, most teachers administered their tests on paper, and there was limited flexibility with assignment due dates. After the transition, the Canvas Learning Management System tests were offered by me over certain days with an expanded period. This option was determined based on feedback from a poll launched to students. The poll resulted in learning that they preferred expanded options instead of only being offered tests during standard class times. Based on students' discussions, I determined that there were internet speed and accessibility issues due to infrastructure and the number of people in the household. This feedback helped me understand why educators should offer tests to students during flexible time frames. After the pandemic, course assignment due dates were extended as students transitioned to the new online environment. Fortunately, I listed my class information for students in Canvas, including assignments, power points, and grades before the pandemic, making the transition slightly more manageable. However, I was still required to create additional content for online instruction.

8. Personalize the instructional experience and address special accommodations.

The most challenging choice is determining how to personalize the online experience and differentiate each schools' personal touch with online classes. During the pandemic, I used my classroom picture as a virtual background, displayed pictures of current students with guest speakers who previously visited the class, facilitated group work activity, and launched polls. The most crucial differentiator will be how each teacher can personalize the online experience. While differentiating the online experience, do not forget to consider accommodations for students with disabilities. It is advisable to gain advice from the disability office and the Academic instructional technology team to obtain the best strategies.

9. Benchmark solutions for quality delivery and continuous improvement.

Academic professionals can conduct benchmarking through inquiries, conversations, observation, and research. During the pandemic crisis, I frequently stayed in tune with the global and national news, held conversations with colleagues at various universities, reviewed all University updates, and stayed engaged with our organizational decision-makers. These aspects were critical in identifying solutions and best practices. Finally, announcing weekly assignments, considering the best visuals, providing examples,

explaining expectations, and committing to continuous improvement are attributes of successful online teaching (Darby, 2019).

10. Review and Apply Quality Matters Standards.

The higher education quality matters rubric is recommended according to best practices if educators fully or partially teach a course online. Teachers should align the eight general standards for successful online course delivery. These eight standards include course overview and introduction, learning objectives (competencies), assessment and measurement, instructional materials, learning activities and learner interaction, course technology, learner support, and accessibility and usability. If teachers assess and incorporate these eight general standards, student outcomes will increase, and learning objectives achieved successfully for online instruction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there were challenges based on the swift switch from face-to-face to online teaching, and educators should perform a careful analysis based on each teacher's experience. This year will require teachers to be motivated to learn online teaching, ensure they have an adequate infrastructure at home, redesign instruction, think long term, and be flexible (Dans, 2020). Teachers should answer the critical questions listed in this article to plan and deliver the most effective distance learning experience. Since there is skepticism of the online learning experience by key stakeholders such as students, teachers, and employers (Grossman & Johnson, 2017), educators must be prepared to ease concerns and increase student engagement. Students spend more time online than in a traditional setting in pursuing their educational pursuits. The recommendations presented will help educators overcome challenges and adequately integrate the solutions for a positive virtual academic teaching experience. This article presented a faculty reflection and strategies for successful online teaching during a crisis, which can assist with a smooth transition from face-to-face to online instruction going forward. Overall, by benchmarking, reading global news, strong communication, and being flexible, the transition will be strategic for your organization's greater good. Remember, there are no teachers without students, and it is essential to consider the right answers to questions to address the challenges and consider successful strategies for teaching success.

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Table 1 - Online Teaching Challenge Analysis

Question	Solution
1. How do I quickly adjust to online instruction after planning months in advance for face-to-face instruction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust the mindset by focusing on the positives aspects of online instruction. • Consult with the Academic Instructional technology team for training and to assess instructional options.
2. In what <u>way</u> can I make the transition better for the students?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solicit advice from students through polls, emails, text, or telephone. • Discuss strategies with internal and external colleagues. • Apply multiple methods of engagement. • Exhibit flexibility while maintaining academic rigor. • Expand your availability to students. • Host a pre-meeting before the actual class session.
3. By what method could I create a personalized experience online and incorporate the mission of the school into the online learning environment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brainstorm how to integrate personalization and uniqueness into the online teaching environment. • Create a community and a caring atmosphere online. • Be available and flexible with office hour times. • Ask colleagues for strategies.
4. What challenges will the students face?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquire with your students about challenges through multiple methods (i.e., text, email, phone, and Zoom). • Launch a poll in Zoom to examine student's perspectives on the challenges faced by students. • Discuss potential student challenges with seasoned professors at the University. • Ask parents and college students at external universities.
5. How do I stay focused while working from home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a structured daily schedule. • Establish a dedicated workspace. • Set weekly and monthly goals.
6. Which is the best strategy to create a professional online atmosphere?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display the agenda at the beginning of Zoom classes. • Present a professional Zoom background. • Discuss etiquette and expectations. • Wear virtual Zoom or school spirited apparel.
7. Exactly how do I teach a difficult topic online?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple engagement methods to keep students interested (group work, polls, homework, quizzes, and tests). • Provide students with a problem in advance and require student participation. • Assign group problems for classwork and future class discussions. Allow students an opportunity to lead class discussions. • Display step-by-step instructions of a problem on your screen sharing option.
8. What is the best strategy to assist students who require special accommodations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquire with the Disability Director. • Monitor the weekly progress of students. • Utilize resources available through the Academic Instructional Technology Department.

Table 1 above displays the examination of challenges faced and solutions for the rapid transition from face-to-face to online instruction.

Exhibit 1 – Picture of Classroom



Exhibit 1 illustrates a picture of a Zoom background based on the actual University classroom

Exhibit 2 – Sample Zoom Meeting Agenda

Introduction to Accounting I

Zoom Meeting Agenda

Thursday, April 23, 2020, at 9:45 am

- Welcome
- Housekeeping (mute and Zoom sessions are recorded)
- Questions
- Announcements
- Virtual Office Hours - Zoom, text or phone & 24 hours via email
- Extra Credit Opportunities - See Canvas
- Final Exam Upcoming (Chapters 9-11)
- Group 1 (Ex 11-1), Group 2 (Ex 11-2), Group 3 (Ex 11-9), Group 4 (Ex 11-11), Group 5 (Ex 11-13), Group 6 (Ex 11-24), Professor (PR 11-2A)
- Attendance
- Next Class - Final Exam Review (Tuesday, April 28, 2020) and Poll
- Upcoming Deadlines
- Chapter 11 Homework due Tuesday, April 28, 2020
- Extra Credit (optional) – Due Thursday, April 30, 2020
- Last exam (open on Canvas from May 2, 2020, at 12 am – May 5, 2020, at 10:30 am, lockdown browser)

Exhibit 2 above displays a sample meeting agenda for a class held online through Zoom
