



Dr. Carleigh Davis

TEACHING IN THE PANDEMIC

COVID-19, now a global pandemic, has spread to over 200 countries, creating strange and unprecedented circumstances. These uncertain times have been made more uncertain by the shift to teaching and learning in online environments, but at least one instructor has approached the challenges with great flexibility and positivity: Dr. Carleigh Davis, assistant professor of technical communication.

What are your thoughts about the effects of COVID-19 on education?

“It’s been a challenge; there are a lot of issues to think through, especially accessibility for students; students should be our priority. I believe that COVID-19 has exacerbated some problems and highlighted some things we weren’t as aware of as we should have been in the past. One of the problems

has been internet access. Once everything moved online, there was some kind of assumption that all students had internet access and would be able to just shift easily. That was not the case. We found out which students in our classes were going to the library until 2:00 in the morning because they didn’t have reliable home internet access, or students who were sitting in a car in public parking lots working on class assignments because that was the only way they could do that.

“One of the things to keep in mind is that we can’t just assume that students have the same resources and the same homework environment. In the long-term, COVID-19 is going to force us to be a little more critical of our teaching practices and a little more aware of the lived realities of students. The silver lin-

ing in all the chaos is being brought to bear and being accountable for these kinds of choices.”

How would you generally describe teaching during the pandemic?

“Teaching during the pandemic has brought about managing a lot of different expectations at once. It takes a lot of innovation and creativity to make it work well. Overall, teaching during the pandemic has been exhilarating, a lot of work, and very rewarding, especially getting to watch students adapt along with you. You get to see that students are really invested in the course work. The experience of moving online taught me to see that students really see the value of the course and want to be there. Students stayed on top of their course work, and their com-

continued on page 10

continued from page 9

mitment was evident. Even when problems like the big storm that came up towards the end of the spring semester, students were not using their perfectly valid excuses; instead, they were finding ways to stay in touch and on top of their course work, which I found to be amazing.”

What was the switch from an in-person classroom to an online classroom like? Did you anticipate any challenges?

“The biggest challenge with the switch was timing and adjusting the course format for a course that was planned in person. You do not design an online course the same way you would design an in-person course. You plan different kinds of activities and structure the lessons a little bit differently because students should be allowed time to switch between online activities, to contact you and to give feedback if they fall behind. The biggest challenge was having established an in-person pattern with the students and then all of a sudden having to make the whole course shift and then, in the online format, trying to finish the things that should have been done in person.

“Most of my classes are workshop and discussion heavy. When I teach an in-person class, it is easy to give information, have students work, walk around to give feedback, and step in to manage the discussion, but in an online environment, I have to set things up in little chunks. For example, in my tech writing course, we were working on usability testing and recommendation reports when all the switch was happening.

“When taking students through the sections of a recommendation report in an in-person classroom format, I would usually introduce the section and ask them what that section is supposed to do, based on their experience, and reading on the resource they have already done. I will give them some time to work and then we come back together. It’s kind of very minimal content, but a lot of heavy interaction. When I move online, I have to get all the content into little videos that students can interact with and put into practice. That is so much more time consuming than just walking into the classroom and leading the discussion. In the classroom you can see what is happening, and then you react to it in a moment, but when I am preparing videos for an online class, I have to anticipate what the students might struggle with and prepare for a few different eventualities that may be true for some students and not true for others.”

Do you feel your online classes are engaging? What strategies have you put in place to ensure this?

“To ensure that online learning is engaging, the most important thing is that students get consistent feedback and know that their work is being seen and recognized. When I teach a fully online class, rather than a few really big projects, I prefer to do a bunch of smaller projects that all kind of fold together and go into the bigger assignment. So, the bigger assignments end up being collecting things and pushing them together, rather than generating a bunch of new content. Smaller assignments let you see individually as the instructor

where each student is, the kind of work they are doing, how they are engaging with contents, any mistakes that they are making, but also what they are doing really well. It is important to name those things for the students, so that they don’t feel like they are getting a form or generic responses. They can tell that you are paying attention to them. I think that makes them want to pay more attention to the course.

“The other thing is making the course easy to navigate, in terms of Canvas or the medium used to deliver the contents. If it is difficult to find what you need, the students aren’t going to want anything to do with it because it’s exhausting. Simple, streamlined, visually engaging Canvas courses are one way to head off the boredom at the beginning.

“Also, respecting students’ time. Staying away from things that feels like busy work, and letting them see the connection and application of everything they are doing in class. Students shouldn’t feel like they are doing something to fill the day, but what they are doing has clear connections with the course outcomes.”

Online teaching and learning versus in-person and learning: how would you rate the two?

“Online and in-person both have their constraints. The most important thing is to recognize those constraints, and you don’t try to treat them like they should be delivered in the same way. I certainly see the benefits to in-person instruction. A lot of students respond well to

continued on page 11

continued from page 10

in person instruction, they engage well in person, and a lot of teachers engage better in person. But I don't think that we can ignore the fact that when online teaching is done well, and all the accessibility issues are addressed well, online instructions can be a lot more accessible and a lot more personalized than in-person instruction.

"As a society, that is really something we need to pay attention to. There is a reason why we have some equity issues when it comes to access to the internet, access to resources that students need to do online instruction. That is something we need to pay close attention to as a society. But as instructors, we also need to think about the ways to implement these great technologies that we have, these great systems that allow us some more flexibility, and allow students some more flexibility. I am excited to see where that goes. I think it is absolutely worth studying, and I think this horrible situation is a good catalyst for innovating."

Do you feel the Department of English and Technical Communication at Missouri S&T needs to do more to make online teaching and learning better?

"Our department has always been strong with online instruction. We have engaged instructors who have been practicing with this for a long time. So, just trust the teachers, and trust the students. I am not worried about our ability to get through this at all. The team in our department work really well together and are really supportive of one another. I think that is probably all we need."



Swenson (left), Davis (center), Hercula

ENGL 2002: REVAMPING AN OLD COURSE FOR A NEW CURRICULUM

In fall 2020, Dr. Kristine Swenson, Dr. Sarah Hercula, and Dr. Carleigh Davis joined forces again to team-teach English 2002 Critical Approaches to Literature. Working in tandem, as they did in Fall 2019, the three professors taught different yet complementary units on literature, linguistics, and technical communication. English 2002 will eventually be given a new name and will serve as an introduction to the various disciplines offered by the ETC department.

One of the biggest goals of the course revision is to show students, predominantly non-department majors, how the different courses offered in the ETC department can contribute to their individual interests and career goals. Connecting the disciplines of literature, linguistics, and technical communication is part of a department-wide trend. For example, in TCH COM 5620 Research Methods, taught by Davis in fall 2020, there were added opportunities for

students to engage with all three disciplines.

"We're thinking of 2002 and 5620 almost as 'bookends' to the different degree paths offered in the department," Davis said. "If ETC majors start with 2002 and end with 5620, they should get the breadth of understanding that will allow them to situate their area of study within the broad umbrella of English studies. The depth of understanding in their particular area of focus will come from the specific courses they take in between these two courses."

In English 2002, Swenson taught the literature unit in the first third of the semester. In the second third, Hercula taught the linguistics unit, in which students conducted some research in sociolinguistics. And in the final third, Davis taught the technical communication unit, which required students to develop and implement a strategy for communicating their research findings to audiences.