

ACUE: A Lesson in Empathy for Online Instructors

March of 2020 was a threshold experience for students and educators alike. The pandemic forced us out of our classrooms and into tiny, one-inch square boxes that glitched across our computer screens. I wasn't worried at first. I'd been teaching online for a few summers, and my courses were strong - or so I'd thought. When the pandemic forced the university into lockdown and all students were shifted online, however, my colleagues and I discovered that our virtual courses had been designed around a specific type of student. We'd built the courses for students who wanted to learn online - students who had chosen this method because it suited their learning style best.

But thanks to the novel coronavirus, we now also had in our virtual classrooms students who craved the personal connection that happens in face-to-face classrooms. These students knew that they worked better when their professors were physically present to look over their shoulder, to answer questions in real time (and not through chat or a microphone), and to share jokes and stories that make the content more accessible through conversation. When the lockdown notice hit our emails on the morning of March 16th, therefore, we had to reimagine how our online courses could be useful for all students. And we had to figure it out mid-semester. At some point that evening I realized that I had been searching Google Scholar for articles about online instruction for six hours in search of guidance, and I had exhausted every link six pages deep in the search. I understood then that I was, in fact, worried.

The University of Missouri System had anticipated these concerns when the lockdown became imminent. Administrators quickly partnered with the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE) to deploy a twenty-five week course for faculty to strengthen online instruction in a manner that serves all students. ACUE uses evidence-based teaching practices that promote student engagement, persistence to graduation, career readiness, and deeper levels of learning.

All campuses in the UM System enrolled cohorts of faculty in the course. Missouri S&T, ever the technological forward-thinkers, quickly boasted the largest representation of committed faculty-turned-students in the program.

The program contained twenty-five modules with titles like "Engaging Underprepared Students in Online

Learning," "Helping Students Persist in Online Learning," "Providing Useful Feedback Online," and "Facilitating Engaging Online Discussions." Each module consisted of videos, readings, and peer-reviewed articles from prominent educators aimed at quelling the anxieties of faculty and students in this new virtual landscape. In order to complete each module, we had to take a quiz, participate in a discussion, and submit a reflection paper in which we analyzed our own virtual learning practices. We received feedback from our peers and from ACUE instructors, and met as a cohort each month for a conversation about practices that were working for us, and practices that weren't.

My faculty cohort certainly learned many new technical and instructional skills, but the greatest benefit of the course seemed to have been the achievement of new levels of empathy for our students.

Because we'd been forced out of our faculty role and into the role of a virtual learner, we experienced first-hand what our students go through as they try to navigate a course online. We began to understand what we liked and disliked. We learned to appreciate discussion board posts with clear guidelines that allowed us to speak openly about our experiences and analyses; we learned that we struggled to respond to our classmates when clear guidelines for those responses were not present. We learned that feedback felt cold and unsupportive when it was generic and seemed autogenerated, but we felt connected to our instructors when that feedback specifically addressed our work. We felt the agony of falling behind in the course, and the thrill of completing a module.

When the pandemic began, many of us were under the impression that the shift was temporary. We would get through the crisis, and we would return to normal. Through ACUE, however, we understood that nothing will ever be as it was pre-pandemic, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. The empathy that we'd developed by learning to be students again will be carried into all of our classes, whether online or classroom-based. The tools we'd developed can be used in online instruction and as supports to face-to-face instruction. Most importantly, we learned that quality education can happen regardless of circumstances - even in events of global catastrophes and personal disruptions - as long as students and faculty work together to make it happen. -Dr. Josselyn Larson