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COVID-19 and Mass Sections in Business Education: Adaptation and Innovation Stemming from the Emergency Online Transition

Cover Page Footnote

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COVID-19 and Mass Sections in Business Higher Education: Adaptation and Innovation Stemming from the Emergency Online Transition

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Abstract

This paper describes three instructional design cases impacting over 3,500 students annually and taught by midcareer female mass section faculty from one of the largest business schools at a tier-one public research university in the Southern region of the US. The three instructors of mass sections describe how they transitioned their face-to-face or hybrid courses from “Emergency Response Teaching” mode to considered distance learning implementation during the COVID-19 crisis. The cases include discussions of learning management system supplements, improvements to peer-to-peer interactions, course structure changes impacting student success, and remote experiential learning group projects featuring community partners. The challenges and solutions described may offer insights to educators and instructional designers.

Introduction

The pandemic has had a significant impact on students’ wellbeing and their ability to participate in society or the workforce, let alone continue to productively and meaningfully participate in education (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021). The “new normal” of isolation, social distancing, and the general move to “online” with all aspects of our lives however means that education may become an important factor in positively impacting lives in ways that differ from how we thought of education before the pandemic. Synchronous or collaborative participation in coursework impacts student performance positively (Milligan, 2020), interactions with faculty and peers result in an improvement in students’ quality of life, an improvement in their ability to cope with their isolation during the pandemic (Silva, et. al. 2021). Faculty networks and collaborative planning of curricula, intentional changes to instructional modes and methods, focusing on resilience altogether impacts the wellbeing and success of our students (Office of the Provost, 2020; Keegan & Bannister, 2021).

The pandemic has had an equally significant impact on faculty as they shifted from business as usual to reach an equilibrium of sorts with a new normal that has been anything but. Faculty have moved from “Emergency Response Teaching” to intentional remote teaching but much like students, faculty have struggled with stressors at home, the place that has become their remote

workplace. The trauma of the pandemic has impacted faculty and even incremental changes have been challenges for many, as faculty work with students while also working on supporting one another (Harvard Business Review, 2021; Inside Higher Ed, 2020).

Developing an online course that meets both academic standards and satisfies students' needs for educational and engaging takes a considerable amount of time, know-how, and resources. Serving mass sections, in particular, has its own challenges due to the diversity of students whose needs have to be met during the span of a few months, especially during a global pandemic when traditional networks, resources, tools, support systems are not available or available only in a way that requires those wanting to leverage them to adapt to a new platform, a new tool, a new way of communicating, learning, engaging. The cases in this paper focus on three major aspects of developing online courses during the pandemic: communication, organization, and student assessments in a virtual learning environment.

The cases from Management, Global Business, and Management Information systems impacting over 3,500 students annually underscore the importance of adapting to the needs of students as the circumstances of a course change. They also offer considerations for those looking to adapt their existing courses. While prompted by the emergency online transition, the cases in this paper posit that these lessons can be successfully applied across all modes of course delivery. The approaches outlined here generate efficiencies and an opportunity to redirect resources, in particular time in the classroom, in an asynchronous environment, or during office hours; from the management of administrative matters to deeper engagement with the course material and its applications.

Case 1: Invigorating Discussions

The first case study focuses on MANA 3335 Introduction to Management and Organizational Behavior course. This is a core undergraduate business course taken by students from all business majors, with about 5% of students coming from outside of the college of business. In a typical semester, the instructor teaches two sections of this course, with 250 students in each section. While the course includes some lectures, a vital aspect of the learning experience are the dynamic in-class discussions, led by students. When classes moved online due to COVID, there was a need to redesign the course so that it fits this new mode of delivery. The online version of this class is asynchronous, so re-creating the engaging classroom experience was the main focus in this redesign process. This paper explores how Microsoft Teams platform was used in converting this class from a face to face format to an online format.

Introduction to Management and Organizational Behavior is a survey course, covering a number of topics ranging from macro (e.g., strategy, organizational environments, corporate social responsibility, etc.) to micro (e.g., motivation, communication, personality, etc.). The biggest challenge in this course, whether it is delivered face to face or online, is making sure that students connect the abstract material from the textbook with day to day business practices. One way to make this connection is to bring up current events, showing examples of real-world companies and managers who are dealing with the same issues that we discuss in class. Another way to do this is to use the rich student experience that is already present in the classroom. Since many of the students in this course are already employed, working either part time, full time, in a family business or holding an internship, the goal is to have them share their experiences from work. That

way, students can learn from each other about challenges that managers face daily. Hearing those stories from their peers makes the textbook material “come alive.”

These student-led discussions, with the instructor as the facilitator, are determined in advance. In every lecture, there are 2-3 topics that are designated to be covered in an open class discussion. For example, when discussing organizational structure, students are required to learn about different levels of management, as well as the responsibilities and challenges faced by different types of managers. In that lecture, the concept of “team leaders” is introduced. Given that many of the students work or have worked in the role of a team leader, they are invited to describe their typical work day as well as the responsibilities and perks that come with the role. Having the whole class hear about the same concept from a variety of perspectives, allows students to see that management is not as straight-forward as some of the neatly organized tables and frameworks that are displayed in the textbook. After all, that is why management is defined as the “art” of getting work done through others.

In a traditional, face to face format of this course, these types of class discussions are easily implemented. After a new concept is introduced, the instructor opens the floor for discussion and asks for volunteers to share their experience with that concept. Considering the time constraints of a 75-minute class, for each of the 2-3 pre-determined discussion topics, 2-3 students are invited to discuss and share their experience. Other students follow up with questions and comments, resulting in interesting discussions. This in-class discussion method was implemented smoothly for over 5 years, until the challenging Spring 2020 semester.

The COVID pandemic struck in the middle of the semester and at that time, the only platform used to deliver this course was Blackboard. While Blackboard is very convenient for posting course materials and managing student grades, it is not an ideal platform for creating dynamic discussions. The Blackboard discussion feature is somewhat clunky, mainly because of the issues with creating and managing various threads, especially in a class of 250 students. For that reason, in the online version of the course, the instructor implemented the Microsoft Teams platform.

The remainder of the Spring 2020 semester was organized on Teams as follows: after creating a new team for each course section, 7 channels were added, corresponding to the 7 textbook chapters that still needed to be covered in the course. This way, content was organized so that students did not have to scroll through various posts to find a topic of interest. The 2-3 pre-designed discussion topics from the face to face class were included within each channel as individual posts, using the same prompts that are normally used in the face to face class. Students were asked to post comments on a given discussion topic within a given week, when that topic was covered. To better illustrate this approach, here are a few examples of the discussion prompts that were used. The topic of *Organizational Environment* was paired with a discussion in which students were asked to identify various stakeholders of their organization and then discuss how the COVID pandemic has impacted the relationship with those stakeholders. Another example comes from the *Managing Safety and Well-Being* chapter, where students had to share examples of how their company is addressing COVID-related safety concerns. One of the most popular discussion prompts was related to the *Work Stress* chapter. Students were asked to list some of their work-related stressors and then discuss how they are dealing with those stressors. In addition to learning about various stressors that different individuals are facing, this discussion prompt turned into a platform for

peer-support and encouragement. It was apparent that students related to each other's struggles, with many of them commenting on how relieved they are that "they are not the only ones" facing those challenges.

While nothing can compare to students passionately sharing their experiences live, in class, the online discussion format did have some advantages over its face to face counterpart. The first advantage is that it allowed for a larger number of students to participate in the discussion and share their experience with the class. It also allowed for more students to comment and relate to those experiences. Compared to the 2-3 student discussants in a face to face classroom, the online discussions normally had up to 10 times that many participants for some topics (20-30 students). One of the possible reasons for such a large increase in the number of discussants is that the online discussion format helped overcome production blocking. This occurs when a student has a comment, but has to wait for his/her turn to speak. During this waiting period, the student may forget what they want to say or they may not get a chance to speak because of time constraints. While production blocking is common in a face to face class with 250 students, it is not a problem in an online discussion because students can access the forum at any time. Since the class is not constrained by the 75 minutes of class time, students have a longer time period to respond.

The second advantage of online discussions is related to the quality of students' comments. In a face to face class, students are not able to prepare for the discussion because the instructor provides the discussion prompts live, during class. Verbalizing a coherent answer, on the spot can be challenging for some students. As they share their experience, it is not uncommon to have students repeat themselves, get clustered, lose their line of thought or forget to mention certain details. While students usually get the general idea across, the quality of face to face comments tends to be lower compared to the online comments. In online discussions, students have the luxury of time and can think through their ideas for as long as they need to. They can edit their posts if needed and they see what others have written about the topic, making their comments more focused and relevant. In addition, students can add content such as pictures, videos and other outside material to further support their ideas. Such use of rich multimedia, makes the comments more detailed and complete, making them easy to follow and understand.

In summary, the online discussion format led to a higher quantity and quality of responses. As a result of this imposed change to the online learning environment, the instructor gained some insights into the benefits of online discussions and is considering using an online format in future classes, both face to face and online.

Case 2: Restructuring Content Delivery

The second case study is from INTB 3355 Global Environment of Business, an undergraduate core business course typically taken by students in their junior year. INTB 3355 has several sections of approximately 300 students each. This case analyzes the organization and communication tools implemented by an instructor who taught a 300-student section of the course before, during, and after the emergency online transition.

INTB 3355 examines the political, economic, and cultural factors that affect global business decisions. The primary objective is to equip students with a skill set that enables them to analyze international investment propositions. By successfully completing course requirements, students

acquire an understanding of: (1) local and global political, economic, and cultural factors that affect the success of business operations; (2) theoretical frameworks for approaching globalization and the global economy; (3) the development of global institutions and their effectiveness; (4) the role that multilateral organizations play in global financial markets; (5) the macroeconomic variables that benefit from the globalization process; and (6) the context and consequences of regional integration. The conditions of the emergency online transition prompted the instructor to identify effective alternatives for addressing organizational aspects of the course.

Before the transition, the course was delivered in hybrid mode, which included a weekly 1.5-hour face-to-face class session. The hybrid format offered the opportunity for the instructor and students to meet in person once a week, and possibly more frequently for those students who chose to attend in person office hours. The instructor used several minutes of class time every week to provide deadline reminders and clarify assignment requirements. In addition, the instructor would address administrative questions before and after class, during office hours, and over email. With a transition to online asynchronous delivery, the several minutes of class time and the opportunity to walk up to the instructor before or after class were no longer there; neither were the in-person office hours—although those were replaced with virtual office hours. The conditions of the transition prompted the instructor to implement organizational changes to the course.

Before the start of the semester, the instructor created detailed documents with guidelines and grading criteria for every type of assignment pertinent to the course and placed them in a dedicated folder on Blackboard available to the students from the first day of class. For every week of instruction, a folder was created with all the pertinent materials—slides, articles, links to pre-recorded video lectures, links to other assigned or recommended materials—including a To Do List for the week. Every Sunday night, the instructor would make a Blackboard announcement welcoming students to the new week, pointing them to the folder and To Do List for the week, and noting the highlights of the week. The To Do Lists were, on average, two-page documents with detailed instructions on all the tasks the students were expected to complete that week, including deadlines and details on how to access materials, where to submit assignments, and how to access detailed guidelines for each assignment.

These organizational details improved both the teaching and the learning experience, enhanced communication and student satisfaction, and led to higher rates of student success in the class.

The course evaluations completed by students for the sections of INTB 3355 taught by the instructor who implemented the organizational changes show a change in the students' learning experience. In Fall 2019, before the emergency online transition, none of the student comments on what went well in the course reference course organization. In Spring 2020, when the emergency online transition took place in the second half of the semester, comments on what went well in the course started to reference course organization. By Fall 2021, when the course was delivered fully online and the newly developed organizational tools were implemented from the start of the semester, comments on what went well in the course included numerous references to course organization: "very organized," "instructor is very well organized and keeps to do lists of each week so students know what has to be done," "Week by week to do list," "Very well structured considering the change to asynchronous classes," "Very well organized course," "The set-up of the class was very well organized and the information given was clear and easy to understand,"

“The structure of this course,” “Updated blackboard every week with what assignments were due that week,” “The course is very well structured and the assignments are well explained,” “The course requirements are clearly laid out, and the professor's weekly emails were greatly, greatly helpful in keeping up with expectations and deadlines,” “The weekly to do list was very helpful for me!” “The professor was EXTREMELY well organized, everything was posted on time, graded on time, and she returned emails quickly. Everything ran like Swiss public transportation.”

One the lessons learned based on the emergency online transition that occurred in Spring 2020 was related to the timing of posting various course elements from an organizational perspective. For example, student feedback suggested that quiz review documents that were originally posted a week in advance of the quiz could provide enhanced academic and structural benefits to the students with an earlier availability. On the other hand, discussion boards were best posted right before the start of the discussion assignment so as to avoid confusion, especially in the context of several assignments using different discussion boards at different times in the semester.

Frequently, mass sections present distinct challenges relative to smaller size sections. In this case, the size of the class made the need to implement organizational changes more evident, and ultimately turned into an opportunity, as the changes provided insights that can be valuable for any size course.

Other challenges were related to the COVID-19 public health crisis. The varied direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 public health crisis on students' lives meant that, from the instructor's perspective, not everything ran “like Swiss public transportation.” There were many situations that called for flexibility and compassion, and the policies and processes that were clearly presented in the beginning of the semester and reiterated subsequently were adjusted in response to individual student circumstances.

While prompted by online course delivery, it is expected that these lessons can be successfully applied to hybrid and face-to-face course delivery, generating efficiencies and an opportunity for redirecting resources, in particular time in the classroom and during office hours, from the management of administrative matters to deeper engagement with the course material and its applications.

Case 3: Deploying Experiential Learning Projects

The third case study is from MIS 3300 Introduction to Management Information Systems that transitioned into BCIS1305 Business Computer Information System in 2020, an undergraduate core business course typically taken by students in their freshmen year with roughly forty percent of the students being non-business majors. This course serves over 2,000 students each year and has several sections of approximately 300 students each. This case provides an overview of changes in assessment practices by the instructor who taught all sections of these courses before, during, and after the emergency online transition.

MIS3300/BCIS1305 teaches students foundational computer, information, and behavioral literacy skills that will serve them in upper-level courses and in the workforce. Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to demonstrate and ability to locate data, process and analyze it, and then report findings based upon their work. Students improve their communication skills

through peer interactions and through creating written or oral presentations. They apply critical thinking skills as they use common workforce applications and problem solving to present findings to community stakeholders through their capstone projects.

This course has traditionally been offered in face-to-face and hybrid mode with two ninety minute class sections each week. The instructor met students in a mass section classroom and lectures asynchronously to the hybrid class once a week in addition to mandatory in-class attendance. Students completed assignments at home and in class, individually and in groups, and had the opportunity to interact with guest speakers, alumni, and academic support assistants on a regular basis. Due to the class size, exams were deployed at the campus testing center, where students completed multiple choice exams applying their knowledge and skills with the desktop applications the course focused on.

As COVID-19 forced the transition of all sections of this course to migrate online, the instructor had to find a way to assess learning an environment where it was no longer possible to offer testing on an equitable basis. Many students were facing issues with their computer equipment, their home environment, the quality of their Internet connection; not to mention the impact the abrupt change in how they attended class, completed homework, and interacted with faculty, staff, and peers. Altogether, the impact was felt in class attendance, participation, assignment completion. Midterms provided a significant challenge where a randomized exam set was completed by over seven hundred students on very different computers resulting in the usual 90-minute completion time expanding to a full day of testing fraught with the need to troubleshoot. This exhausting and exasperating experience on both the faculty and student side lead the instructor to restructure coursework and replace the final exam in the Spring semester and all exams in following semesters with experiential learning group projects.

Group work has many challenges in mass sections due to the sheer volume of students which leads to difficulties in arranging meaningful and distinct variations of projects so that students are invested in something challenging and relevant to them. Group work is often a source of frustration to students, which is something each class vocally communicated before and since the pandemic. However, experiential learning, project-based learning, service learning, and an ability to communicate and collaborate with peers, in general, is something that is extremely beneficial not only for the career prospects of students, but also for the social and emotional aspects associated with a particular class. The shared hardship of COVID, of group work, of creating a product in service of a client or community partner allowed for students to move past their frustrations and acknowledge the value of what was ultimately a valuable experience for them.

In these courses, students complete an individual project that assesses their ability to process open data from a variety of industries parallel to learning Microsoft Office Suite application usage from their open educational resources textbook, related lectures, and other course materials. In addition to working with their textbook and regular weekly Blackboard assignments, students carry out very similar tasks in service of one of four to six community partners that include our institutions student-facing academic support services, a local branch of an international video gaming league, a regional art scholarship program, a human resources firm, and our own College's current and past students via our historical records project. Students collected, processed and reported on data for these stakeholders to provide them with insights into their own practices and make

improvements in how they market their services, allocate resources, or recruit for their internship programs.

The end of course surveys have consistently shown that while student sometimes felt burdened by their peers' inability to fulfill deadlines, attend meetings consistently, or turn in quality work; altogether they have found the group projects just as beneficial as the individual project as the social and collaborative aspects of the group project balanced out the less ideal aspects of their group work. Over sixty percent noted that they will list the projects on their resumes, which suggests the recognition of the value of these projects for those early in their careers with little to no future or declared major, or career related experiences. Students noted that while they "had no clue what Excel [our primary application for this course] was" and "did not trust [themselves] to even input numbers properly", in the end, they felt "much more confident in [their] skills". Ultimately, the projects were beneficial as they taught students "several ways to showcase data and bend it to [their] will". Students recognized that "group and individual projects hone different skills" and many enjoyed the social elements. Sharing insights, collaborating with peers, just getting out of their usual environment were highlighted.

Both the individual and group projects offered in this course have transformed over the years. However, the changes to projects in 2020 alone have been substantial enough to prompt the need to document these in several working papers, conference presentations, and scholarly papers. Every class size has its own challenges, but with mass sections, the number of students and the instructor's ability to offer diverse enough, interesting enough, and challenging enough projects make lessons learned from such an implementation worthy of documentation. Support personnel, faculty and staff mentors, campus and community partners have been instrumental in delivering many aspects of these course components and the instructor encourages all to consider leveraging existing relationships and networks to bridge classroom and community resources to provide students with valuable learning experiences.

Next Steps

All of the courses discussed are under continued review by the instructors based on formal professional development events offered at the College and campus level and at regional, national or international conferences which have become easier to attend via teleconferencing tools during the pandemic. Informal conversations among peers play an important role in course development, too, though these opportunities have dwindled in the absence of impromptu watercooler conversations due to remote work. Feedback from students on individual assignments or course activities, analytics from learning management systems, performance data, and end of course evaluations all feed into how faculty develop their courses over time.

For the instructor of the Introduction to Management and Organizational Behavior course, reading through students' posts and comments on those posts, it became apparent that in addition to sharing knowledge, these discussion posts helped build an online class community. Having similar backgrounds and facing similar challenges allowed students to connect with each other on a deeper level. In future versions of this course, the instructor plans to create groups at the start of the semester and build them around student's interest areas in hopes to create even more engaging discussions and connection among students.

For the Global Environment of Business course, next steps include (1) applying the lessons learned from this experience to courses with varied modes of delivery; (2) developing a student survey that, coupled with the teaching evaluations, can provide more data on the student experience; (3) conducting a comparative study between similar sections where different organizational tools and strategies are implemented, with the goal of better isolating the effect of these tools and strategies on learning outcomes.

For the Business Computer Information System course, next steps will include (1) seeking out additional community partners and mentors to assist with the scope and deployment of the experiential, service learning projects; (2) locating relevant, perhaps COVID-related data to integrate into the course content in addition to existing healthcare data related projects, (3) coding and analyzing student responses to surveys from past and upcoming data collections in order to improve on the quality of the course overall.

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