Diminishing the Distance in Distance Learning: Developing a Relationship-Based, Online Course

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Background

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is a dynamic field at the crossroads of medicine, education, mental health, and other fields. Faculty from Family and Child Nursing collaborated with the Early Childhood and Family Studies program to develop an undergraduate distance learning course in IECMH.

As Teaching Technology Fellows, we aimed to connect our content with diverse audiences of learners -- those just entering fields (traditional undergraduates) and those already engaged in frontline practice (e.g., child care providers). We taught a purely online as well as hybrid version of the course back-to-back.

Questions

Key questions for us included:

- What are best practices to maintain a relationship-based approach to teaching this content online?
- What are best strategies to utilize video and effective learning activities?
- What are best online (and in class) practices to increase students’ reflective capacity (ability to consider experience of the other as well as their own experience in the moment)?

Online Teaching Methods

- "Powtoon" Lesson Intro
- Video-based Infant Observation
- Real Child Case Study
- "Me as a Baby" Video Intro
- Neighborhood Groupings

Evaluation Methods

To assess impact on student learning, we reviewed:

- Canvas course analytics (e.g., page views and participation);
- Qualitative changes in discussion posts over time; and
- Reflective feedback from students

In the spirit of reflective practice, we developed a short survey that we posted on the course website. 17 students completed it.

For purposes of continuous evaluation of learning, qualitative change in student posts was most illuminating. Maintaining a consistent weekly schedule and format made the learning readily visible.

Reflective Feedback Survey

Reflective Feedback Survey for NSG 432 A
Directions: We value your reflections. In the spirit of reflective practice, please help us reflect about this course, your own learning, and our teaching this quarter.

- Tell us about your experience in neighborhood forums. How well did this structure and peer experience support your learning?
- Tell us about your experience with instructor grading feedback and online discussion. How well did this structure and interaction with instructors support your learning?
- Tell us about course content you liked most and/or found most useful to your learning. Why?
- Tell us about course content you least liked and/or did not find useful to your learning? Why?
- What advice would you give students who take this course in the future?
- Other comments about your experience taking this course:

Results

Canvas Course Analytics: Examining student page views and participation was nominally helpful when concerned about an individual’s performance. Analytics showed lower levels of views and online participation for student performing poorly.

Reflective feedback survey. Several themes emerged across feedback survey responses:

- Neighborhoods were uniformly viewed as assets to learning
- Surprise and satisfaction at seeing their weekly improvement in posts
- Appreciated specificity of rubrics and feedback
- Infant observations and a quarter-long case study uniformly supported understanding and application of key IECMH concepts
- Appreciation for self-reflective focus of the course

Discussion

Something seemed to “click” in the work of many students at about Lesson 6 (of 10). We speculate improvement in observations and other posts was linked to consistency of practice, as well as attentive early feedback. Students’ words (from surveys) best answer our guiding questions:

What are best practices to maintain a relationship based approach to teaching this content online?

Creating Neighborhoods

I really liked the smaller groups of peers. I think we connect better when we have smaller group because you get to know people better.

I appreciated the neighborhood forums and especially those when we were invited to comment and challenge one another. I often benefited from the feedback as well as gained new insight...

Relational feedback

The grading feedback was invaluable. I could see my growth throughout the quarter. I felt respected and valued, which ultimately supported my learning...

I realize now that instructor feedback helped guide my own awareness of myself...

What are best strategies to utilize video and effective learning activities?

I found doing the infant observations to be eye opening. It was helpful to realize how many feelings go into making a simple observation.

Use of Powtoons to introduce the course and each lesson, as well as the "Me as a Baby" introductory video exercise.

What are best online practices to increase students’ reflective capacity?

Though I resisted at first, I did enjoy reflecting on my reaction to children and their families. Understanding my own feelings will help me as I continue to work with children and families.

You learn so many different perspectives in this this quarter, be prepared to see things differently and reflect on your own self.

Be prepared for a lot of reading and a lot of emotions, but it is so very rewarding when can begin to piece it all together and implement it into your daily practices.