

Coronavirus: When teaching during a disaster, students need to be partners

May 20 2020, by Jean Slick



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Many universities and colleges are planning to teach most of [their courses online in the fall](#), even though there are still many unknowns.

Post-secondary institutions first transitioned from face-to-face to online learning in March, when the threat of COVID-19 emerged. Institutions

brought differing levels of [experience and preparedness](#) to this endeavor. Experts in educational technology weighed in on [the best ways to both understand and implement such a rapid transition](#).

But what was missing, for the most part, were insights and practices from the field of disaster and [emergency management](#).

Key insights

Having worked on responses to wildfires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes and tsunamis over the past 30 years, I have learned about how to work in conditions of uncertainty and when there is an urgent need to act. While plans and established practices guide response to extreme events, I have learned [to be agile](#), while still keeping the end goal in mind.

The ability to adapt and improvise when necessary is a key to success.

In addition to having experience in [disaster management](#), my doctoral studies were in the field of educational technology. This combination of education and experience has been of great value in thinking about how to best support students' continued education during the pandemic in the [Master of Arts in Disaster and Emergency Management program](#) at Royal Roads University where I teach.

To help inform the changes we are making in our program due to coronavirus, I drew on two distinct practices respectively grounded in higher education and disaster management: working with [students as partners](#) and using [impact](#) and [needs assessments](#) to support decision-making.

Integrating these approaches led me to use focus groups, surveys and one-on-one interviews as I engaged with students to think about what changes

we needed to support social distancing measures to reduce the rapid spread of the virus.

Students as partners

An increasing number of institutions have adopted the [concept of students as partners](#) as an approach to [student](#) engagement that shifts the power relationship between students and faculty.

While students and faculty each have distinctive roles, there is space for [collaboration and co-creation](#) in learning, teaching and assessment, as well as in designing curriculum.

Since starting to explore ways to work with students as partners four years ago, I have come to value reframing my relationship with students. I'm now a passionate advocate for this approach, which exemplifies an ethos of caring.

When it first became evident that universities would no longer offer face-to-face classes, I immediately turned to engaging students as partners in helping make necessary transitions to online learning.

Invaluable focus group

As a first step, I seized the opportunity to schedule a focus group with students who were in the last days of their second residency on campus. We had an upcoming residency for first-year students scheduled to start a month later and it was evident they wouldn't be able to come to campus. I knew the second-year students could offer valuable perspective on changes to the program we would have to make.

While I went into the discussion thinking about how to adapt courses, as

the dialog progressed, it became evident we needed to make both course and [curriculum design changes](#). This hour of time spent with students was invaluable.

In a partnership, learning goes both ways. It become apparent I needed to give students space [to grieve the loss of](#) residencies on campus, before talking about what might be.

Students wanted to talk about how important the residency experience is for learning as well as bonding as a cohort.

Assessing impacts and needs

Decision-making during a disaster needs to be informed by information about the consequence of a hazard in a given context. Different types of assessment tools provide insight into the [direct, indirect](#) and ripple effects of a hazard as well as an understanding of resulting needs.

I [designed and sent students a survey](#) that asked how the COVID-19 crisis had affected or might affect their personal and professional lives.

The survey also asked students to describe what kinds of supports they needed to help them continue their studies—and to rate their level of stress.

The narrative comments in the survey responses told the stories of a myriad of ways that students and their families were being affected by both the threat of the virus and social distancing measures.

Students' perception of vulnerability to the threat of the virus for themselves, their household members and other family members was telling. The results made it clear that these vulnerabilities need to be considered in any institutional strategy that would see people returning to

campus at some point.

Planning together

With the inputs from the initial focus group and the results of the survey, I next held two online focus group sessions with students who would be directly affected by changes. Student feedback made it clear which options students preferred.

To help with transitioning the design of a course from a face-to-face to online format, I held one-on-one interviews with students from the previous year to learn from them which elements of the course design were most essential to their learning. I knew I needed to find a way to retain those features.

The changes we ultimately made included not offering the first face-to-face residency in April and putting one of the two scheduled residency courses online. Consequently, we need to change the remainder of the timetable to add space for the missing residency course—so we extended the program end date by another three months.

As I reflect back on the process of engaging students, it's clear that the decisions we made were both different and better as result of their inputs and partnership.

A new normal

The nature of the pandemic is such that we are responding in a sustained crisis. Because of the need to maintain some form social distancing measures for the foreseeable future, we will need to continue to collectively learn to adapt.

Further, disaster and crisis situations provide the opportunity to envision a new normal. Now, more than ever, it is important to value students as partners to collaborate on what successful post-secondary educational programming looks like during the pandemic and beyond.

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