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The Remote Learning Experience at Portland State University in Spring 2020


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The Remote Learning Experience at PSU in Spring 2020

Research Report Commissioned by the President

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ABOUT THE PROJECT AND METHODOLOGY

It is an endeavor to understand what we have and will learn about the impact of remote instruction on faculty, students and relevant academic support teams. Simply put: We want to learn from an experiment foisted upon us by a health crisis. We have engaged in an incredibly innovative response. And now, we ask what have we learned? How might we improve? And, most importantly, are there implications from this experiment for the future of instruction at PSU and throughout higher education?

The project was organized around two stages in the Spring 2020 term.

- Stage One: Out of the Gate: Reflections and Lessons Learned (First half of the term)
- Stage Two: Reaching the Finish Line: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for moving forward (Second half of the term).

The project began the week of April 20 and continued through June 12.

The original plan called for the following participants: (a) ten undergraduate students to put together a group of 8-10 other students to discuss the questions posed in the study; (b) Three graduate students who would assemble 5-7 fellow graduate students; (c) Three tenured or tenure-track faculty, two non-tenure-track faculty and three adjunct faculty, each of whom would form a chat group of 5-7 other faculty to discuss the questions posed in the study. In addition, Judith Ramaley put together a chat group of a dozen student support unit leaders to explore how each unit adjusted as the university moved quickly to remote learning and remote work and then, in a second round, what lessons each had learned throughout the spring term about ways to support students and assist faculty members who were also seeking to help their students.

FINDINGS

From the onset of the pandemic an oft-repeated refrain has been, 'we are all in this together'. In many ways this is true, and the reflections of students, staff, and faculty taken together illustrate this shared experience. Both students and faculty saw the other as a full person; we all were experiencing distractions, had our homes, our pets, our children on screen, became frustrated with connectivity, and felt the fatigue of being on-screen much of the day. This shared experience was not divorced from the experience of living through a health crisis and reckoning with racial injustice. Together, the PSU community continued to show up to teach, to learn, and to support students and faculty. For faculty, the narrative of who our students are was in direct view. Our students work and have families, they lead complex lives. Students could see faculty and instructors as human, people who cared about them and people who were doing their best to work through the challenges of moving quickly to remote delivery.

Shared themes that emerged from the reflections of students, staff, and faculty:

- Flexibility
- Accessibility

- Dealing with stress
- Boundaries
- Tech difficulties
- Communication

Despite the ways in which the experience is shared, the importance of access and equity cannot be overstated. The students that faculty report as not having their video turned on may not have wanted their home environment on display for others. Students reported not having a dedicated quiet space in which they could take an online exam or study. A move to remote, while a necessity, affected our campus community in different ways and we should continue to embed access and equity in this work.

What follows are the findings from the reflections, recommendations that emerged implicit and explicitly, as well as the implications for the future.

Pedagogy and student success

Sample of questions asked:

- Overall, what do you think of remote learning? What did you like? What did you not like?
- How is learning different in remote learning courses? How does it compare to in-class learning? To fully on-line courses you have taken in the past?
- In the first half of the term, what were the most significant challenges you faced in instruction?
- How would you describe your interactions with and connections to students through remote learning platforms as compared to in-class instruction? Did you use synchronous or asynchronous approaches?
- Have/how have you changed assessment methods for online instruction this term?
- Are you more interested in enrolling in on-line courses in the future? Are you more interested in on-line degrees? What about hybrid courses where you have both on-line and in-person classes?

FLEXIBILITY

Both students and faculty reflected that simply trying to replicate a course in a remote environment was not effective. Instead, the degree to which the instructor was flexible and adapted the course over the term made a difference in how the students experienced the class. One faculty member reported that they solicited feedback throughout the term and made adjustments in response to this feedback. Both faculty and students reflected on 'the point' of the class and wanted the coursework and assessment to reflect what was most meaningful. Students used words like 'busy work' and noted that such work was not applicable to the

learning of the material. Other students stressed that assignments that may have worked well in person did not 'translate' to a remote learning environment.

In the student reflections, there was a perception that faculty believed students to have *more* time, and this perhaps would explain the added 'busy work'. Interestingly, in the faculty reflections, one participant shared, "*Students tend to be more responsive because they seem to have more time.*" The students expressed strongly that being remote is not equivalent to having more time, and all three groups reiterated the fatigue felt as a result of larger health and social issues and the day-to-day challenges of being remote. Just as it is a myth that online classes are easier, it is also true that being remote does not mean that there is now additional time available for students (and faculty).

Across the three groups, there was agreement that in the future there would be a greater degree of flexibility expected than what was available before the move to remote. Students appreciated not having to commute and having the option in some cases to learn the material on their own. Hybrid as an option for the future was a common reflection, with faculty indicating their openness to teaching in that format. Student expectations for the future will include more flexibility in course modality. Students weighed the benefits of the different modalities and while the relational aspect of remote learning was missed, the flexibility afforded in a remote environment was appreciated.

There was no clear consensus on synchronous versus asynchronous, and again flexibility is what students need. In some instances, faculty and students appreciated having synchronicity; this allowed faculty to see and connect with students and for students to feel less like they were in an isolated void. Nonetheless, students reflected that having the ability to watch a recorded lecture and engage with course material independently was necessary to their ability to successfully engage with the coursework. More than once, students shared that in the future, when we again can meet in person, having the option to watch a recorded lecture would be beneficial.

Inextricably linked with flexibility was purpose. Faculty made decisions that prioritized learning and questioned other classroom practices. The pass/no pass option was appreciated and there was also a shared sentiment around the quality of remote learning that was expressed with phrases such as the class is '*not the same*', '*can't do the class online*', and '*shouldn't pay the same for less quality*'.

In many ways the move to remote improved access for students and yet the question remains how did the move to remote limit access for our students.

BOUNDARIES

Students, staff, and faculty shared that establishing boundaries was a challenge. When work and school happen via Zoom, in one's home, it is hard for these discrete aspects of our lives not to blur into one another. Students and faculty reported the lack of boundaries as being a struggle and affecting both mental health and how they managed their time. Additionally, there was a question about the level of understanding across all spectrums (faculty-student, supervisor-employee, family). One student wrote, "*No clear boundaries between work, school*

and home affect our mental and emotional states. It's hard to stay in front of the computer so much and not get depressed/anxious.” Another student shared, “Because of school and work being remote, it's difficult to break up my day by being places. It has a negative effect on focus because of the lack of physical boundaries and sometimes I end up working too much on an email for work, decreasing the amount of time I have for an assignment. Time management and motivation have been particularly challenging with the transition.”

TOOLS

Faculty relied on the tools and resources at their disposal, and used these to adapt their courses to remote with very little time. Many faculty reflected that they appreciated not only how easy it was to learn Zoom, but the additional support provided by OIT and OAI. Very quickly, students, staff and faculty adapted and used technology that in many cases there was little to no prior experience. Students appreciated the effort and offered that in the future, faculty might make better use of the tools available to make the course work. Examples that students shared were recommendations for faculty to make better use of features such as breakout rooms, whiteboard, and chat.

Over the course of the term, faculty employed different strategies using the tools available. In one instance faculty that saw low engagement in discussion over Zoom adjusted to engaging students one on one while other students observed. One faculty gives color to this approach by sharing they found, *“creating consistent due-dates and assignment protocols, while embracing variety in assignment format was successful. An example of this was having a class discussion each week, but with varied formats for participation from online D2L discussions, to real-time Zoom meetings, or written reading responses”*. Another faculty member reflected that what worked for them was, *“letting go of the idea that remote teaching would be a replica of face-to-face teaching. Switching thinking, releasing expectations and thinking about creative solutions in the face of remote teaching.*

Students suggested that in addition to faculty and instructors thinking about how to make the most of their course using the tools available, they also think about how to make the course more ‘remote friendly’. Students understood that in Spring 2020 there was limited time to do so, but in the future they would hope to see the courses be more engaging and advocate for additional faculty support. As one student shared, *“so far, we haven't utilized a whiteboard of any sort in classes which would be helpful for some of the complex diagrams or equations we work with. It seems like people are more hesitant to be engaged in the discussion in some ways, it's harder to find the right time to chime in, or perhaps people are just stressed and don't feel like engaging as much...”*

CLARITY, STRUCTURE, and DEALING WITH DISTRACTIONS

“Professors need to be clear in their curriculum and syllabi because students can't ask questions as easily, and assumptions are made when the instructions aren't clear”, this is an example of the sentiment shared by students who sought to have greater clarity and a modicum of structure in an environment rife with distractions. Students also wanted transparency from the institution, but having clear expectations was necessary to provide structure for their courses. This was even more essential in classes taught asynchronously, with one student sharing that,

“expectations from professors as being less clear to students, especially when a class doesn’t have live ZOOM lectures.”

Students worried about their ability to manage distractions and their lack of focus, and especially at the beginning of the term, were not sure how to manage their time. They had to balance the need to be ‘online; while rejecting more screen time. Students struggled with staying motivated, and some attributed this to the independent nature of remote learning, for as example as one student shared, *“by being in an in-person class, I can see the reactions of my peers, have sidebar conversations relevant to the greater group discussion and interact with the instructor at a more natural, human level.”*

Faculty also recognized and saw that students were affected in different ways by the pandemic and, *“found forced integration of home and the learning environment to be the biggest stressor/distraction for students. Might be kids, income/resource issues, or a lack of space to learn...”*

ASSESSMENT

Faculty adapted their classes not just at the onset of going remote, but throughout the term. In some instances, faculty became more flexible with assessments and instead of having one or two assignments that comprised the bulk of course, used smaller assignments that allowed them to provide more timely feedback. Other faculty completely did away with quizzes and instead reworked assignments to allow more use of books and notes. There were many comments indicating faculty had reflected on how to adapt assessment and assignments to best support learning. Still, at least one faculty member was concerned about cheating and several shared they were unsure what was best in terms of setting expectations and ensuring fairness in how the class was structured.

While students commented that the pass/no pass policy was at first confusing, they appreciated the option. From the student perspective, again, the more that assignments were adapted to work within a remote context, the more they felt their faculty were understanding of the situation.

Service

Sample of questions asked:

- What was it about the culture and organization of a specific department that made it possible for the teams to adapt and respond to the needs of students, staff, and faculty?
- How did the work of the unit change as the term progressed?
- How will this experience influence or change the nature of services you provide and/or the balance of different services you perform?
- Insights and reflections about the interview other than those noted above.

Units across campus quickly adjusted priorities in order to meet the needs of the campus community. As shared in Dr. Ramaley's summary report, "Units that had already spent time developing the capacity to work together and to connect with colleagues across campus were best prepared to respond to an unexpected crisis." SHAC, OIT, OAI, the Library were just a few of the offices that were able to quickly pivot and change how they work.

The remote environment made more apparent how challenging it is for students to both be aware of support and resources and to find the help that they need. This has an implication for faculty in terms of providing faculty with the knowledge of what additional support and resources are available to students. Students mentioned feeling reluctant to ask for help. There were other students that had initially looked into resources, and felt that the process was overwhelming and that they would be in competition with other students, so chose to either get help elsewhere if possible or forego asking for additional support. There is consistency in services wanting to help students, but there is not consistency in how the services are offered, shared, or accessed. Some offices offer students the option to chat online and other offices provide online appointment booking. Additionally, students did not always know what was available. From the student point of view, in a remote environment, resources are not centralized and it was hard to find the help and answers to their questions.

Community

Sample of questions asked:

- What suggestions or ideas do you have for making remote teaching more effective for student learning?
- From your perspective as a campus support unit, what will be different at PSU as a result of the COVID-19 response experience?

A general difficulty with creating effective/ positive interactions and connection was expressed by all respondents. Faculty found it challenging to foster connection and remarked on a lack of participation in discussion and break out rooms, and similarly students reflected that they often felt isolated. All three groups missed the connection that happens informally and casually. To connect with others in a remote environment requires a different level of intentionality. This is particularly hard when one is not only remote, but is trying to make sense of what is happening in the world.

As Dr. Ramaley stated in her report, "It is clear that concepts like engagement and community will take on new forms and meaning in the future. The change is being shaped by both the pandemic and the inequities that the pandemic has revealed and by the demonstrations and protests that have taken place here and across the country after the death of George Floyd."

While being remote may seem inherently impersonal, this varied among the participants. In smaller format classes, use of the resource center virtual events, etc., a semblance of community and connection was maintained. However, as one student shared about her experience in a large lecture format class, *"It is hard to have thoughtful discussion; some*

students are reluctant to participate; students often turn cameras off and (this) feels very impersonal."

There is also a tension between 'Zoom Burnout' and the need for community. Students do not always necessarily find it valuable to attend virtual events (though this is helpful for some) but instead miss the connection to their instructor and classmates that happens organically when in-person. Similar to how students and faculty reflected that the in-person course could not be replicated but needed to be adapted, building community needs to be adapted from in-person to remote. Students appreciated the understanding and empathy extended to them during the remote transition and expressed hope that this will continue both in a remote learning environment and when there is a return to campus.

Faculty recognized prior to the pandemic students were seeking community and worry that struggle will only be more intensified. Faculty expressed concern regarding the effects of remote learning having a lasting negative impact on student retention and graduation rates. While the need for community and connection as evident in the reflections, the *how to build community remotely* was less clear.

Student facing services offered a myriad of ways to connect. Dr. Ramaley summarizes, "*As the shift to remote began, student affairs people focused on three core issues... finding ways to create community during the remote experience...For example, the Queer Resources Center has set up a virtual lounge space. They are seeing more people visit the virtual space than have come to the lounge on campus. Clearly people need these community spaces.*" As the service units took an iterative approach to connect with students it may be worthwhile to learn from one another and collaborate on approach.

Research

Questions asked:

- Were there some content areas (such as dissertation research) where remote learning was particularly challenging? Did you find solutions to deal with the challenge?
- Did you call upon any student learning support services or other services as you undertook remote learning at the beginning of the term? Were you able to get the help you needed?

Research was paused during spring term and this naturally led to questions from PhD students and researchers. There were both pragmatic questions and questions of the role of research in relation to the health crisis and social issues.

Questions that emerged:

- How will increasing online learning format impact University rankings?
- As other universities open up more distance learning, how will PSU stay competitive?
- PSU relies on PhD students to teach, how will they be supported financially?

- Who will fund PPE for research with human participants?
- How are current issues reflected in the research? For example, public health curriculum needs to be updated often; students are picking up on issues with articles that may present race in an outdated way.
- How do remote interactions perpetuate inequality, and how can this be challenged?

Boundaries were also a concern for graduate students and they struggled to separate “the transition to remote learning from the pandemic and cultural changes and to keep separate their experience learning as students and their roles as researchers, teaching assistants, instructors.” There was a general worry about how future research would be affected, and while those that could conduct research online were doing so, many hoped that PSU would explore innovative ways to return to research in-person.

Technology

Questions asked:

- What resources/technology were helpful to movement to remote teaching and how was it helpful? Did you receive support from any campus support units? If so, what assistance did you receive?
- Did technology work for you? Did you have access to the internet and to equipment that allowed you to participate in remote learning? If you did not have equipment or the internet before the term, how did you acquire it?

The move to remote made faculty and students Zoom super users and many appreciated how intuitive and easy the platform was to use. Both OAI and OIT offered support with Zoom and faculty made use of this training. Faculty at the start were focused on the technology needed to go remote and OAI requests for assistance peaked and then dropped significantly in the after weeks 3 and 4 of the term as faculty became more comfortable with these tools. It was mentioned more than once that while the access to laptops through the borrowing program was welcome, the Chromebooks were not compatible with Zoom.

The degree to which faculty and instructors were comfortable with the technology was evident to students with many remarking that faculty should receive additional support. Students remarked that perhaps that faculty that were more skilled with technology could assist their colleagues.

A clear area of concern was internet access. There were faculty that found it necessary to go to campus to ensure that they could deliver instruction without interruption. Students, especially those sharing internet access, had trouble getting online. It is clear that reliable and consistent internet was crucial and this was a stressor for both students and faculty.

OIT, OAI, and the Library were all recognized for responding to student and faculty needs. These offices and departments adapted quickly and their support was appreciated by many of the participants. It was recommended that this support be available to faculty and students on the weekend and after hours.

Communication

Communication is such a broad topic and the concerns expressed by the community are not necessarily new, but in some ways were intensified by the pandemic. In times of uncertainty, it is even more critical to have clarity. Communication came up both in the classroom and at the institutional level.

In the classroom there was a reluctance from some students to communicate with their faculty/instructors. Students were uncomfortable about doing so and in some instances this was intimidating for the student. There is a formality inherent in online, with students expressing this format is *“not casual”*, and there is a discomfort in speaking up online, other students remarked that the lag in the connection was not conducive to discussion/conversation. Faculty offered office hours via zoom but whether students made use of these office hours was not shared in the participants reflections.

Students also felt that they were not being kept up-to-date on the university's decisions. One student remarked, *“students don't appreciate being left in the dark in their classes or in the school's decisions.”* Students also were unclear on why specific fees were charged and the difference between online and remote was murky.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the questions lent themselves to recommendations for the future. The pandemic highlighted areas of strength (student resilience, faculty care, employee dedication, capacity to adapt, etc) but also made more visible the opportunities and friction points that exist at PSU. As such, the following recommendations are not all specific to remote and have implications for whatever the future may bring.

Consistency of practice/policy

- Common use of platforms and tools with room for variation as needed. This would provide the structure and clarity that students are looking for. Students commented that it would be helpful if there was both consistency in which platforms are used such as D2L and Zoom *and* in how they are used. Could faculty and students work together to create a recommended best practice to be broadly adopted? Other examples of consistent practice include Zoom etiquette, a shared practice of how Zoom links are made available, and how recordings are made available.
- Faculty also are looking for consistency. For example, *“some clear and specific language regarding the format of the class needs to be developed and communicated to students. For example: will the class be totally asynchronous allowing the student to engage with the information on their own schedule? Will it be totally synchronous meaning there will be scheduled “real-time” class meetings the student must attend? Or will it be some kind of hybrid between the two?”* It is important to recognize that while online and remote mean different things for staff and faculty, this is conflated for students. It would behoove us to provide clear examples of how these modalities are different.

- The consensus is that the simpler and more streamlined the technology the more student confusion is alleviated. As a result, there can be a greater focus on course content.
- Students recommended that P / NP be implemented as a university wide policy vs. an option that varies. Some of this may stem from the inconsistency in how this was messaged to students by departments.

Faculty Support & Resources

- While faculty were effusive in their recognition of OAI's support, they are seeking additional professional development, supported by their departments and colleges, and look for also peer development.
- Additional equipment such as tablets, webcams, etc., to be made available for borrowing to enhance the course offerings.
- Students echoed a sentiment of additional faculty support especially, as they experience a difference in how faculty and instructors deliver the course.
- Support for large format classes, including learning and teaching assistants.
- Ensure that all faculty and staff have adequate internet connections, and if they don't, provide funding or other options.
- Weekend and after hours support.
- Strategies for dealing with inappropriate use of chat, bullying online, etc.

Continue learning, lean into understanding equity and access

- Many are keen to think about future implications and support additional research during this time.
- As with all efforts such as this, it is important to ask which voices are missing. There are questions of access and equity and it is important to explore this.
- Assessment and how this should be adapted to not only a remote context but in a way that does not perpetuate inequity.
- As shared from one participant, *'there is an interest in change across the university to address systemic racism in academia, students want to engage in these topics in class, can we create learning opportunities for that to happen?'*

Change the narrative for online and remote classes

- Synonymous with remote and online is quality; students and faculty often equating remote with low quality. Students and faculty will only expect more flexible options in the future and it will be important to think strategically about how remote and online classes are framed. Students shared some ideas about how online and remote could be more engaging and if this is not already in the works, more conversation with students on this topic could prove to be extremely beneficial.
 - *“Lecturers could make short YouTube style mini lectures to deliver content in an engaging way.”*
 - *“Highlight the ways that students can engage with one another online, bring in ways to connect socially on D2L.”*
 - *“The use of a flipped classroom structure would be helpful for me personally, allowing me to focus primarily on autonomous, self-paced learning and using class time for discussion and clarification.”*
 - Regular check-ins with students, solicit feedback from students and adapt class accordingly. For example, *“Repetitive information will leave students less engaged. It’s really easy to tune out of zoom or skip a class and so it’s important to check in with students on their familiarity of topics, speed of presentation because going too fast or slow in the online format.”*
 - *“Let them (students) know exactly what will be covered that day and how it matters, how it builds on information they already know. Coordinate with other instructors to avoid surface level repetitive information.”*
 - *“Consider drawing something live or figure out ways to show motion/direction of a diagram.”*
 - *“Reserve specific time for questions and answers built into the class.”*
 - *“More facilitation of inter-student and professor interaction; maybe a PSU Reddit type of message board or something similar could be useful to share ideas and make connections.”*
 - *“Ice breakers at the beginning of class.”*
 - *“Encourage students to interact with each other outside of class.”*
 - *“More group projects to foster community.”* (note some students strongly dislike group work in the remote setting)

Student centeredness

- While many offices coordinated to be responsive to student's technology needs, students expressed less concern about access to devices and more concern about quality internet access. Additional hotspots would be helpful in addition to safe, socially distant spaces on campus for both students and faculty to access the internet. This should be communicated so students are aware of what resources are available to support their learning.
- Students need study spaces, this is about access and equity. Many students (and some faculty) shared that they did not have access to a quiet space to study and learn. Again, if this is an option available to students this should be clearly communicated to both faculty and to students.
- Students (and faculty) are very frustrated about fees and looking for transparency on the fees they are being charged and the services they can access as a result of the fees. Note that students have long expressed more clarity with regards to fees and the pandemic only intensified their frustration with regards to fees.
- Students appreciated the support and understanding that was extended to them. As we have adjusted to this new way of working, teaching, and learning, it is important to continue to extend empathy to students (and one another).
- Student support with time management, dealing with distractions, incorporating mindfulness, focus, and motivation.
- Continue to recognize that flexibility works and expanded options in the both classroom and with services is needed. Student facing services should continue to collaborate to offer a consistent experience in how students access and connect to services (i.e. time of day, how to make an appointment, etc).
- Responsiveness, when the only way to communicate is via email, it is critical that we respond to students in a timely manner. When we are unable to do so, we really ought to consider letting students know the expected wait times. Additionally, we could think as an institution about how we share resources (people) when specific offices are working beyond capacity.

Improve wayfinding and discoverability of resources, both faculty and students

- We need to make it easier for students to access and find resources, the words 'difficult to navigate' and 'bureaucracy' were often used with one student reporting that some students opted to '*not even try*' as it would be too hard to '*fend for oneself*'. Communicating to students once or including the message in an email is not sufficient to inform students - despite communication efforts some students were not aware that they could borrow technology. Students are asking for better advertising of services and support.

- Students often look for support from PSU and do not distinguish offices from one another so even better coordination and collaboration is essential.
- In the environment, roles and responsibilities are even more nebulous and it is important that faculty are also made aware of the support and resources available to students.

Community

- Facilitation of inter-student collaboration whether through small groups or other means.
- Normalize the experience for students, as being remote can be isolating, it is helpful to let students know they are not alone in their experience.
- Students are asking for ways to connect and build community, partner with students to address this issue.
- For most students, community happens in the classroom and in their shared academic interest. Faculty need support in developing and implementing strategies for building community in a remote context.
- Community based learning.

Communication

- Be clear and direct with students to avoid students 'feeling left in the dark'. Have a strategic plan for communication that includes the schools, colleges, and departments.
- Develop a best practice for communication including platform, tone, length, etc that is shared with communicators across campus. Include clarity on terms that are newer i.e. remote vs online vs hybrid
- Avoid 'adminspeak', recognize that students appreciate direct communication.
- Be open and clear regarding fees.
- Resources and supports need to be communicated with students often *and* be easy to discover; students need help when they need help.

Implications for the Future

Spring term made evident our capacity for change and elevated what truly is important. The pandemic, systemic racism, the political climate is difficult *and* has created a tremendous opportunity for cultural change that is felt by the campus community. There is a spirit of collectivism and optimism for the future of PSU.

Just a few of the implications for the future that emerged:

- Expanded options for service modality (i.e. online, in-person, via the phone, etc.)
- Flexible work options
- Hybrid course modality
- Greater collaboration across the institution
- Possibility for breaking down 'silos'
- Opportunity to improve communication and student access to services