Prepared to Pivot: Creating a Resilient Basic Course Program

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Basic Course Forum

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Abstract

The rapid transition to emergency remote teaching due to COVID-19 provides many lessons for how BCDs can design resilient basic course programs that will be prepared to adapt in any number of potential future emergencies. BCDs can design resilient courses by pre-planning how courses will maintain instructional continuity, pre-loading pivoting options into learning management systems, and adopting online texts that are accessible anywhere. BCDs can also build instructor resilience by providing high-quality training and providing continued support for instructor well-being.

Keywords: basic course, course design, emergency preparedness, pandemic pedagogy, resilience.

COVID-19 forced institutions to transition rapidly to emergency remote teaching. However, there have been, and inevitably will be, other scenarios that might necessitate pedagogical pivoting in the basic course. Due to weather, illnesses, active threats, military situations, or personnel changes, crises at the individual, program, and institution level have disrupted learning and led to a need for isolated accommodations or wholesale adjustment. As such, to anticipate the inevitable, Basic Course Directors (BCDs) need to build resilient programs that are prepared to pivot (Westwick & Morreale, 2020).

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Resilient Course Design

Basic courses should be (re)developed to utilize resilient course design, which we define as creating an infrastructure that allows for the seamless and relatively effortless adaptation of instruction in response to any number of unexpected challenges. First, BCDs should *have a predetermined plan for how the program will maintain instructional continuity when forced to adapt.* For example, to prepare for the possibility that one or all course sections will need to move online for a period of time, BCDs might build a video conferencing tool (e.g., Zoom) directly into the course's learning management system (LMS) so that a face-to-face course could easily change to a synchronous online modality. BCDs should also have clear procedures that instructors can follow in times of crisis, including how to find a substitute instructor, when and how to adapt a course's modality, and how to communicate with students about course changes. For crises at the individual level, BCDs should consider having predetermined policies and pre-drafted messages for responding to student emergencies and accommodation requests, including plans for how students in a variety of scenarios ranging in type and complexity will be supported.

Second, although potentially time-consuming on the front end for BCDs, having *pre-planned pivoting options pre-loaded into a course's LMS* can ensure consistency across sections and minimize the burden on instructors if forced to adapt. For courses where lectures are typically delivered during instruction time, BCDs could have lecture recordings (i.e., screencast, podcast) preloaded in the LMS but hidden from students' view so that a particular lecture could pivot modality at a moment's notice. In hybrid or flipped courses where lecture material may already be delivered outside of class time, having hidden online synchronous or asynchronous activities included in the LMS offers the same adaptable benefits. For major assignments like individual speeches or group presentations, BCDs should create LMS infrastructures that can accept assignment submissions in a variety of formats. For instance, in a course where speeches are typically delivered in person, the LMS should be set up to also allow submissions of speech videos in case of a sudden modality pivot for an individual student or for the whole class.

Third, instructors can strengthen course resilience by *adopting digital texts* that are available regardless of physical location. In many crises, students and instructors may find themselves without access to printed texts because they are suddenly unable to return to their campuses or homes. Additionally, digital texts offer a host of auxiliary benefits such as increased accessibility, the ability to embed videos and other media,

and the use of innovative and adaptive learning tools that are tailored to individual student needs.

Resilient Instructor Support

BCDs also need to focus on cultivating instructor resilience, preparing instructors to successfully manage unexpected challenges and adapt to change. First, *high-quality instructor training*, adaptable to both in-person and online formats, is the necessary first step to building instructor resilience. There are excellent resources that outline best practices for instructor training (e.g., Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018; Fassett & Warren, 2012) as well as books that can help support instructor development (e.g., Dannels, 2015). These trainings should be scaffolded appropriately to prepare instructors for the pedagogical, classroom management, and administrative dimensions of classroom teaching as well as the emotional and psychological aspects of teaching that are especially salient in times of crisis.

Second, BCDs should provide *continued support for instructor well-being* both in and out of the classroom. Instructors are more likely to effectively support students and respond to crises when they have their own needs met and goals achieved (Mottet et al., 2006). Throughout the academic year, BCDs should encourage and model healthy work-life balance with regard to daily instructional responsibilities such as email, grading, lesson planning, and work hours. BCDs should also provide information to instructors about essential local and campus resources related to mental wellness, health, housing, parking, education, food, and other basic needs. Not only can these resources benefit instructors directly, but instructors can also use this knowledge to support students in their own courses.

Conclusion

Programs and departments were not prepared for the logistical, pedagogical, and personal challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. By thinking strategically about creating resilient course design and training resilient instructors, we believe basic courses will be better equipped to weather the inevitable storms ahead.

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