

PERSPECTIVES IN COMMUNICATION: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ONLINE DURING THE COVID- 19 PANDEMIC

Carol COOPER
Rochester University, USA

Abstract: In March 2020, Rochester University went online within 72-hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By necessity, the focus was on pedagogy rather than being student-centric initially. Several issues arose among students in the mass communication department. First, it became apparent that our “digital natives” did not have some of the presumed skills necessary for online success. A digital divide emerged between students equipped for online learning at home and those students who only had smartphones on which to write their papers and others who had no Internet access at home. Cases of anxiety seemed widespread among students. Faculty in the mass communication department became student-focused and prioritized student engagement and collaborative learning as ways to reduce stress and empower them for online learning.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; online teaching; virtual communication; virtual learning.

1. Introduction

The university was on its week-long Spring Break when the decision was made to move all course online for the last eight weeks of the academic year. The mass communication department already has an established online accelerated degree program comprising of 8-week semesters. From an administrative point of view, it was possible to quickly begin adapting the existing online material for the traditional students’ sudden online classes. Both versions of the degree program are supported through Moodle, the university’s learning management system, so material specific to the accelerated online degree was adapted for the traditional students’ LMS site.

The process was not as straightforward for some of the traditional students, and they found it difficult to adapt to the online environment. Mass communication students comprise a wide range of young adults whose interests include subjects such as graphic design, broadcast, public relations, journalism and digital media content. They are not a homogenous group and choosing between a traditional on-campus degree program and an online accelerated degree program reflected their preferences. Young adults today are part of the group referred to as ‘digital natives’ because they experience new technologies as an integral part of life, however, such an assumption can mean faculty underestimate students’ abilities to adapt to sudden changes to an online environment, especially in times of stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic uncertainties, and restrictions. Even pre-COVID it is sometimes apparent that not all students who choose an accelerated online degree cope.

Additionally, some students who did not have laptops or tablets had relied on the university library computers or campus computer labs to complete their work, and suddenly they had no access. Some students went on lockdown with only their mobile

phones. Some students did not have internet connections once they were at home. This situation was not unusual to the mass communication department or the university.

National research of undergraduate students was conducted from May-June 2020 by *Digital Promise*, a non-profit organization that works “at the intersection of education leaders, researchers, and technology developers to improve learning opportunities for all and close the Digital Learning Gap” (digitalpromise.org). Their findings revealed that just over 40% of university students had never taken an online class. Although 95% of those being surveyed said they had internet access, the available bandwidth needed for synchronous video class sessions or tutorials was sometimes problematic for 44% and 16% reported there were continuous issues. Nearly a quarter of the group experience hardware and/or software issues that impeding their ability to participate successfully online regularly. Ten percent said they had to share their device with someone else (Means, Neisler & Langer Research Associates 2020).

I felt the best way to facilitate student learning and be considerate of students' emotional and mental health as well as practicalities about connecting online for some, was to offer asynchronous classes. I tried to be ruthless with the curriculum, identifying what was vital to help students progress in their degree program. They did not seem able to maintain the previous pace and rigor. Students also knew that I would have Google Meet turned on for the duration of their normal class times each week in case they needed assistance and I maintained virtual office hours too.

2. Managing student fears and expectations

The biggest challenge was offering a variety of delivery methods that reached some of the students some of the time and hopefully enough of the time to be able to progress in the course and achieve the course learning goals. There is not a “one size fits all” approach to comprehending information. Mass communication students are a heterogenous group drawn to specific aspects of the degree program. Traditional students take a core set of courses and then select a specific track to complete their degree, such as integrated media, graphic design or broadcast. Although the notion that there are seven learning styles has been popular for decades, research suggests that students employ a variety of learning styles depending on the task at hand, and that educators design curriculum choosing one method over another based on the how familiar they are with their students and from previous experiences of student success (Pashler et al. 2008). Nevertheless, it becomes important to find some kind of methodology for practical reasons when developing course curriculum. Designing additional online material to meet the needs of the traditional students was aided by an article from Rasmussen University, which offers several online degree programs. It discusses the various ways students learn online as *learning preferences* rather than *learning styles* and the importance of helping students feel empowered by being flexible. “Most students will have to find ways to adapt in the course of their education” (Flavin 2019).

Everyone was finding ways to adapt to COVID-19 induced restrictions, lockdowns and the constant media reports. Students who might have shown good time management skills previously were finding it difficult to stay focused with online coursework and not play video games or have video chats. It was important to provide

some clear guidelines that indicated how much time would be needed to complete weekly material online. The LMS Moodle sites for all of my courses included a video that explained how the rest of the semester would be organized and how students could contact me. Previously my mobile phone number was to be used for emergencies only, however, COVID-19 changed all that and I wanted students to know I was accessible, as shown in Figure 1. below.

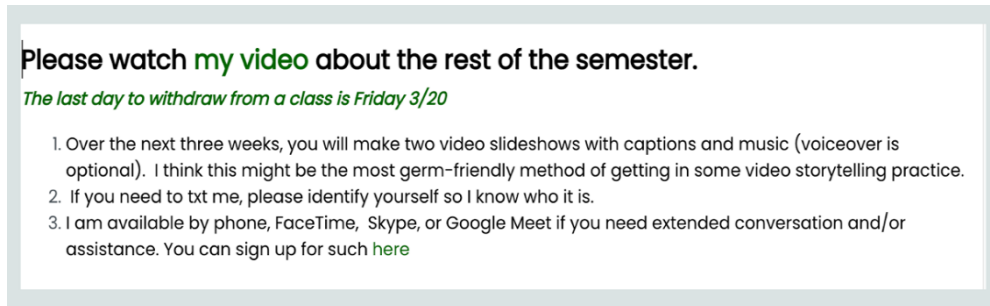


Figure 1. Moodle LMS course site for MCM 3243 Video Storytelling

The LMS Moodle sites for all of my courses were edited to guide students into the routine of asynchronous learning. The example below shows how students were informed about when the week began and ended, when assignments were due and where to find the rubrics for the assignments. I opened the succeeding week on a Wednesday to provide more time to complete assignments due to the reported rise in mental health issues among students, especially anxiety.

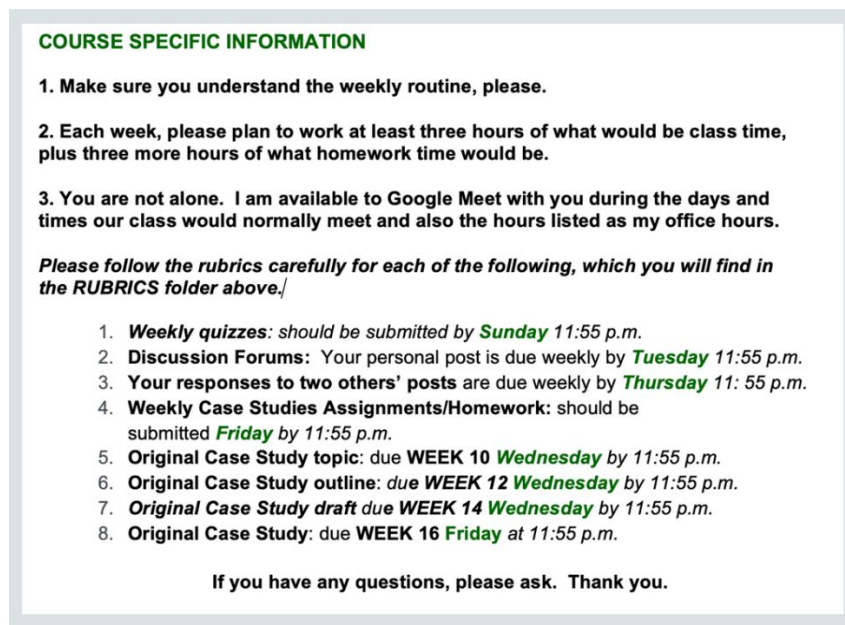


Figure 2. Moodle LMS course site for MCM 4943 Media Ethics

3. Incorporating a variety of delivery methods

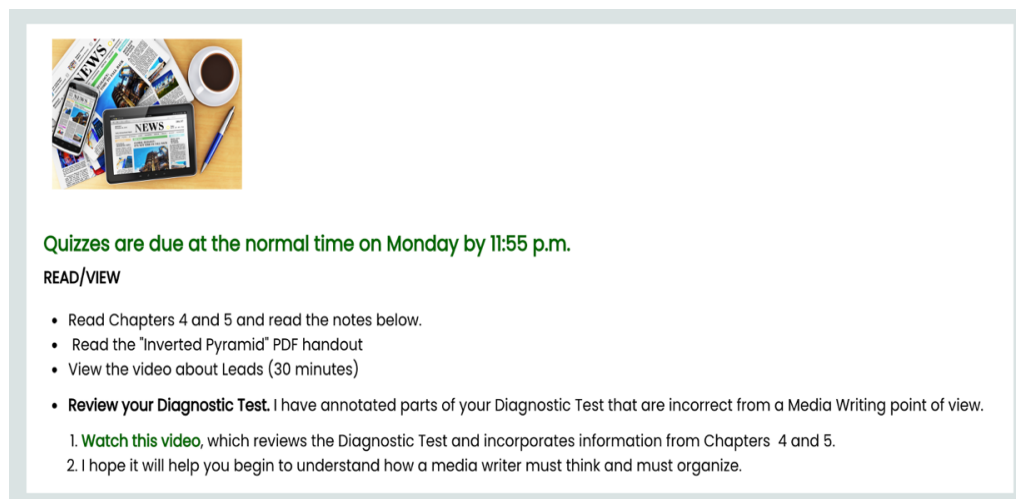
Moving courses online at short notice during the COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as “triage” by some educators quoted in a recent *Inside HigherEd* column (Lederman 2020). It was important that traditional mass communication students did not feel a kind of “triage” about their suddenly online course material. It was equally important to create assignments that resonated with traditional students’ expectations based on their previous eight weeks in class and my experience with these students. I decided my course assignments would try to incorporate the following categories listed by Rasmussen University reflecting a range of student learning preferences:

- (1) Visual learners
- (2) Auditory (aural) learners
- (3) Kinesthetic (hands-on) learners
- (4) Reading and writing learners (Flavin 2019)

What follows are screenshots of some assignment examples that incorporated one or more learning preferences from various Moodle LMS course sites.

4. Visual and Reading and Writing learners

Students who are visual process ideas and information they see, read or write. Those who prefer writing and also process what they see. Students who prefer reading and writing tend to enjoy reading the textbook and taking notes. The example below is from the *Media Writing* course and includes reading chapters, testing for knowledge by using chapter quizzes, gaining new information by watching a video, reading my comments on their Diagnostic Test as well as watching a video of me discussing several points common to many class members. Producing a short video also avoids having to write the same comments to each student separately.



Quizzes are due at the normal time on Monday by 11:55 p.m.

READ/VIEW

- Read Chapters 4 and 5 and read the notes below.
- Read the “Inverted Pyramid” PDF handout
- View the video about Leads (30 minutes)
- **Review your Diagnostic Test.** I have annotated parts of your Diagnostic Test that are incorrect from a Media Writing point of view.
 1. [Watch this video](#), which reviews the Diagnostic Test and incorporates information from Chapters 4 and 5.
 2. I hope it will help you begin to understand how a media writer must think and must organize.

Figure 3. Moodle LMS course site for MCM 2515 Media Writing

5. Kinesthetic (hands-on) learners

People often assume that most mass communication students are kinesthetic and sometimes even non-academic. Students showed evidence of their knowledge, understanding, and research in ways besides writing a term paper. In the *MCM 3003 Media and Society* course, students were given a choice between writing a term paper, creating a narrated PowerPoint, or a video of themselves presenting a lecture. The latter two could be linked to Moodle. They provided alternative ways for students who were having difficulty completing extended writing due to stress and anxiety the opportunity to complete their assignments. Figure 3 below shows a sample of the PowerPoint topics.

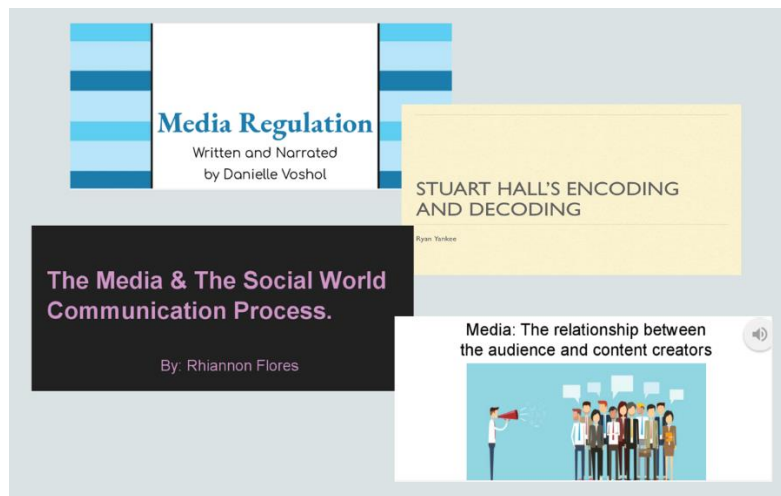


Figure 4. MCM 3003 *Media and Society* term paper alternatives

5.1. Other interactive and collaborative examples

(1) Discussion Forums

Weekly discussion forums were incorporated into each of the traditional courses during the last eight weeks of the Spring 2020 semester. I endeavored to include video clips that necessitated listening to song lyrics or to the tone of a speaker in a TEDTalk so that students practiced understanding and deconstructing meta-messages through listening. I found it difficult to think of specific ways to develop other assignments for *auditory learners*, however, listening is a vital aspect of producing all forms mass communication and I plan to explore more ways in the future. The discussion forum exchanges with class members helped students develop the ability to consider other points of view without being reactionary.

(2) Class Glossary

A colleague created an online class glossary when she developed the *Mass Communication Theory* course, which allowed students to take ownership for their learning and they held one another accountable should they not complete their glossary assignment. It also helped students understand they were not alone in understanding

some terminology in the textbook and made the engage more with the textbook. Figure 5 shows the instructions to the class.

OUR CLASS GLOSSARY: Class members will take turns contributing three words based on textbook chapter readings. *Who will be first?*

CLICK HERE: to choose your week to be a glossary editor

Your glossary is due by Friday at 11:55 p.m. of the week you choose.

WHAT TO DO:

- Choose words that are NOT part of your "Theory Analysis" or "Short Essay" assignments.
- Define at least three words that you don't know or that you need extra help to understand.
- Cite the textbook page number where you find the word

Complete the following *for each of your three words:*

- Provide an example of the word being used in its context from non-Wikipedia, non-textbook sources. *Cite the sources of your definitions.*
- Add an image *or* a hyperlink link to the term that will be helpful to the class.
- An example glossary entry can be found [here](#).

Figure 5. Moodle LMS course site for MCM3013 Mass Communication Theory

6. How does one measure student engagement and learning in an emergency online environment during a pandemic?

(1) Course evaluations

At the end of the semester students complete course evaluations designed by the university, and there is a narrative section where they can write a general comment. The majority of mass communication students commented about the usefulness of the Discussion Forums, yet the rubric was very strict and included a minimum word count, citing sources to back up opinions, and also discussion etiquette rules to follow. Students seemed to have enjoyed the opportunity for a free exchange of ideas and felt a safe environment had been provided for them. It also helped the more introverted students who might have gone unheard in a traditional classroom setting. One student from the *Video Storytelling* class said, "I loved the class discussion and the constructive criticism to help you further projects and potential."

Some students expressed how they felt about the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. A student from the *Media Ethics* class wrote, "The transition to class online was hard for me but the professor was on top of it and super helpful."

(2) Course reflections

Mass communication students are given a short assignment at the end of the semester to reflect on the Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) described in the respective course syllabi, and the extent to which they felt they had accomplished them. In Spring 2020 I edited the first question so that students could relate their course experiences and learning to COVID-19. This resonated especially with students in the *Media Ethics* course. The first question was stated thus:

Question: *Looking at the Course Learning Objectives above, to what extent do you think you applied any of them not only to the course, but to something you have thought about or experienced during the changes we've had to cope with during the pandemic.*

What follows are two unedited student responses based on CLO 2, “To thoroughly analyze media case studies to gain a greater understanding of the complex ethical decisions inherent in the media profession.”

Student 1: “During this time because of the pandemic we are in, I found myself watching the news more, and reading different things posted by media outlets (something I do not usually do). COVID-19 is a very scary thing, that has taken a lot from a lot of people. However, I do not believe the media handled it well at all. Stating facts and getting information to the public, that is all that needed to happen. That’s not all that happened though. News outlets all over plastered different headlines and “breaking news” lines all over the place that were not really called for. If anything, all they did was cause the panic and chaos of people “panic shopping” and hoarding supplies that not everyone was able to get, causing shortages nation/worldwide.”

Student 2: “During the current COVID-19 pandemic, the media has had a strong impact on the spread of the news regarding the virus. The media has also caused stress upon those who are consuming the media more during the quarantine. During the course, I used Course-Learning Outcome #2 the most than before, because this was the first time I had to use ethical grounds for the media.”

Such narratives demonstrated how a mass communication course could serve to contextualize what was happening around students’ preoccupation with COVID-19.

6.1. Data

The university has collated data from all student course evaluations as just one method for assessing the effects of moving classes online during the pandemic, and Figure 6 below shows some comparisons between the institution and the Mass Communication Department.

SP20						SP 20 Course Evaluation Engagement Questions					
ONLINE (n=1181)						A	B	C	D	E	
4	3	2	1	N/A	Mean	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree		
931	192	32	26	0	3.72					3.80	
956	176	29	20	0	3.75					3.78	
886	216	56	23	0	3.66					3.76	
947	187	34	13	0	3.75					3.64	
1002	148	20	11	0	3.81					3.82	

Figure 6. The university Engagement Question data are on the left

Mass communication students appear to have been more motivated and engaged with their courses than other students. There is very little difference in the data between pre-pandemic Fall 2019 and Spring 2020. There are too many other factors that need analyzing to be able to articulate reasons for this, however, it is encouraging to mass communication faculty.

7. Conclusion

The most important lesson I learned in Spring 2020 was that in order to help students engage and learn, I had to communicate how I cared about them as whole persons – mind, body and spirit. Second, it was vital to find ways to design course material in a variety of ways to facilitate learning for as many students as possible. Professors can only *motivate* students to *want* to learn, and some of that will depend on the ways in which online course material is communicated. Third, some of the changes in in the curriculum due to the COVID-19 pandemic will probably become a permanent fixture, however teaching online as an emergency measure is not the same as regular online teaching (Hodges et al. 2020). There will be work to do.

References

1. Flavin, B. 2019. Different Types of Learners: What College Students Should Know, available at <https://www.rasmussen.edu/student-experience/college-life/most-common-types-of-learners/> [accessed April 2021].
2. Hodges, C., Moore, S., Locke, B., Trust, T. & Bond, A. 2020. The Difference Between Emergency Remote Teaching and Online Learning, available at <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning> [accessed April 2021].
3. Homepage - Digital Promise. 2021. Available at <https://digitalpromise.org/> [accessed April 2021].
4. Lederman, D. 2020. How the shift to remote learning might affect students, instructors and colleges, available at <https://www.insidehighered.com/print/digital-learning/article/2020/03/25/how-shift-remote-learning-might-affect-students-instructors-and> [accessed April 2021].
5. Means, B., Neisler, J., & Langer Research Associates. 2020. *Suddenly Online: A National Survey of Undergraduates During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. (pp. 5, 8-9). San Mateo, CA: Digital Promise, available at <https://digitalpromise.org/our-reports/> [accessed April 2021]
6. Pashler, H., McDaniell, M., Rohrer, D. & Bjork, R. 2008. "Learning Styles. Psychological Science" in *The Public Interest* 9(3): 105-119.