Features of Online Teaching that Support My Learning

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Although I do not consider myself a "traditional student," my preferences and expectations about learning are conventional. I value the expert faculty's role in imparting knowledge, sharing current research, and bridging course content to the real world. My program of study has included face-to-face instruction, hybrid courses, and online delivery. Each of these platforms presents benefits and challenges. Overall, I like online courses. In this essay, I describe the online learning features I find most helpful, as an undergraduate student.

Help Forum and Video Recaps

Hands down, the most helpful tool is a hosted Help Forum. Here you can post a weekly recap video of concept(s) that students struggle to understand. At the end of each week, faculty upload a self-made video explaining the concept(s) in greater detail, at a slower pace, with illustrations or examples. In each weekly recap video, faculty commonly answer related questions posed by questions via email or posted within the "help" forum. I find it most helpful when the discussion forum remains open all semester, and at any time, students in the course can post a question for the whole class to consider or for the faculty to answer. Both work well independently, but the video recaps and help forum make a rich resource to clarify content.

Flexibility Accessing Course Content

Most professors typically divide assigned work into folders within online classrooms based on each week of the semester. Each folder is unlocked one week at a time across the semester. I understand the rationale for doing this when considering each unit as a building block; however, it is more productive when professors simultaneously unlock two coursework weeks. With the uncertainty we have been facing in COVID19, it provides a sense of control. I can better manage my time and the resources needed to access and download supplemental readings, handouts, and worksheets.

"The flexibility of choosing where and when I access content and complete coursework allows me greater control over the environment around me."

It reduces my stress level, making it easier to focus on the work of learning. Accessing course content and completing coursework can be challenging for students who share laptops/computers or have limited access to stable wifi or no internet at home. When access to either a computer or access to stable wifi connections is limited, the priority becomes maximizing the amount of work completed during this narrow window of opportunity.

Online Tutoring

In traditional face-to-face courses, opportunities to access a tutor is a strain. My personal schedule rarely lines up with the student center's hours. Even if I were fortunate enough to use flex time or personal time off work, successful in-person tutoring was not guaranteed. Hassles include lost wages, finding on-campus parking, long waiting

times, delayed schedules, and, most of all, the anxiety surrounding telling someone I don't know about my academic struggles. In contrast, using online tutoring, which most campuses offer, there is a kind of emotional security in having a screen separating yourself from the online tutor. Students I have spoken with tell me they also find it easier to relate with and open up to a tutor over a screen than face-to-face. Personally, I prefer the convenience of online tutoring as it is now available 24/7 on my campus. It eliminates barriers to access and offers assistance in real-time.

Recorded Lectures

The transition to emergency remote learning, most learning for the 2020 spring semester, likened to independent study through textbook readings, online research, and YouTube videos. While this works, I find my learning is more effective when watching a recorded lecture of my professor speaking. When such videos are uploaded and accessible through the semester, I find that I can better understand the course material as compared to the content presented in a traditional face-to-face classroom. When viewing recorded lectures, I pause, rewind, and re-watch the explanations of concepts that confuse or are new to me. Further, this allows me the control to stop the lesson, take extensive notes, then resume when I am ready, which is impossible in a face-to-face classroom. Students also have the option to adjust the playback speed. We can watch lectures at a slightly slower speed for complicated concepts, allowing our brains additional time to process the information. Likewise, we can view portions of the lecture at slightly increased speed for material, which we already know well.

Connecting with Other Students

Utilizing forum posts and discussion boards also encourages community within an online classroom. The community in an online setting is facilitated by requiring students to post on weekly discussion board forums. Students recognize each other's names, feel more comfortable asking the group questions, and create an engaging conversation about course concepts. Requiring students to respond to at least two of their peers is a great way to encourage these interactions and help students feel connected. Consider beginning the course with a "get to know me" post in which students write a short introduction and then respond to at least two of their peers' posts. It's essential to have clear guidelines on what the professor expects for each entry, including how many words, the topic of each forum, and how long the response posts should be. This clarity prevents students from posting a simple "yes, I agree" to the forum.

Online Office Hours

Online office hours allow me to connect with my professors through Zoom, google voice, or a similar video chat application. Such exchanges build student-faculty connections through real-time conversations, personalized attention, face-to-face feedback, and time to clarify questions about coursework, grades, mentoring, or advising. It also feels much more personal than emailing back and forth and helps develop the student-professor connection. Online office hours are helpful, regardless of whether the course is online, hybrid, or face-to-face.

Ecofriendly and Economical

There's a reason people joke about being "college student poor." Students frequently rely on financial aid and student loans to provide for their course fees, student fees, back to school supplies, housing, food, and more. Having courses online is economically friendly. We can go an entire semester without printing term papers, notes, or documents. Not purchasing toner, paper, or photocopies is a direct saving. Smart devices allow for online note-taking (with or without highlighting), developing separate glossaries, and reference lists; this saves money on school supplies. And the most considerable savings is found at the gas pump! For commuter students, online learning is a direct saving due to fewer miles driven.

As we return to the classroom, student learning can be enhanced by teaching practices regardless of the platform. Part of the educational journey is the process of personal and professional growth. As with any adventure, one anticipates triumphs and setbacks, but preparation, flexibility, and a positive attitude increase the likelihood of success.

Discussion Questions:

1. This student post recounts the experience of one student. To what extent do you think your students would agree to these strategies listed as being helpful?

2. Which strategies to assist student learning may well be more suited to the online environment as compared to face-to-face instruction?

3. What surprised you most about what was written in this post, either because you had not thought about it before or because your perspective was quite different?