

method also was used to replace in-class discussions by giving students the opportunity to participate virtually. The discussion forum comprised 15% of their overall grade. I maintained a tally of weekly points for students who used the forum. The results were somewhat mixed. Most students who had been fairly engaged continued to post to the forum; others apparently ignored it. As online delivery continues into the fall, use of the discussion forum will be tweaked to make it mandatory for all students to submit at least one response every week—even if that response is a brief reflection or comment (Christopher, Thomas, and Tallent-Runnels 2003).

Fourth, I gave students the option to upload their papers through Turnitin or email. I preferred receiving papers as Word documents via email so I could use the “track changes” function to edit and grade. This was an easier option because I find some Turnitin editing and commenting features to be unwieldy. The final exam—a combination of three- to five-sentence conceptual definitions and five 150-word short essay questions—was altered to a take-home-exam format. Students were provided a template with the final-exam questions two weeks in advance. Papers were to be returned on an assigned due date during the scheduled final-exam period. Most students were diligent and found it quite easy to follow these instructions. Although I returned student papers within a week, grading online was significantly labor intensive (Lao and Gonzales 2005; Sellani and Harrington 2002).

At the end of the course, I used a Feedback tool on Moodle to compile my own evaluations that asked students basic questions on course content in addition to the main tools they preferred in remote learning. Most students were pleased to have the option of both synchronous meetings and recorded lectures. Many reported that they were satisfied with my communication and that I had maintained the same momentum as an in-person class by keeping the content, structure, and objectives the same. Although I managed to use online tools in the spring and will continue using them in the fall, teaching daily classes on Zoom can be exhausting—especially with a higher teaching load. There is something deeply limiting about not having the physical and mental space to move around in the classroom. Interpersonal interactions also are more difficult, making student participation challenging. Mutual respect and setting ground rules are important principles for me, especially as a female instructor. Student privacy is an important concern; however, if synchronous lectures become the norm in the fall, then—in this spirit of mutual respect—I will expect my students to be present at all online meetings for my courses.

Key to managing online instruction without too many obstacles—at least in my case—were flexibility and communication (Jones, Kolloff, and Kolloff 2008). I cannot emphasize this enough. Given the unnatural circumstances in which both faculty and students find themselves, being flexible and clearly communicating ideas are crucial. This means relaxing unreasonable expectations of students. Successful online instruction depends on delivering course content as simply as possible without complicating or adding to/revising the curriculum. ■

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SIMULATING “NORMALCY” IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC: SYNCHRONOUS E-LEARNING AND THE ETHICS OF CARE IN TEACHING

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The benefits of using simulations as an active-learning activity in the political science classroom are well documented (Asal and Blake 2006, 1–18; Newmann and Twigg 2000, 835–42). Insights from the pedagogy literature in the discipline already address a variety of formats, including simulations developed for in-person learning in or outside of the classroom or entirely online (Taylor 2013, 134–49). Yet the COVID-19 pandemic presents new opportunities and challenges. Instructors may need to consider whether and how an in-person simulation can be conducted while maintaining physical distancing, determine if and how it can be conducted remotely, and reassess the balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning.¹

This article builds on our experience, as instructor and students,² in remotely conducting an in-class simulation in the context of emergency e-learning as part of a fourth-year undergraduate seminar in international relations at a Canadian university. We offer practical advice on how to move simulations online as well as broader insight into the value of a hybrid approach to remote learning that combines asynchronous and synchronous components and how this can be grounded in a pedagogy of care (Smith and Hornsby 2020). The voices of student coauthors, identified by their first name, are woven in throughout the following discussion. Our hope is that this contribution will inform how students, educators, and administrators approach the so-called new normal in postsecondary education.

In this particular course, the transition to emergency e-learning entailed adapting an in-class, two-week simulation of a diplomatic negotiation between parties to the South China Sea disputes for remote instruction in less than a week. This decision was made amid emerging discussions about synchronous versus asynchronous learning in an emergency context (Barrett-Fox 2020; Flaherty 2020). Most of the structure of the simulation, which involved both synchronous and asynchronous components, was preserved, and the structure and timeline were adjusted so that the assignment could be conducted via Zoom. The simulation also became optional: students could choose an alternative (i.e., fully asynchronous) assignment.

The transition to a remote format involved multiple challenges. Both instructor and students needed to familiarize themselves quickly with new technologies. Yet, as Max³ points out, there is a prevailing expectation among instructors that “Generation Z”⁴ students will be technology savvy by instinct. However, this is not always the case, especially when learning how to use software and apps with which they are unfamiliar. Educational-psychology research also provides evidence of this, as some scholars argue that assuming the average student is a “digital native” amounts to a belief in “yeti-like creatures” (Kirschner and De Bruyckere 2017, 135).

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Conducting negotiations in a virtual space also proved challenging irrespective of technological proficiency. The inability to physically move around, access private discussions, respond effectively to nonverbal interpersonal cues, and locate “where the action is” as they would have if the simulation had been conducted in person was frustrating for students—although it also contributed to their learning experience in unexpected ways.⁵ Some were managing multiple private chats simultaneously in addition to following the drafting process and coordinating with their team. As Munro states: “Part of what made it challenging is that thinking and acting fast in-person are much easier than on a device—there’s a limit to how quickly I can type.” Other students who were cut off from direct access to private dealings among teams had to make executive decisions for the team without having all of the information they thought they needed to do so. Chairing an online simulation also made it more difficult for the instructor to track participation in real time. Fortunately, “channels”⁶ allowed for written traces of intra-team coordination to be consulted after the fact for assessment purposes.

Finally, students experienced new challenges while coordinating asynchronous group work online. Some students reported additional discomfort at “annoying” their teammates and being more mindful than usual of how their peers might be experiencing extenuating circumstances related to COVID-19 that would hamper their ability to contribute. Although feedback from participating students was overwhelmingly positive, these challenges provide important lessons.

The chaotic frenzy that accompanied synchronous negotiation was a welcome mental break from the uneasiness students had been experiencing throughout the transition.

First, instructors should be mindful that students are likely to experience various emotions as a result of their reluctant participation in remote courses—which, as Munro reminds us, is “not what they signed up for.” Feelings of disbelief, excitement, despair, anxiety, fear, worry, compassion, and grief were expressed by students, including the authors, at various stages during the transition to remote instruction. Some of these feelings will persist

beyond the emergency. This should be a factor in how instructors approach remote instruction moving forward.

Second, our experience suggests that compassion and flexibility on the part of everyone involved in deadlines and expectations and during collaborative work is, as Sydney states, “non-negotiable” in the context of e-learning in a crisis context. Flexibility is not without tradeoffs, however, which brings us to our next lesson.

Third, under certain circumstances, preserving synchronous learning components is the ethical choice. Indeed, the lack of

structure that generally accompanies the type of flexibility afforded by asynchronous learning can lead to procrastination and difficulty in focusing for students. In an emergency context, the support system that many students rely on to stay organized (e.g., study groups and student clubs) disintegrates. As a result, for Munro, finishing a semester remotely was “a really isolating experience.” The synchronous components of the simulation exercise and being accountable to others allowed her to retrieve some of what was lost. The chaotic frenzy that accompanied synchronous negotiation was a welcome mental break from the uneasiness students had been experiencing throughout the transition. Group work, which often included video calls, allowed them to retain a connection with their classmates. As Serena notes, “knowing our peers from weeks of class together” also made the transition easier, whereas students starting a course online must deal with a different type of loss. Instructors will need to institute measures so that students can build the kind of peer-to-peer support that develops organically in an in-class format. Colleges and universities proactively making online technologies (e.g., Flipgrid, FeedbackFruits, and Perusall) broadly available and aimed at promoting student interaction, and training for instructors to foster such support, is key. There are legitimate concerns pertaining to how the development of online teaching capacities can be used as a pretext to further the neoliberalization of higher education. However, these technologies offer clear opportunities to improve students’ overall learning experience, including in the context of in-person teaching after it resumes.

As we transition from emergency into the new normal, these lessons can productively inform how instructors, students, and administrators approach remote and online teaching in the context of a global pandemic and beyond. Although some of the challenges faced will have receded, many will subsist. They must be met with an ethics of care that, it is hoped, will survive COVID-19. ■

NOTES

1. Whereas “synchronous” learning happens in real time, “asynchronous” learning is done without real-time interaction.
2. All of the students who coauthored this article are white (as is the instructor), received A-level grades in the course, and had stable access to a personal electronic device and the Internet. To mitigate bias, we also drew from feedback given by a broader pool of students over email and via an anonymous survey. The generalizability of our experience also is impacted by other factors. None of the students enrolled in this course requested accommodations for disabilities that could not be easily applied in an online format; neither did anyone report extenuating circumstances beyond what is expected during a global pandemic. The predominantly white and wealthy composition of the broader student population at Queen’s University is also a factor.
3. The name of this student was modified to preserve anonymity for professional reasons.
4. This is the demographic cohort succeeding Millennials, born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s.
5. Indeed, the diplomats they embodied during the simulation are experiencing similar challenges as a result of COVID-19 (Septiari 2020).
6. In Zoom, but Slack also includes channels and is a good alternative.

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MAKING HUMAN CONNECTIONS IN ONLINE TEACHING

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Effective teaching is not simply delivering content. More than 40 years of research shows that increased interactions and meaningful relationships between students and professors are associated with student persistence and success (Delaney 2008; Kezar and Maxey 2014). This finding is especially strong for students of color, first-generation students, or academically struggling students (Amelink 2005; Anaya and Cole 2001; Ishiyama 2002; Strayhorn and Terrell 2007).

Yet, the inherent distance imposed by online teaching and learning can make meaningful interactions between faculty and students difficult. The casual interactions that professors and students have on campus—continuing a discussion after class, mentioning a grant while waiting for the elevator, chatting after a speaker—often have positive outcomes for students (Kuh and Hu 2001) but are unavailable in an online environment.

Instead of simply shrugging our shoulders and bemoaning the loss of these interactions due to COVID-19, the burden is on

faculty to create opportunities for connection with students in our online classes. Research shows that the instructor is more important than any other aspect of an online course (Muljana and Luo 2019; Nistor and Neubauer 2010) and the quality of faculty–student interactions consistently predicts online retention and success (Gering et al. 2018; Jaggars and Xu 2016).

How can faculty connect in meaningful ways with students in our online classes? Doing so effectively takes creativity and authentic caring. Without these efforts, our online classes risk becoming hollow shells in which little learning takes place and only the most self-motivated, privileged, and persistent students survive.

Building Rapport with Students

I realized something was wrong in my first online class when I saw the grade distribution at the end of the semester. I taught online Introduction to Political Science with the same textbook, lectures, and assignments as the in-person course, but more students earned Ds or Fs or dropped out completely from the online version. I soon learned that this was not unusual. The distance inherent in the medium makes it difficult to connect with students, and retention is consistently lower. So, I tried an experiment. For five years, I made a particular effort to connect with my students on a human level, communicating well and personally reaching out to them. I called this approach “rapport building.” By the end of five years, I had increased retention in my experimental online sections by 13%, making them statistically indistinguishable from my face-to-face sections (Glazier 2016).

With so many courses moving online due to COVID-19, faculty are faced with immense teaching challenges. The following recommendations to improve retention and success are drawn from my own experience and grounded in the research of scholars who focus on humanizing, connecting, and building rapport with students (Aragon 2003; Glazier 2016; Pacansky-Brock, Smedshammer, and Vincent-Layton 2020).

Start Early

Begin building relationships with students by reaching out to them before the semester even begins. Send a welcome email introducing yourself, attach the syllabus, and ask a friendly and innocuous question related to the course content that will help you get to know your students and demonstrate that you care about their success. If you show students that you care from the very beginning of the class, they are more likely to come to you when they need help.

Humanize Yourself

The more students see you as a real human being, the more they will remember and prioritize your course. A short welcome video is a good idea, as well as a brief check-in video every week. These videos do not have to be perfect—it is okay if pets or kids make a surprise appearance; your students may have pets or kids, so this helps them to connect with you as a real person and to stay engaged with the class.

Get Personal

As often as possible, send students the message that you are personally invested in their individual success. The online environment can be anonymizing so anything that lifts that barrier and gets you personally engaged will help students succeed. Use their