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# Building Community in the Pandemic Classroom

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The pandemic upended my teaching routines. Normally, I give short bursts of lecture, interspersed with moments for reflection and sharing and small group activities that reinforce concepts and connect ideas across lessons. But the required social distancing the pandemic required changed all that.

I taught in-person in fall 2020. I had a class of 50 in a room that seated 200 and a class of 100 in the student center's stadium-seating theater, built for 560. The students wore masks and sat six feet apart. In these big, echoey halls, Think Pair Shares fell apart: the students could not hear each other. Group work was impossible, and getting the students to talk, to say anything, took time. As one student noted in my course evaluations, speaking in that large empty space felt awkward.

With such large classes, I did not want to move to the black screens of Zoom – nor did I want to record endless PowerPoint lectures. And, so, out of desperation, I tried something completely new: I had students in my upper division class on the U.S. health system meet in small groups on Zoom, one day a week. I lectured on Tuesdays. On Thursdays, they met in groups of three or four to complete a 75-minute activity. At first, I worried that the students would not learn as much without

the second day of lecture: the U.S. health system defies easy explanation, and students often arrive in my classroom with no concept of how it works. However, my worries were unfounded. These students did as well as previous students on the exams, and, in course evaluations, many students reported that talking through concepts and questions with their group members helped them learn. More importantly, students valued their time with other students. They developed friendships and found people they could talk to about their courses, both in my class and other classes.

These Thursday assignments drew on collaborative technology (Google Slides, Zoom) and my previous experiences with student groups. I purposefully had small groups (three or four) to encourage every student to participate, and I had students meet with the same people each week, changing groups only at the midterm. The students set up their own Zoom meeting and then completed a Google Slide activity for participation points.

Google slides allowed for a structured activity where I could provide detailed instructions and information delivery without overwhelming the students with a long list. The slide deck served as a navigational tool, walking the students through the different tasks and thinking processes I had designed for the learning experience. The students worked their way through the slides, starting with an ice breaker or get-to-know-you question. They then took a group picture and assigned group roles for the day (Facilitator, Reader, Recorder, Reflector). Each part of structured activities played a key role in the flow of the class. The ice-breakers created an opportunity to build community across meetings; the group picture held the students accountable for meeting; and the group roles gave each student a task.

The activity itself usually consisted of short information delivery (in green boxes, that one student was to read out loud) and discussion questions (in purple boxes, where one student recorded the group's answers). Some weeks, I had the group listen to a short audio or video file - but I never provided any lecture recordings of myself. The consistency of student groups allowed the students to develop deeper relationships as the semester went on. In midterm evaluations, students told me that they had formed study groups for other classes with their group members, and that their group members had become an important source of support during a difficult semester. The impacts of these activities reverberated even outside of my course. During a semester where COVID-19 meant a great deal of isolation and difficulty meeting other students, these small group activities served as a curated moment for students to really engage with each other.

I plan to use this format again, only in a three-day-a-week course structure. I hope that this format of two days of lecture and one day of group work will create an even more effective learning environment. The group meeting itself will be shorter (50 minutes, instead of 75), and I will have more time in class to answer questions and provide transitions. A weekly group meeting may not work for every class, but I plan to incorporate more low-stakes, student group activities into other classes and continue having students meet without me, on some regular basis, in the future. Creating opportunities for meaningful student-to-student interaction seems important beyond the pandemic. Public university classrooms are one of the few places where U.S. residents from different socio-economic experiences still interact. And, for me, that interaction is key to the value of a public university education.

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