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Ignatian Pedagogy Certificate Final Project

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Project Description

    The class I teach is CPST 200: Introduction to Degree Completion. The 3-credit

course is a required component of the SCPS Loyola Experience, and is the first of three

school-required courses needed to graduate for students in our degree programs.

SCPS covers this first course for all students with a full, school-funded scholarship to

minimize the risk of beginning a program as an adult student at Loyola. This class is

instrumental in determining whether or not a student is retained at SCPS, and I have a

large role in creating and improving its curriculum for all CPST 200 instructors. As

related to the Ignatian pedagogical paradigm, this class shapes the context and

experience for the SCPS student, offering many opportunities for reflection in their first

term at Loyola. For these reasons, I decided to make this class the focus of my IPC

project.

    As listed in the current syllabus, "CPST 200 exists to give newly admitted adult

students a chance to ease back into the academic environment in a community setting,

while highlighting all of the tools and services available at Loyola University Chicago.

These services are a necessary part of succeeding as a student at any age at the

University, and knowing where to access these resources is an important first step

towards completing your degree." In this class, instructors give students the opportunity

to dive into the research paper writing process, build community with fellow classmates,

and learn practical applications, such as building a graduation plan and exploring non-

traditional credit options to earn college credit.

    I teach this course in both an online and blended format. In my time teaching this

class and working as Assistant Dean where I serve as the primary academic advisor to

SCPS students, I consistently witness students struggling with the transition to college. However, I have found that when students feel connected to the community and to the content they are learning, they do better in the course. This is also supported by literature about adult learning (Knowles, 1984). With this knowledge as a foundation, I started my project by first brainstorming the following question:

- What issues do my students face in the classroom regarding connection to their class community and to the course content?

I have found that the largest barriers to community are as follows, as supported by recent surveys of our students:

- Feelings of inadequacy or intimidation that can be a result of an undiagnosed disability or a bad experience in college in the past, particularly when taking online classes or attending a large university.

- Feelings of not belonging resulting from being out of college for "too long," which I hear often from veteran students or students who have finished raising a family.

- Feelings of not being prepared, with an emphasis on writing and navigating online tools.

These experiences are very real, even if students have had great career and family successes. Although these insecurities can act as barriers, these common challenges have the potential to foster bonds between students when the appropriate forum is created to share their concerns, thus, further fueling my project.

My next step was to brainstorm when a person feels part of a community, based on my own experiences working with students and recalling student development theory. As instructors, we know students feel part of a community when instructors and

students know their names, where they are from, and their academic plans. It is important to know students' values and backgrounds, particularly in this introduction course. Community is also formed when students' contributions are appreciated and their participation is not only recognized, but encouraged. We feel compelled to engage in a community when we do not feel anonymous, when we engage in one-on-one conversations, and when we are included in group conversation. We also feel inspired to participate when we have an obligation to fulfill or a reputation to establish and/or uphold. As we know through student development theory from Astin (1985), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005), and Tinto (1997), for example, connection and buy-in are key elements for students to be successful.

In reflecting on my "role as teacher" within the Ignatian paradigm and fostering the community "experience" in the classroom setting, I wanted to implement new methods to better foster communication as a whole in my classroom using the resources I already had available in Sakai. This led me to my next area for brainstorming:

- Where can I, as the instructor, grow community in my class conducted online, using the tools that already exist, to foster commitment and connection, specifically to peers and to me as the instructor?

The tools I chose to use to make this possible were Sakai functionalities, Voicethread, and Adobe Connect.

Focus 1: Connection to Peers

In Sakai, I had students do the following to foster greater connection to their peers:

- Add a Sakai profile picture, which created increased "presence" in the online forums.
- Share class contact information, including phone number, text plan, and email address, to promote contact outside of the classroom when working as a group on assignments.

This was further promoted through the use of breakout groups. Students also used this information to reach out to students who shared other common classes.

- Participate in forums that tie in personal identity or values each week. These forums were also monitored and facilitated by either volunteer Student Ambassadors who had completed the class or by a hired Peer Advisor, which increased quality participation significantly.

In Voicethread, I had students do the following:

- Post a Voicethread profile picture, which created "presence" in the video assignment forums.

- Post a Voicethread video introduction the first week of class, sharing the student's name, major, fun fact, how they would describe himself/herself as a student, class expectations, what they are most nervous about, etc. This allowed for a safe space to begin to share student stories right at the start of the class.

- Students were required to post audio and video responses to student presentations later on in the session.

Using Adobe Connect, I required:

- The use of audio by all students during synchronous sessions and mandatory advising appointments.

- Adobe Connect breakout sessions and notepads, with mics, to workshop research papers. This significantly reduced anxieties about the paper writing process because students could share challenges, but also served to encourage better participation from students who were behind after interacting with students who were catching on to the writing process. I was surprised how well these breakout sessions worked as compared to my blended courses.

- Participation in Adobe Connect "rapid reflections" using polls and chat functions relating to struggles in the class and general assignment prompts.

Focus 2: Connection to Instructor

In Sakai, I did the following to foster connections to me as the instructor:

- I posted a Sakai profile picture, which was visible anytime I participated in the forums. This was particularly useful in the general questions forum open to all students about any topic open during the entire course. This forum was where I found out common themes that were not clicking for my students, and students often jumped in before I could to answer each other's questions, demonstrating a supportive community environment.

- I tailored each week to showcase my personality, sharing videos, gifs, and images that I thought added humor and levity to the content. This was most apparent in Week 8, where I required student to use principles of Ignatian reflection in their final blog. The blogs were in response to "St. Iggy" videos and prompts I had created, which resulted in beautiful, rich reflections. Many of these reflections also brought to light incidents of gender-based violence that students had experienced in the past, leading me to be able to connect them to campus support resources in their first term at Loyola through the Dean of Students Office and the Title IX coordinator.

- When using Turnitin, I added audio comments, in addition to written comments, to better communicate tone and to help students better connect with me personally.

- Updated my syllabus to show how the mission of Loyola tied to CPST 200 directly.

Using Voicethread, I did the following:

- Created my own video introduction posted before the class started. This video also let students know that I would be calling them on the phone before the class began to introduce myself and to discuss class expectations.

- Filmed and posted weekly video announcements I made in Voicethread discussing the upcoming week's content, which I included with the text announcements I sent out each week of the course. I also used this space to summarize themes I noticed in the work

submitted by students, including both positive and constructive feedback. I imbedded these announcements and videos in weekly lesson tabs to be re-reviewed later.

- Recorded a video explaining all assignment instructions, which was done via Voicethread and imbedded in the content each week.

In Adobe Connect, I did the following:

- I used Adobe Connect to answer individual questions before and after synchronous class sessions. Originally, I planned to have my peer advisor use Adobe Connect to hold office hours. Instead, I he used Zoom, which worked out. My peer advisor also served as my Adobe Co-pilot during class sessions.

- Required one-on-one meetings with each student, conducted in person or via Adobe Connect so we could share screens. Points were assigned to this requirement.

- Used video at the beginning of all synchronous sessions, which were recorded.

- Visited breakout rooms when students were collaborating to workshop their research papers. My peer advisor also monitored and facilitated breakouts.

- Sent out a summary after Adobe Connect session and used that space to give specific "kudos," making sure to include the recording of the most recent class session and the PowerPoint presentations reviewed.

Implications and Next Steps

This project was invaluable in holding me accountable to make these changes for my class, especially since it is so challenging to make meaningful adjustments with the term being 8-weeks, with only a few days separating sessions. The timeline is incredibly tight to make big changes. Doing this project charged me to better articulate expectations and material for my students. It also helped me create more accessible ways to experience the course, regardless of a student's past exposure to higher education. This process opened up more lines of communication, in general, making the

process of reaching out to me or our peer students more comfortable and less intimidating.

The drive to make changes in my course come from a place rooted in "cura personalis" and a sense of moral responsibility to create an environment of support, community, and access. As I have had more and more exposure to the lives of the adult student, they face so many obstacles in their way that can prevent an uninterrupted learning experience as they are charged with juggling the responsibilities of at work and family, be that children, a spouse, or an aging parent. Finding methods, both big and small, to connect them to this learning experience, reinforced through reflection, allowed them to stay connected more easily and with more flexibility.

Making videos proved to take the most time; however, these reaped solid results. The process of recording videos for multiple element of the class made me realize that students could listen to instructions, rather than read them, increasing flexibility, and also forced me to clarify my instructions, which I originally thought were clear before this project. Videos increased my instructor presence in the course, which I felt led to more meaningful sharing, evidenced by the blog entries I received as compared to prior sessions before making these changes. I found myself moved to create shorter videos for my lectures, as well, rather than long presentations to make the content more manageable in smaller chunks. I also encouraged students to use more video and photos in the course to further create community and presence.

Another success was the use of peer support in the classroom. Although it took a considerable amount of time to recruit students to participate to lead a forum as a volunteer or to recruit a quality student hired to support a large class as a peer advisor,

it served as another touchpoint of support for students taking the class beyond me as the instructor. The forum posts were significantly more robust since I introduced this option, and more students applying to be student ambassadors grew, as well.

Overall, I feel inspired to continue to improve my class further. I want to use more media and videos wherever possible, and I want to learn how to do so more efficiently. I am interested in learning how to make content more streamlined and effective in shorter segments to serve our busy students who need to access information with flexibility quickly. I want to become better versed in tools we have available as instructors, like Zoom and Panapto. I also want to look to add more pieces of meaningful reflection, and to hone in the prompts for my assignments. I am excited to continue to improve my course, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to do so in the context of pursuing the IP certificate. Thank you!

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