What (Some) Students Are Saying about the Switch to Remote Teaching and Learning

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Learning about remote learning

Learning what is and isn't working for students in the move to remote learning is invaluable, but it is especially important right now as online courses are being developed rapidly, iteratively, and under pressure.

Faculty members and students across Canada and the United States have overwhelmingly switched to alternative forms of teaching, learning, and assessment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. How is this transition going for students? Our research—in which we have called for researchers and educators to pay greater attention to students' learning experiences and understand the value of collaborating with students—positions the learners at the center of education, allowing the two of us to find ways to learn from them.[1]

Both formative and summative feedback from students are at the crux of improving any course or learning experience. Learning what is and isn't working for students is invaluable, but it is especially important as courses are being developed rapidly, iteratively, and under pressure. While colleagues at institutions of higher education have been and will be asking their own students for feedback, we have sought to provide another way to learn how this transition is going for students overall.

In a 2018 article, we described how scraping public social media data may generate valuable insights for online teaching and learning.[2] We decided to put this unobtrusive method to the test to get a sense of how students are adapting to courses that have transitioned from in-person to remote delivery. There are challenges with this approach, including questions about privacy, ethics, objectivity, and representativeness—questions that others describe in the context of big data work[3] and that we discuss in our own article in the context of educational technology. In reporting these comments, we intentionally avoid quoting anyone or otherwise identifying individuals and institutions. We used this approach not just because the data we describe below is available but also because alternative data-collection methods used for student input (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys) would have added further pressures on students and their time. We felt that surveying or interviewing students right now was inappropriate. Based on our prior research, we also suspected that we could achieve similar outcomes by examining information that students have already shared.

This past week, we scraped thousands of Twitter posts from individuals who have been commenting about "my professor." We then categorized these posts to identify common feedback, aiming to identify recurring pain points and positive experiences. While Twitter is often used as a platform for venting, we were curious as to what these posts

would reveal. We have seen many articles about faculty experiences in this transition, and we've seen faculty bring their creativity, humanity, scholarly ethos, and intellectual curiosity to the current reality, but to date we have heard little from students.

Here are some of the things we learned from students' tweets.

1. Students appreciate faculty who remain positive and calm. Plenty of posts reveal that students appreciate encouragement, support, and positivity—not "disaster plans." This pandemic may be the most uncertain and difficult life situation most students have ever faced, and they may be looking to faculty for some calm in the storm. If faculty feel comfortable, they should share their thoughts and emotions with their students and talk about their personal life as appropriate, being careful not to overshare or overemphasize their fears and anxieties. Students appreciate—and need—communication.

2. Students would like faculty to maintain a proper perspective. Education and learning continuity are important, but students who are fearing for their livelihood, well-being, or health might legitimately have more important things to deal with than a professor's class. Some students have posted about the need to choose between doing what faculty want for class and what they need to do to survive or what they are expected to do by society. For example, if a student is being forcibly evicted, it should be okay for that student to pack while listening to a faculty lecture—or not join the live lecture at all.

3. Students appreciate faculty who are empathetic, who are flexible, and who have reasonable expectations. Because everyone's lives have been upended, we can't know or account for every possible difficulty that students are facing. Faculty should be flexible and accommodating. For example, some students' tweets mentioned that faculty need to recognize that students who went home may now be in different time zones. Holding class at the same time that it was held originally may now be too early or too late for some. Continuing on the theme that students are dealing with health, financial, and life difficulties, it is reasonable to expect that these issues will impact some students' ability to focus on class. Canceling some assignments and/or restructuring them to accommodate students' emerging needs are reasonable ways to apply empathy and flexibility to pedagogy.

4. Professional behavior norms benefit students as well as faculty. A number of students' posts mentioned seeing other students lie down and take a nap on-camera or show up shirtless to a webinar. Some students also noted that they could hear faculty yell at their children or pets. Because remote teaching and learning may be a new experience for both faculty and students, faculty should be explicit, but reasonable, about how they expect students to dress, communicate, and behave. Likewise, they themselves should follow those expectations. Just as classrooms need structure, faculty and students need to structure their learning environments while participating in remote educational efforts so that the experience is professional, safe, and nondistracting.

5. Students want faculty to be comfortable with technology. There are many ways to teach remotely. Faculty should not assume that all teaching must be done via a live lecture. The most common tweets from students involve complaints that professors try to use technology that they clearly have not practiced, lecture for some time before realizing they were muted, show whiteboards upside-down, and don't notice when students tell them that something is wrong. If faculty are going to lecture, one way to avoid these problems is to simply record the lecture and ask students to watch it on their own time. Recording lectures in short five- or ten-minute chunks may provide added flexibility. Or if faculty want students to take notes, why not provide them with the PowerPoint file as a starting point? But most importantly, faculty should practice using technology before incorporating it into their classes.

6. Not all students are tech-savvy and connected. Students wrote a number of self-deprecating posts about recognizing the limits of their own technical expertise. For example, they sometimes need help getting the audio to work, understanding how to unmute themselves, or troubleshooting glitchy Wi-Fi. While faculty may be tempted to assume that students are more tech-savvy than their professors, it is important for faculty to recognize that students have varying degrees of proficiency with technology, that they make mistakes, and that online learning requires digital skills, literacies, and resources (e.g., bandwidth) that they may not currently have. Creating equitable learning

opportunities is an essential aspect of remote learning, and one way to begin doing this is by recognizing that while some students may be able to quickly figure out how to participate in online environments, others may need more support and assistance.

Considering all of the students' tweets as a whole, we see that students appreciate social engagement, teacher presence, faculty support and care, and faculty familiarity with online learning, as well as connecting with others. To the greatest extent possible, faculty who are transitioning to remote instruction should follow the consensus among the online learning research community and avoid merely replicating the face-to-face environment online; rather, faculty should continually learn from their own efforts and the advice of learning design professionals and should consider the new, and perhaps unexpected, ways that online learning technologies allow them to improve students' experiences.

Notes

1. George Veletsianos, *Learning Online: The Student Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); Scott Woodward, Adam Lloyd, and Royce Kimmons, "Student Voice in Textbook Evaluation: Comparing Open and Restricted Textbooks," *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 18, no. 6 (September 2017). ↩
2. Royce Kimmons and George Veletsianos, "Public Internet Data Mining Methods in Instructional Design, Educational Technology, and Online Learning Research," *Tech Trends* 62 (2018). ↩
3. danah boyd and Kate Crawford, "Critical Questions for Big Data," *Information, Communication & Society* 15, no. 5 (2012); Zeynep Tufekci, "Big Questions for Social Media Big Data: Representativeness, Validity and Other Methodological Pitfalls," International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, May 2014. ↩

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