



## ARTICLE

# How COVID-19 Made Me a Better Teacher

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COVID-19 has caused havoc in the world as we know it, altering every aspect of life, including education. The pandemic forced me and other educators to teach online, and by doing so, it has made me a better teacher. I now (1) employ more teaching techniques; (2) assess more frequently; and (3) engage every student. As I emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, I have reflected on the positive lessons I learned from teaching online, lessons that I plan to bring with me when I return to the classroom.

By way of background, I have taught Legal Analysis, Writing, & Research Skills for over twenty years. For the most part, teaching has come naturally to me. I love the challenge of taking complex material, breaking it down, and explaining it to someone else. My in-person classes are spirited as I aim to ignite student interest, engage in debates, and spark dialogue. I'll confess, though, I never spent time thinking about how students learn. My students developed and improved, and when someone struggled, I'd individually meet with the student and contact academic support. My course evaluations were positive, so I had assumed that whatever I was doing worked.

But when I discovered that my course would be virtual, I recognized that I had to do things differently. What had worked in the classroom would not be as effective for students who would be staring at a computer screen all day long.

From personal experience, I knew how easy it was during online meetings to “zone” out or multi-task, like checking emails and surfing the web. I also knew how difficult it was to have your voice heard in online meetings, with inherent challenges in the race to unmute or to find and employ the “raise hand” function. It was also easy for one person to dominate a discussion, shutting down those less confident or comfortable. Hence, I began to think about how to effectively convey information in a virtual setting and engage each of my students.

## 1. Different Learning Styles

As I developed my online class, I became more attuned to different learning styles. A learning style or preference is the way a student “perceives, absorbs, and processes new information.”<sup>1</sup> A student’s learning style is determined by the way the student relies on the senses to absorb new information. The three major sensory modes of learning are visual, aural, and kinesthetic.<sup>2</sup> While a learner can use all three senses, one usually dominates, and the student prefers it.<sup>3</sup> Visual learners learn through seeing images; aural learners learn by listening to lectures and discussions; kinesthetic learners learn through touching and experiences.<sup>4</sup>

While there is considerable debate as to whether learning styles are real and whether they even affect learning outcomes,<sup>5</sup> I contend that no matter which position you take, teaching techniques that cater to different senses maintain student interest and motivation, both of which positively affect performance.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, when I had to move to online teaching, I transformed my traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Eric A. DeGross & Kathleen A. McKee, *Learning Like Lawyers: Addressing the Differences in Law Student Learning Styles*, BYU EDUC. & L.J. 499, 508 (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Heidi L. Lujan & Stephen E. DiCarlo, *First-year Medical Students Prefer Multiple Learning Styles*, 30 ADVANCES IN PHYSIOLOGY EDUC. 13, 13 (2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* The results of a study performed on medical students revealed that most medical students preferred multiple modes of information presentation.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> See Rory Bahadur & Liyun Zhang, *Socratic Teaching and Learning Styles: Exposing the Pervasiveness of Implicit Bias and White Privilege in Legal Pedagogy*, 18 HASTINGS RACE & POVERTY L.J. 114 (2021) (critiquing assertions regarding learning styles in Deborah L. Borman & Catherine Haras, *Something Borrowed: Interdisciplinary Strategies for Legal Education*, 68 J. LEGAL EDUC. 357 (2019)); see also Scott Barry Kaufman, *Enough with the “Learning Styles” Already*, SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN BLOG (Dec. 8, 2018), <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/beautiful-minds/enough-with-the-learning-styles-already/#> (indicating that studies consistently show catering to different learning styles does not improve learning outcomes).

<sup>6</sup> By “acknowledging and consciously utilizing a multimodal pedagogy catering to different learning preferences” we help learners, and “no serious educator should suggest that because of a “learning style” the student is only capable of learning the material in one way.” Bahadur & Zhang, *supra* note 5, at 136.

lectures to include instruction and exercises that were visual, aural, and kinesthetic. I did not intentionally do this. Rather, I changed my teaching strategies because every workshop regarding online pedagogy repeatedly advised against lecturing online for more than fifteen minutes as students lacked the attention span to focus for a longer period. Accordingly, professors were encouraged to create asynchronous lectures or group activities to break up the screen time. Keeping this advice in mind, I began to think about different ways to deliver material.

I created short video clips and PowerPoint slides with diagrams and examples for students to watch outside of the classroom. I sometimes incorporated voice over in these slides. I developed group exercises for students to do in breakout rooms. As I engaged in this process, I realized that in conveying one concept, I was employing different techniques and was satisfying distinctive learning styles. While my diagrams and PowerPoint slides would benefit the visual learner, my taped and live explanations would please the aural learning. Because students could see and hear material before class, my lecture time was reduced and students could spend more class time practicing the new skill, satisfying the kinesthetic learner.

When I return to the classroom, I will supplement my traditional lectures. Like I did when teaching online, I plan to use different means by which to deliver information to maintain student interest and reach all types of learners. I intend to couple my lectures with tapes, slides, and hands-on exercises. For example, when teaching thesis paragraphs, I will have my students watch a five-minute video clip prior to class, which will set forth the basics of a thesis paragraph as well as a sample. When we get to class, I will have different writings for the students to review in small groups, editing and critiquing the thesis paragraphs of those writings. I will then discuss with the class what makes a good thesis paragraph. After these varied activities, my students should feel more confident as they begin to draft the thesis paragraphs for their next writing assignment.

## 2. Frequent Assessments

Before teaching virtually, I based my lectures on the assigned readings. Frequently, students would nod their heads, affirming that they understood the conveyed information. Upon reviewing their first written assignment, however, I soon discovered that student comprehension was lackluster, forcing me to review and revisit areas in which they got stuck. In the virtual world, though, I employed no-stakes assessments to determine what my students did and did not understand, allowing me to address common problems before the students submitted their first graded assignment.

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I discovered that unlike in-person assessments, online assessments did not take exorbitant amounts of time. By assessing my students, I could better gauge what students did and did not know. Specifically, I used my school's learning platform, Canvas<sup>7</sup>, to assign an ungraded quiz for students to take outside of class time. The quizzes covered concepts conveyed in the readings or class discussion. By reviewing student responses, I was able to determine where students faltered.

For example, at the beginning of the semester, I teach the hierarchy of the courts. When I taught live, I would present hypotheticals and ask students to determine which court decisions were binding and which were persuasive. One or two students would volunteer the answer. But, in my virtual class, by assigning a no-stakes quiz, every student participates in the exercise. Substantively, the material in the hypotheticals and the no-stakes quiz was identical. But, with the no-stakes quiz, I could ask more questions, get one-hundred percent participation, and not waste precious class time. By assessing students outside of class, I reinforced information and saved classroom minutes for learning and engaging. Since there is no grade assigned, there is no stress involved. The students also were eager to see what they did and did not understand; virtual assessments helped students become self-regulated learners.<sup>8</sup>

The success of these ungraded assessments was revealed in my students' first written assignments, where I saw more students rely on binding relevant case law than in previous years. When we return to in-person teaching, I plan to continue to use online formats<sup>9</sup> that enable me to provide no-stakes quizzes to monitor my students' progress and help me troubleshoot before graded assignments without wasting valuable class time.

### 3. Engaging All Students

Teaching online has enabled me to engage an entire class and leave no student behind. To involve students, all online platforms have built-in mechanisms like polling and breakout rooms. While polling requires student participation, breakout rooms encourage discussion and inform professors of student comprehension. While teachers could poll and do group work in a live classroom, these techniques are more effective online for the reasons described below.

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<sup>7</sup> Blackboard is another learning platform that has similar tools. Other learning platforms are Open, Cornerstone Learning, Kahoot!, Schoology, and Brightspace, and they all have a means by which a teacher can assess student knowledge outside of class time.

<sup>8</sup> Self-regulated learners are learners who can monitor their behavior in terms of their goals and self-reflect on the effectiveness of their behavior. See Barry J. Zimmerman, *Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: An Overview*, 41 *THEORY INTO PRACTICE* 64, 65-66 (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Canvas and Blackboard are two learning modules that provide online assessments.

When conducting an online poll, the teacher poses a question, and viewers electronically answer. The teacher can then share the percentage of students who chose one answer as opposed to another. The poll mandates participation, and students see how their choices compare with those of others, providing a springboard for discussion. For example, in teaching how to write an objective statement of facts, I advised students to avoid legal conclusions and characterizations. Students then viewed a poll containing several different sentences and answer “yes” or “no” as to whether each sentence is a “statement of fact.”

In-person polling was never as effective as online polling. A written poll took time. If I conducted a quick poll by asking for a show of hands, students were influenced by whether their classmates’ hands were raised. When taking a poll online, however, students quickly and independently answer questions and cannot be swayed by others. While the unprepared student might guess, he or she feels the discomfort of being out of the loop. And prepared students can determine whether they understood the material. Polling involves and engages all students, not just some, and it facilitates dialogue. When I return to in-person teaching, I hope to continue using some form of a technological online polling device<sup>10</sup> to continue assuring 100 percent student engagement.

Additionally, online platforms enable the professor to divide the class into small groups. These “breakout rooms” allow students to practice a skill or work through a problem, serving two advantages. First, students meet and work with their peers—a novelty in a COVID-19 world. They learn from each other and formulate questions when they hit roadblocks. Second, I work with small groups of students and provide more individual attention than is possible in a large group setting. As I go from room to room, I see common errors and questions. When we reconvene as a group, I address the collective concerns. While I did group work when I taught in person, I often found students were distracted by the noises and sounds from the other groups. This is not the case when students are virtual.

## 4. Conclusion

I do not think teaching online is ideal: I miss walking around the classroom, observing body language, and hearing my students chat and laugh before, during, and after class; it is simply less personable. I eagerly anticipate returning to the classroom and seeing my students as full-bodied people not just faces in “Hollywood Squares.” While not perfect, online teaching showed me firsthand that computer technology can provide supplemental routes to learning. Class polls and assessments make students accountable for their learning and progress. Doing these things before big assignments are due, raises student self-awareness

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<sup>10</sup> For example, iclicker is an audience-response system for higher education.

of their strengths and weaknesses, allowing them to review and revisit troublesome areas and master concepts before completing the final project.

When I return to my classroom, I will continue to employ technology to enhance my teaching. By continuing to give no-stake quizzes I will endeavor to more frequently assess my students. I further hope to more actively engage every student by continuing to poll them in a way that ensures every learner actively participates. Finally, I will use more visuals that students can review before and after class, giving my kinesthetic learners “practice” time in the classroom. Educational psychologists have recognized that the student mode of absorbing and processing information requires different instructional strategies.<sup>11</sup> I am grateful that online teaching has showed me how to incorporate these strategies in my teaching.

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<sup>11</sup> DeGroff & McKee, *supra* note 1, at 508.