

Faculty Focus Groups:
Experiences Teaching FlexSync and Online Synchronous during Fall 2020
Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

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In Fall 2020, the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) recruited faculty and staff who were teaching FlexSync and online (synchronous and asynchronous) courses to participate in focus groups about their experiences. Recruitment emails were shared in the Provost Weekly Announcements twice and the CETL weekly announcements four times between October and November.

A total of 19 faculty, staff, and graduate students indicated an interest in completing the focus groups, and 18 of those participated in focus groups that were scheduled in November and December. Five focus groups were conducted in total with the size of the groups ranging from two to four participants and took place via Zoom. Focus groups lasted between 75 and 90 minutes. Transcripts from the recorded sessions were analyzed for themes.

Faculty were asked to respond the following questions:

- Describe your teaching experiences last spring and this fall.
- What works well for you in teaching your online or FlexSync courses?
- What hinders your ability to teach in these formats?
- What resources are needed to help you be successful in teaching online and FlexSync?
- Share other comments or feedback about your teaching.

Participant Profile

Participants represented five of the six colleges with the following distribution across Colleges:

- Allied Health and Nursing – 5 participants
- Arts and Humanities – 0 participants
- Business – 2 participants
- Education – 1 participant
- Science, Engineering, and Technology – 4 participants
- Social and Behavioral Sciences – 5 participants
- Other – 1 participant

Additionally, the participants ranged in rank with the following distribution of representation:

- Assistant Professor – 7
- Associate Professor – 7
- Professor – 2
- Other – 2

Findings

Upon review of the focus group data, four themes emerged among the focus groups: a) classroom engagement; b) technology (un)assisted classrooms; c) innovative teaching; and d) institutional support. Each theme will be explored in further detail.

Classroom Engagement

“In terms of why some of us are here, I’ll speak for myself, why we do this [teaching] is I like to connect with students and right now, that is the hardest part of all of this.”

Social interaction and classroom engagement emerged as a concern among faculty and staff teaching in FlexSync and online environments. Many faculty shared comments similar to this one, “And then this year discussions were very flat, and it was like pulling teeth to get students to talk and by about, I don’t know, third week of the semester, everybody had a camera off.” Faculty shared a frustration and concern that they are unable to re-create the social interaction that takes place in a physical classroom because

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students are not visible. Another faculty member mentioned the following related to their concerns about student engagement and being able to see students, “And, and, so kind of contrasting it with like last year, the same course, it was, it was just, it was really hard and felt like I was talking to myself and you couldn't use the trick of making eye contact with the student who you felt like was going to say something and pulling it out of them because you couldn't you can't make eye contact. On Zoom you're looking at the wrong place where their camera is.” Most of the faculty indicated that this left them feeling exhausted in ways that they had not previously experienced and others described it as an emotional workload burden that they were unsure how to address.

Concerns about students not being visible to the instructor also created uncertainty about learning and attention. As a faculty member stated, “Yeah, you know, attendance has been fine because it is easy, right. You just open up a laptop in bed, and hey, you are in class! So, attendance has been great. The attendance has probably been the best ever in my entire time teaching, but I am not sure how much they are paying attention.”

Examples of this worry for a lack of attention included observation of students not acknowledging information that faculty are sharing with them. Additionally, faculty are finding it difficult to identify a modality of communication that students will engage with. One faculty member shared the following experience:

“I made this 15-minute-long video that was like here, here's a map of Campus, here's the building, here's the room we're going to meet in you know, here's when this first assignment is due, and you know, sent out an email saying there's a very important video for you to watch, and then I got questions two weeks later, after the first assignment, you know, that was not in person was due like I had no idea that that was there and I said, well, I talked about it a lot in the very important video that I posted on D2L and I labeled it as important like, did you watch it, and then I don't get a response because you know they're not going to say no.”

Another faculty member shared the following observation and connected the communication and attention challenges to heightened anxiety. “They internalize that anxiety, and it builds up and builds up and suddenly I get the random emails and texts saying what's due when?” Others described students in the following way, “I say this in the most loving way possible. I mean, they're just messes right now, and so am I.”

The loss of interaction was not just concerning in student – faculty relationships but there was also fear that the social interactions among students are going to present on-going challenges when students are not on campus. “If there's a loss of engagement in this, in this process and my fear is if the more this [pandemic] goes in this direction, the fewer students come to campus, that the reduction in social interaction, part of the value of higher education is lost...[students] will start shopping for the cheapest school.”

Another faculty member shared their concern related to students' interactions with one another, “To try and have some of that serendipity happen, but they have to turn on their camera and talk to each other, you know, I've had, I've done random breakout rooms and then the kids come back and say, well, you know, two people never turned on the camera. They never talked to me.” Many faculty felt that this lack of interaction was detrimental to creating a robust learning environment where students can share ideas, collaborate with one another, and guide each other in the learning process.

Finally, interaction among colleagues was mentioned as missing in the current environment. As one participant shared, “So those are those are some of the hindrances is and then serendipitous interactions with colleagues too, you know, just running into somebody in the hallway. Midway through the semester, and they're talking to us about what they did in their class and you go, Oh, that'd be a great idea. And I

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want to try that with this next module and doing you know we're not getting that, I get a, you know, we try to email each other and stuff but not the same level when we are in the moment."

Technology (Un)Assisted Learning

"I can't remember the last time I made it through a class without a technical issue, including just yesterday."

Faculty participating in the focus groups expressed concern related to the challenges that were perceived to be a result of the technology required to teach a FlexSync course and frequently describe teaching a FlexSync course as "mental gymnastics" with feelings that the attention demand needed to teach was overwhelming. One faculty member shared the following related to the challenges they experienced with technology and the process for ultimately deciding to abandon FlexSync. "Look, I can't justify giving a worse educational output for the other 90% for the sake of 10% because you have to remember my attention is half and half right. You're not giving the same attention, the actual hardware in the is not as good as I have at home, and so I can do a much better job teaching from home online." This comment was part of a discussion on the challenges related to FlexSync and technology to teach in this modality.

Another shared their experiences with Zoom in the classroom, "But there's so much monkeying around that I need to do in order to pop into breakout rooms in the classroom, and that I find really challenging because if I don't disconnect things then the breakout room is over the speaker and so I like my teaching, I can't really connect with those students online like I can face-to-face." Many others shared how the technology and the worry of making it function properly created barriers to being able to be present and engaged with students. Others mentioned wanting more classroom support while teaching, "Having support in the classroom to run that equipment. I know that was talked about, but I never had requested anyone to do that because we have GAs who you know need these things to do. I think if we can make that a more seamless process to like request someone to be in the classroom, it won't seem so daunting for me."

Similarly, a faculty member shared that when they did seek support because of the volume of technology challenges were not always addressed, "There was one day, speaking of help with technology. I walked in the classroom, everything's not working great right call phone number, call the phone number we'll be there. Like, when are you going to be here because you're going to log into the zoom and I don't want those kids being like, Oh, she didn't show up, you know, one of those like professor not here in five minutes, I'm out, close the video. So, I call them like, [they say] we'll be there in two to three minutes. Ten minutes later, someone shows up there messing with some things. I start class because I'm like, I can't wait. He was like, I gotta go back and get a key and never shows back up to the entire class!"

When technology was not working the way they had envisioned, faculty did not feel they had time to continue to test it to make it work. They had to make quick adjustments to keep their course progressing. "So, it's been, I've been really challenged the whole semester. You know, I came in thinking it's pretty well prepped, especially for the first month, but now we're past that. And so, it's been a kind of constant scrambling changing things like we started out with Kaltura Capture. I tried to record things to do video quizzes. We had technical problems. And there was no going back. Once that happened, I wasn't going to try again. I had to stop doing that because it didn't work, and there was no way I was going back in the middle of the semester."

Another concern that faculty expressed was that they do not feel students have a fundamental understanding of how to learn in this technology-assisted environment. "[I have] tried giving them tips on how they might somehow learn in this environment. They don't know anything about it. They don't know how to learn in this format. Just like I don't know how to teach in it." Faculty mentioned that students need resources on how to learn in this environment and that their lack of knowledge is causing them to

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lose focus. “They are emailing about incredibly basic things that I’ve repeated in class 15 times that I’ve made detailed announcements about more than once. There is nothing sticking.” Another faculty member shared a story of an in-class experience, “I almost lost my mind last week when we spent like 20 minutes going over this one concept. I used a Kahoot on the way out of the class like an exit ticket and 50% of them got it wrong. And I was like, what were you doing for 20 minutes! How did you get this wrong?” In a separate focus group, one faculty member shared the following experience, “You know it is interesting to me that the choice would be to login via Zoom. Those who are online, like, I’ll often give instructions at the beginning of class, and then we’ll break into groups and the online people are always like, wait, what are we doing in groups? And, I’m like, I literally [just said] and the face-to-face people kind of look at each other and roll their eyes because they’re like, we just talked about that.”

There was a concern that students perceive FlexSync as an asynchronous online course where work can be completed at any time. One faculty member explained it this way, “I think for students, part of, I think part of the issue, you know, when they see FlexSync, they see online. And they think, oh, I can work now. You know, they are always going to choose work over class. I am trying not to be mad about it.” Solutions to some of the issues and concerns raised by faculty included the following, “You know, students are half, half-awake or, you name it. But I think, um, long story short, I really think a lot of front-loading education and prep on FlexSync could be very useful for students.”

Others commented on a concern for students taking ownership of their learning and taking initiative to support their learning. “No one ever answers me that so finding ways to encourage students to have some agency, but also some understanding about how to be successful in this learning environment would be really helpful.” Another shared, “I would love to see, especially now a hub-type place that could even be staffed with upper-level students or some staff people or someone that students could go to for this kind of help like that they could get have some training and maybe they’re supposed to do like D2L Modules or something on this.” Several faculty echoed this statement stating that they felt students need more support on how what this learning modality requires of them including and what were the expectations and strategies for how a student can be successful in this environment.

Innovating Teaching

The transition online in the spring was much different than the preparation for teaching in what feels like a static environment. Many faculty explained how the transition online in Spring 2020 was not as difficult as the Fall has been. As one faculty member described it, “The big difference that I’m seeing is I took a group of undergrads, who had talked to each other in person for however long it had been, eight weeks and we transferred that same feeling over to the Zoom so they could, they would happily chat on Zoom. In the fall, they didn’t see each other at all in person, and they are not talking to each other unless I explicitly say okay breakout rooms. There is none of that classroom buzz.”

In the midst of the unexpected challenges that have resulted from new protocols for safety, some innovative teaching ideas have come to fruition. A few of those ideas include team teaching, team-based learning, collaboration with other institutions, and faculty reexamining the course learning outcomes to focus on key learning concepts and experiences.

Team-based learning was shared as a way to connect with faculty, provide students with a content expert, but also to help reduce workload burdens on one another. “I used team-based learning, a sort of modified, but I really struggled with whether or not I was going to be able to pull it off this semester, and I almost let it go. But then I was like, it’s too important. It’s too important to not try to do it. And so, I have managed to work it out. I know that a lot of my students are, have said things like my team in [course] are the only people outside of my roommate that I talk to like, and I didn’t want to do teams when you first told us we were going to like meet with strangers, I was like, I don’t like this professor and now I’m like oh my gosh I have someone to talk to, other than my roommate.”

Team teaching with other faculty within a program was another strategy used in Fall 2020.

“I had two [courses] that I hadn't taught before. One was a capstone [discipline] course. Um, but the saving grace, there was two other professors who have taught the course in the past were the team teachers. So, we took our three sections, and we combine them into one kind of and we each took a section of the course. So, one instructor took the first third, the other took the middle third and I took the last third and we each took the areas that we felt most comfortable with. I'm most comfortable with cases. So, I did the case stuff. Somebody else did the simulation and somebody else to the text and the three of us cooperated together really well. They were awesome. I thank God for them. They were great. They taught me what they do. So now if I have to do the course again in the future, you know, I've got that background I saw how they did things; they saw how I did things we, you know, the students had three times the people, three times the brains.”

Collaborations across institutions were also explored to ensure that students could be provided with an optimal learning experience. A description of this is mentioned below:

And we could see that coming for the fall semester with our graduate degree program and [discipline]. And so, over the summer. I got busy with contacting another institution, and we created a virtual [program] that runs from 12 to 4:30 Monday through Thursday with faculty from two institutions students gather in a lab room on their campus pods of two to four. [We] Connect in Zoom with students from the other campus. They act out scenarios and cases for each other. We use the students there with his body doubles for physical examination items. And then have a full-time faculty person there for that 4-hour block, guiding the case problem with questions. So, we had to get creative. It pushed us to do some things that we had been reluctant, I don't want to say reluctant, but slow in terms of adopting around [program] simulation. And when I talk with my colleagues, I think we all felt like we had to become more precise in our teaching because we were doing things in compacted ways or sometimes extending face-to-face blocks to have separate pods based upon room capacity, it still was less time for the student in the lab class. Though, it was more hours for the faculty, but we had to say this is what matters the most in the curriculum in the skills in the behaviors in the knowledge which takes away some of you know the fluff maybe that that that gets in which can be positive and negative, but we had to refine our teaching and we had to be innovative, and part of that the negative side was also bearing the load of those new innovations on the fly.

Overall, faculty felt that being flexible and reexamining learning outcomes was crucial to their success over fall semester. “Helping them adjust to online and them accepting quite, quite a few late assignments. Like, that's been the theme. It's like, is it late? That's great. No problem. We'll take it.” Another shared a conversation that they had with students, “We're going to make the best of it, but the way we're going to make the best of it is by being patient with one another, by being flexible with our expectations, and not pretend that this is normal.”

Institutional Support

The faculty participants expressed a desire for institutional support in the following areas: setting clear expectations for learning and teaching and support for faculty wellbeing.

Clear expectations for learning and teaching

Faculty explained that they needed and wanted consistent messaging and communication (or knowledge of this communication) for what it means to teach and learn in a FlexSync environment. There was concern that with faculty each setting their own expectations and course policies, messages were not consistent nor clear. Many stated sentiments similar to this faculty member, “I would like to see more clear communication from the administration about particularly to students about what FlexSync is and how they can learn in that environment and what the expectations are. I have made policies in class that I

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think are compassionate, I think. I would like to hear from students, what, our students get and maybe they are. But I don't know what our students are getting in emails from administration.” Another concern raised was about expectations for engagement and attendance. As many mentioned, “Students just stopped showing up in person.” This was a persistent challenge.

Another concern raised by faculty were policies around creating ideal teaching and learning environments. To establish these policies, faculty wanted to be included in conversations about a framework to design these ideal learning environments. Those conversations need to address class sizes, “I would say class size needs to be intentional not just whatever room; however, many people would fit in the room, that's how it's determined. I don't think that's a pedagogically sound way to determine class size, this is a unique type of way of teaching. I think also having some specific, you know, in places that had this type of model prior to our emergency reasons for using them, faculty would have specific training on how to do this effectively.”

Faculty also mentioned that they were getting mixed messages from leadership about how to determine whether to teach FlexSync or online or some other modality. “I think that the messaging from our Department Chair which was theoretically from our Dean was the 75% of classes in your program need to be FlexSync and 25% need to be online. So, I don't think we really had a choice. And you can apply for an exception or whatever, but I don't have tenure. I am not going to be you know out there rattling anyone's cage.”

A tenured faculty member shared a similar thought based on observations in their College and Department, “I do not feel good for junior faculty at this point in time, like we are putting them through hell.” Another shared a similar experience:

“Our Dean in meetings as use the word courage and courageous to describe those who are teaching FlexSync. It has repeatedly touted that you know the courage of those who are teaching FlexSync, which of course then makes those of us who are choosing not to enter the classroom. You know, it just seems it's an odd thing. And I'm sure it was not intentional thing, but it has certainly hit me wrong, but you know that we're saying that as a courageous thing. It's putting that pressure on the person who doesn't have tenure, you know, and a new faculty member was trying to you know get, well if he wants points with the Dean. This is what it can mean that's, that's what it felt like to me if you want points as well.”

Academic integrity was another was also mentioned during conversations about setting learning expectations for students. As one participant stated, “They suddenly feel much more confident cheating online because look there on the internet, right.” Others mentioned this as well. “Exams are not working for me, and I had the worst experience with my [exams]. I teach a prerequisite course for program admission, which I will be teaching now in the spring. And there is so much stuff online. I can come up with the most unique problem. But if they are just finding something a similar thing and following or having someone sell it for them online, on Chegg.”

Support for mental health and wellbeing

“I think first off from administration or top-down perspective we need to see compassion and understanding.” Many faculty wanted messaging and actions that acknowledged the challenges that faculty were facing and felt that they were not receiving this communication.

Faculty felt it was important that campus leadership heard their experiences some of which can be summarized as, “I'm reluctant to say burden but it's really kind of what it is. And it's made, the nature, the day-to-day experience of teaching really different and far less regarding with the uphill challenge.”

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Another story shared about a personal teaching experience as it related to the burden of planning a course was as follows:

“I didn’t have a FlexSync room, but I have students who want to be in class and the rest are on Zoom. I feel like I have three audiences. I have in-class which initially when I asked, 39 said they wanted to be in a class of 47. I did three rotations. I have 14 spots in the room. Nobody was coming, not nobody but it was many less than what they said they would do. I survey again throughout the semester at the end I had 13 who said they would want to physically be in the class. Only 5 come and I don’t need to deal with the logistics of that. And I have Zoom-engaged and Zoom-not-engaged audiences.”

Similarly, another person shared:

“It's making me not as excited, It's making me feel like it doesn't even matter what I'm doing and that is a hard pill to swallow because I've really, like normal time [faculty name] like believes that teaching is a really like one of the most important jobs in the world and to feel like what I'm doing, doesn't actually matter at all is, it's hard to sit with that and it's sure hard to like get up and be excited about teaching you know, like all the good stuff that comes from teaching isn't there right now and that's the hardest for me because it's zapped my joy and my motivation and I don't have a solution for that either.”

Mental health and wellbeing were also mentioned by several participants, “To be 100% honest I have struggled with emotional health for these last six months. I had anxiety, not sleeping. Not just because of, you know, teaching me there. You know, there's family issues, there's, you know, elections. There's social justice, there's, you know, there's the whole gamut. It's like, everything gets just gets to be too much sometimes.”

Conclusion

Faculty shared their experiences of teaching during Fall 2020. These experiences provide some suggestions for changes and resources that may be considered for development to support both faculty and students in this learning environment. Some specific recommendations to consider include:

- Connecting with faculty to make technology adjustments in the classroom to meet pedagogical needs
- Providing support for students on strategies to be successful in an online and FlexSync learning environment
- Beginning conversations to establish expectations for teaching and learning for a consistent experience
- Examining ways to build compassion and wellbeing into University practices