The Challenges of Emergency Online Instruction at a Small HBCU

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In Spring 2020, South Carolina State University, like most institutions of higher learning across the United States, faced a sudden transition to remote instruction due to the global pandemic, a transformation that affected instruction methods throughout 2020-2021. This paper discusses how the Department of English and Communications (EAC) at SC State addressed this abrupt paradigm shift and what lessons were learned. The sudden switch to remote teaching methods imposed an acceleration of group dynamics in a department most comfortable with the Kurt Lewin Model of Change. Nevertheless, the department faculty evolved into a unit with a greater understanding of their abilities and of student needs.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching, HBCU, COVID-19, Kurt Lewin, faculty development, student needs

In Spring 2020, the COVID Pandemic abruptly forced many institutes of higher learning to adopt remote instruction. While some colleges and universities had several resources readily available to ease the transition for faculty, other institutes experienced greater challenges. This article explores the experiences of the Department of English and Communications at South Carolina State University, a small Historically Black University, during this period of swift transition. Despite the challenges, the department faculty emerged with stronger teaching skills and a greater understanding of student needs.

A land-grant institution founded in 1896 as an alternative for African Americans, who were not allowed admission to the University of South Carolina (Student Affairs and Academic Support, 2012), SC State is the state's only public four-year Historically Black College or University (HBCU). At the height of the pandemic in 2020, there were 2339 students, 93% of whom identified as African American (IPEDS, 2020). As is true for other rural institutions (Orphan and McClure 2019), SC State is pivotal in providing educational access to the local and state population, including rural communities. In 2020, for example, 85% of our students were in-state (IPEDS, 2020). Our students also rely heavily on financial aid to afford their education: from 2019-2020, 98% received financial aid, with 81% receiving Pell Grants (IPEDS, 2020).

The above student picture is just as true for the students we see in EAC. Our department offers degrees in English (with concentrations in English and English Education) and Communications (with concentrations in Journalism and Broadcasting), and in Spring and Fall 2020, we had twenty English majors and seventy-seven Communications majors (Institutional Research, 2021). EAC is also a service department that houses several general education courses: freshman composition, world literature, and speech. Thus, the department sees almost every student on campus. In Spring 2020, EAC had twenty-four faculty - - six adjuncts, six instructors, and twelve tenured or tenure-track professors - - who were abruptly forced to reevaluate teaching methods honed over several years and, in rapid succession, apply the new teaching model.

As Chair of EAC, I was not initially prepared for how chaotic this transformation process would be, despite the formula I embraced. Kurt Lewin's Model of Change has three basic levels for efficient transformation: Unfreeze, Moving, and (Re)Freeze (Aziz, et al., 2017; Hussain, et al., 2016; Levasseur, 2001). While useful for understanding the process of change, this simplified breakdown of Lewin's work does not acknowledge the complexities of each individual case, where members of an organization may be at different stages (Hussain et al., 2016). Forced into reactive, rather than proactive, change, our faculty varied in their resistance, and there was not enough time to "melt" or "unfreeze" all resistance before implementing change. Transparency, knowledge sharing, and faculty involvement were key to our transformation (Hussain, et al., 2016; Levasseur, 2001).

For years, SC State has embraced online instruction, but, like other HBCUs, we lagged behind PWIs. Due to a lack of funding and concern that online instruction adversely affects the personal approach HBCUs pride themselves on, only about one-third of all HBCUs offered online programs in 2019 (Smith, et al., 2020). We were one of the third, but our pre-pandemic infrastructure was severely challenged by the urgent transition to remote instruction for all students. The University's Information and Technology Services (UCITS) was inadequately staffed for this shift. SC State's Center for Online and Distance Education (CODE) also had minimal staff: in Spring 2020, there were two staff members dedicated to faculty requests, one staff member working with Student Success and Retention (SSRP), and two staff working with students directly (Burnette, 2020). EAC classroom technology was often in need of service, and campus internet was often unreliable. Finally, the comfort with teaching technology varied: of the twenty-four EAC faculty, only eleven had completed the basic training in online instruction, and the other thirteen were uncomfortable with technology. The technology and support issues we already experienced naturally increased resistance.

During the COVID crisis, our department had to increase comfort with remote communication quickly. Ensuring transparency and clarity throughout this process was central. Our faculty needed quick and easy access to information about policies in relation to grading, deadlines, registration, COVID-19 protocols, and other topics. The University regularly kept faculty abreast with emails in this constantly changing environment. Due to the flood of emails we were receiving, however, any department or institutional emails were easily missed or just ignored. We needed one source that catered to the needs of EAC faculty. Sharepoint, our institution's main resource for document sharing and communication, is useful but is not intuitive for those whose comfort with technology ranges from skepticism to discomfort. Our department adopted Padlet, an online resource that allows users to post videos, documents, links, comments, and other information on a virtual wall, which I have used successfully with my students due to its simplicity. The following materials were placed on Padlet: 1) recordings of department meetings; 2) video tutorials developed based on EAC faculty requests for help with email attachments, zip drives, course copying in the LMS system, and other technology basics; 3) documents shared by the University; 4) and saved emails from EAC and the University. All faculty had a one-stop resource for information on remote instruction, news about the pandemic, links for university resources, and tutorials on basic technology skills.

Clarification of our goal for the rest of Spring 2020 was central to successfully progressing: faculty needed to understand we were expected to engage in emergency remote teaching (ERT), not vetted online instruction. This proved to be one of the biggest impediments to movement, and resistance came from faculty who were technologically proficient and those who were novices. CODE has a clearly defined process for approval of fully online asynchronous courses that incorporates the basics of Quality Matters standards and works with faculty to meet "SC State Level 1 QM Standards," which emphasize learner-focused organization, active learning, and class interaction. Developing such a course takes time and the input of many, but we had to move all instruction to a remote environment immediately. Any concerns about the quality of instruction often had to be addressed on the fly (Hodges, et al., 2020). Faculty were encouraged to create their learning modules week by week, rather than trying to revamp what was left of their courses all at once. Faculty were also encouraged to use what they already know. While using the university learning management system (LMS) was preferable, some faculty had to rely on email, texting, Zoom, and other resources due to their lack of confidence in their skills with the LMS. This situation increased the sense of the lack of effectiveness of technology in the classroom. In addition, faculty more

comfortable with remote learning technology resented having to create ERT courses without the guarantee of their being approved as official asynchronous online courses. Initially, my assurance that faculty who wanted to create more vetted online courses could use these ERT courses as solid drafts was not convincing. As part of my goal of transparency and clarity, I created nine videos with accompanying handouts that reviewed the University policy about vetted online courses vs. ERT courses, which were also uploaded to Padlet.

While I encouraged a dialogue about these concerns, COVID-19 and University policy limited choice. At this point, interactive knowledge-sharing and faculty involvement were vital. Faculty already knew where they had no choices: I wanted them to understand where they did have agency. With repeated encouragement, faculty began to use the Padlet site more actively, posting teaching tips, articles on the pandemic, pedagogical resources, or comments. The few faculty who did not add to the Padlet at least were benefiting from the knowledge shared by their colleagues. Regular remote department meetings continued, with postings of the videos, minutes, and agendas on the EAC ERT Padlet. But we added informal and optional Friday Zoom meetings, in which faculty discussed their concerns, their triumphs, and their ideas during ERT. With the approval of all, videos of these informal meetups were also posted on our ERT Padlet for the benefit of those who could not attend. In April 2020, EAC sent out an anonymous faculty survey requesting further faculty feedback and suggestions. The faculty indicated that they were stressed and did not have enough time. They shared that some students were also overwhelmed, did not have the needed technology, were dealing with the stress of babysitting younger siblings, taking on employment during class time, or were simply not engaging with class anymore. They also shared that they were excited about learning so much and felt less frightened. Some faculty noted that those students who were engaged were doing surprisingly well. Finally, the faculty shared advice on self-care and keeping up with grading and communicating with students. Several also noted that this would be the "new normal" and that it was necessary for all of us to rethink how we assess students and to be patient with students, with each other, and with ourselves. This survey, which was shared with everyone in EAC, indicated that there was indeed some movement.

As it became clear that we would need to prepare for remote instruction in Fall 2020, faculty became more involved in planning and implementing those plans. An April survey requested ideas for creating a sense of community in virtual space for Fall 2020. Among the suggestions were a virtual meet and greet for EAC students, faculty, and staff; and a recital event for students to present poetry or prose. (Both events were very successful in Fall 2020.) EAC also partnered with CODE for intensive remote course development training in Summer 2020. Money was not available for stipends, so participation was optional. But EAC and CODE emphasized that participation could make Fall 2020 easier, as faculty would have three modules ready after they completed the workshops. Those who did not yet feel confident enough with our LMS to work on their own were given the option of partnering with somebody else. Sixteen faculty registered, with two other faculty choosing to partner with their more confident colleagues. The optional Friday Zoom meetings continued throughout the summer as well. Another anonymous survey in July 2020 focused on faculty confidence in EAC's preparation for remote instruction in Fall 2020. Faculty expressed continued concerns about students in terms of access to necessary technology and engagement. Many also urged that everyone be conscious of what students are facing during the pandemic. Several expressed a desire for more technology workshops after noting that they were glad they took the online teaching certificate and summer online course development workshops. One person stressed the importance of "a growth mindset," in which we accept that "the transition to virtual teaching is a process" requiring patience. Of the twelve faculty who responded to this summer survey, eleven indicated that they felt ready for remote teaching in Fall 2020.

Throughout this process, I learned about my blind spots as a department leader. I initially underestimated the disconnect between EAC faculty perceptions of students and the reality of what our students were facing during this crisis. I remember sitting in an administrators' meeting about ERT prep during which somebody insisted that students could simply use their cell phones to complete all of their work. In fact, our LMS is not fully compatible with cell phones, students may have limited phone plans, and not all students necessarily have unlimited access to cell phones. Contacted by thirty-one students

needing to borrow laptops, SSRP conducted a survey in March 2020 to determine student readiness and need. Of the 747 students who responded, 155 had no access to a computer, 69 reported they had limited access to a computer, and 169 reported that they had no internet access (SSRP 2020). Given the technological divide that exists between rural and urban areas and between predominantly white communities and students of color, it is no surprise that our students struggled with access (Ovide, 2020; Vogels 2021; Spievack & Gallagher, 2020; Sande, 2021). Our students faced other hurdles to a successful semester in Spring 2020: our majors often reported that they had to assist younger siblings with schoolwork, babysit, or take on jobs after a family provider was laid off. As the semester progressed, I realized that many faculty were assuming that, aside from having to learn the technology, they could manage classes as before. This created frustration for both students and faculty when, for instance, a teacher required cameras to be on for a class meeting or when students arrived late to class or even missed class. Poor bandwidth or financial need may have been affecting those students, but some faculty only saw students who were using the COVID crisis as an excuse to take a break. A comment from an otherwise engaged and enthusiastic instructor on the April 2020 survey where they expressed concern that students don't understand that "with extra time on their hand, a fantastic opportunity for intellectual growth has presented itself" encapsulates this disconnect. The results of the SSRP survey were shared right away with EAC faculty. Information about how the University was addressing student concerns was also shared. But I did not take into account that some of the faculty would not immediately intuit what some of those student concerns entailed. I should have ensured that all of our students and all of our faculty were meeting at times to discuss and work through these problems together.

More encouragingly, I also underestimated the EAC faculty's willingness to progress. The Fall 2021 hiring of new CODE personnel and purchasing of new classroom technology no doubt boosted morale. However, the current mindset of the EAC faculty would still have been vastly different from the pre-pandemic mindset. There is a better appreciation of CODE's QM policy, with several faculty currently revising or creating courses they plan to have vetted for online instruction. More faculty are using technology, even in traditional courses. A survey sent out in November 2021 asked EAC faculty for ideas about preparing for Spring 2022. Everyone who responded requested more technology workshops. One faculty member suggested that our department develop a stronger virtual media presence. One respondent could not wait for the EAC composition computer classroom in development to open, and one suggested we develop at least one online certificate program. All EAC faculty have now completed at least the two of theonline teaching certificate courses. Technology skills increased in the department, but, more importantly, our faculty are now more creative problem solvers. When the University's system was hacked in Fall 2021, for example, our faculty were able to face this issue with patience and flexibility. But that is a story for another day.

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