Personal Evaluation

Teaching Online:

I started teaching at Edmonds College the quarter after the pandemic started. I was initially scheduled to interview in person but at the last minute, even my interview was moved online. Because of this, my time at Edmonds has been full of new experiences and challenges. Although I have had some classes that have not gone as smoothly as I have wished, I have reflected on why that was and made changes to avoid those issues in the future.

I taught an asynchronous online course summer quarter before I officially started. That was the first time I had ever taught online and the first time I had ever taught asynchronously. It was a very unsatisfying course. When you are in a classroom, or even talking to students online, you form a connection. This helps the students feel more comfortable asking you questions and interacting with you generally. It also helps keep you motivated and helps improve your ability to adjust your schedule and curriculum to your current group of students. However, it was extremely hard to make these connections asynchronously as, even at the end of the quarter, I hardly knew the students.

Since then, I have made sure to always teach my online classes synchronously. This gives me a chance to interact with the students, answer their questions and see where they are struggling in real time. This allows me to adjust better – give them more practice where they need it and focus less on what seems easy to them.

Talking to students tends to feel more awkward online as they almost always all keep their cameras off. At first, I found it extremely off putting to be talking to a screen filled with names. It was harder to sense confusion as well. However, with practice I have learned to look out for the subtle signals of confusion without the help of expressions or body language.

I have also discovered, as my time teaching online has progressed, some benefits. One of the nicest is the ability for a student to send a question privately to the instructor in the Zoom chat. This allows students who may feel embarrassed admitting they are confused in front of their peers ask their questions anonymously. Many students start out asking questions this way and then, as the quarter progresses and they feel more comfortable with their classmates, transition to asking publicly.

Getting students to talk and collaborate online requires the right tools. When I started out online I used some of the same tools I used in the classroom – tools where only one person could type at a time. Throughout the quarters I have experimented with online collaboration tools that allow multiple students to edit the same file online at the same time – tools like Google Docs but for coding. I have had mixed success with this. Many of the tools that exist are buggy and so frustrating to use. Others cost a lot or lack significant functionality. Therefore, this is a work in progress.

Adjusting to Edmonds:

Besides my first quarter at Edmonds being my first quarter teaching online, it was also my first quarter teaching at a community college. I had spent the last six years teaching at large public universities and working on K-12 outreach. I soon discovered the backgrounds, expectations and goals of the students at Edmonds are often very different than those of students I had taught before.

I soon discovered that, although there are some well prepared and hard working students right out of high school, there are also many students in complex situations and with barriers to completing a degree that they constantly have to struggle against. Although there are students with these issues everywhere, the proportion of the students in these situations was way higher than I had been accustomed to. Furthermore, community colleges, although they try very hard, have far fewer resources to offer these students. I have tried to help connect many students to resources on campus and in the community. However, I have no training as a social worker. It has been painful to see students struggle and not be able to access adequate help as resources have become overburdened as the pandemic has worn on.

Since most students have a different background here, even though I have taught many of the same classes, I have had to adjust my curriculum and policies to better fit their needs. One of the biggest changes I have made is adding many more graded small practice assignments. I added two little practice problems a day (with two deadlines throughout the week) and mastery quizzes. I added the problems first as I realized many students didn't know how much they actually needed to study in order to be successful. They also often didn't understand what effective studying is. These small, quick practice problems showed them a good example of effective studying and helped them get a feel for how much studying is really needed to succeed. Last year the practice problem server shut down suddenly due to some issues with the webhosting company it used. It was down for 2 – 3 weeks. During that time a few former students sent me messages asking if I knew when it would be back up and telling me they really needed these small problems for practice with the topics they were currently learning in more advanced classes.

Although these small practice problems really help many students, I started to find some students were guessing and checking their way to the right answer. This would get them points for the practice question but lead to them failing that question type on the exam, since you can't guess and check on exams. Therefore, I added mastery quizzes. Students have 7 attempts to get 90% or higher on each quiz. Each additional couple attempts lowers their score. This has motivated many students to realize they don't understand and to figure out how to do the problems without guessing and checking. I find this most helps the students who tend to struggle in the class and are on the lower end of the grading curve.

Unfortunately, these quizzes disadvantage some other students. I have had several students who get bad test anxiety or find it difficult to complete the quizzes for other reasons. These students tend to have already found their own method of learning and practicing the material which works for them. I didn't want to punish these students for having their own system and after a couple quarters I realized that is what I was doing. I therefore added a line to the syllabus stating that if a student's score on an exam question was higher than their score on the quiz for that type of question I would give them the test question grade for the quiz. This way they can study the way that is most useful for them without worrying about their grade.

Advising:

Helping students figure out what classes they need is a lot trickier at Edmonds than at universities. At universities there is generally one set of requirements to graduate. However, since our students are mostly attempting to transfer, they need to meet the requirements of all schools they are interested in applying to transfer to. Each school has its own requirements, they often even differ between campuses of the same school. This is a maze of information to sort through.

In the past it has seemed that many students were trying to figure this out for themselves or with the help of general college advising. Sometimes, unfortunately, this has ended up with them not taking all the courses they need. I have been putting a lot of time and effort into meeting with

students and advisors to help clarify the requirements. I have also been working on creating a tool to make this information easier to understand and less overwhelming.

Overall:

Throughout my time here at Edmonds, I have had many new experiences and experimented with the most effective way to overcome new challenges. I may not have all the answers or always get everything right the first time, but then again, nobody can. The important thing is to keep trying.

I constantly work to improve my teaching methods and materials. I do this both to improve their quality and to keep the courses I teach from stagnating. There is always something new to learn, both as a student and as a teacher.

I have worked hard to connect with my students whether they are remote or in person. I believe making these connections is the most important thing we can do for our students, especially during the pandemic when many students are cut off from much social interaction. I try to communicate to my students that I care about them as people and that they are part of a community that values them.