Return to remote: Are higher education instructors prepared for the future in a post-COVID world?

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Abstract

This reflection and analysis discusses the current 2024 "return to remote" action that occurred on higher education campuses. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, research has shown that there were significant gaps in higher education's emergency remote teaching (ERT) preparedness. Despite adaptations during and after the pandemic, there are still questions about whether or not higher education instructors are prepared for the future in a post-COVID world. The authors discuss current ERT readiness as well as future needs of higher education institutions. In comparing current situations with the ERT switch that occurred in 2020, the reflection discusses issues such as faculty training and professional development, pedagogical shifts, and institutional policies. This reflection calls for enhanced training and professional development needs, a paradigm shift in teaching methodologies, and institutional support and policies to ensure educational continuity in future crises.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching (ERT), instructional continuity plans (ICP), strategic planning, return to remote

> What was normal for some has never been equitable for all. As educators, we suggest a reframing that speaks to that truth. We can use our power to reshape learning conditions and to highlight the realities of students who are oppressed by the norm (Ansuini et al., 2022, p. 48).

In April 2024, after a wave of on-campus protests, Columbia University announced that it would hold classes remotely for the remainder of the Spring 2024 semester (Taylor & Closson, 2024). Following this "return to remote" action, other higher education institutions across the country copied this trend and held classes in a remote or hybrid fashion in order to keep all individuals safe during this time period of unrest.

As current higher education instructors, we reacted to this switch with various emotions. Immediately, it prompted us to remember the March 2020 transition to emergency remote teaching (ERT) that we personally experienced (Hodges et al., 2020). It also served as a reminder that emergencies can take many forms and occur at any moment. In 2020, at least 84% of U.S. students in higher education had some or all their courses switched to remote delivery due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During that ERT experience, critical gaps were identified in professional development, teaching methodologies, as well as institutional support and technology-based policies (National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in Moore & Hodges, 2023).

We believe that future work in higher education can focus on developing a theoretical framework for ERT to facilitate smoother transitions (Moore & Hodges, 2023). Hofer et al. (2024) agreed and stated that "sustained transformation requires intentional planning and reflection" (p. 71). Despite adapting to a new form of education since the ERT switch of 2020, there seems to be a gap in preparedness for planning for and managing emergency-planned instruction in a post-COVID world. Hence, we are confident that a change regarding emergency preparedness must occur for the better of the higher education landscape.

Current Research Findings

Many instructors were ill-equipped for ERT in 2020, lacking essential resources and skills (Gillis et al., 2024). A significant number faced challenges, such as unstable internet connections and lack of technical knowledge. Furthermore, many colleges and universities were not ready for the sudden shift to online education, with only 20% of public universities having offered online courses prior to the transition. Students and faculty experienced chaotic academic transitions as all courses had to pivot to remote learning, as they struggled to understand new course policies and structures.

In early Fall 2023, we conducted a study of higher education instructors focusing on emergency planning and ERT. While some instructors in this study viewed ERT as an opportunity for growth, others clung to their pre-COVID teaching methods. Study results indicated that almost 93% of faculty were teaching with some combination of remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 experience and need for ERT. When asked about plans for future emergency planning, one respondent explained, "I am prepared and ready with asynchronous materials and discussion forums that can run during an emergency. My students know what is expected because there is a note in my syllabus about emergency plans." Conversely, a participant stated, "I would still rather do it in person."

During our investigation, we discovered that faculty may not necessarily be trained or open to shifting their paradigms. Research has shown that digital technologies and learning management systems were essential in keeping students engaged and on track with their studies during ERT and school closures (Donham et al., 2022; Nkomo et al., 2021; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2021). Yet, are they being used effectively and consistently in the current classroom? Also, many administrative policies and institutional support levels have not been adjusted to meet current needs; in fact, some may no longer even exist.

After concluding the Fall 2023 study, we recommended increased attention to emergency preparedness planning for faculty support in higher education. Al-Naabi (2021, p. 17) suggested, "Higher education institutions should allocate resources and funding for professional development provisions during emergencies." Institutions can support faculty in time management, technology integration, professional development, and emotional well-being. Addressing these needs is crucial for ensuring high-quality instruction continuity during emergencies.

Training and Professional Development Needs

Since the initial ERT period, a lot has been learned about professional development needs. The study that we conducted in 2023 found that 56.4% of participants felt they needed help with online teaching. They mentioned wanting to get better with tools like learning management systems, creating tests that prevent cheating, and getting help from instructional designers. To help teachers prepare for emergencies, universities can offer training sessions. When COVID-19 started, teachers urgently needed training, and they still do today. Donham et al. (2022) emphasized the importance of providing strong support to enable instructors to maintain strong teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Redstone and Luo (2021, para. 3) explained, "Prior to the pandemic, if a college or university's culture had not widely promoted or supported online learning, the institution may not have been able to provide adequate opportunities for faculty professional development (PD) in online teaching." By offering training to remain updated with emerging technology trends and newer pedagogical methodologies, colleges and universities can help their faculty effectively adapt.

Paradigm Shift in Teaching Methodologies

Although some educators shifted to a new way of teaching and learning after the COVID-19 emergency, we have found that some instructors

have yearned to go back to the way it used to be. As we reflected on the ERT switch that occurred in March 2020 (Hodges et al., 2020), it was clear that educators were forced to shift their paradigms during this time; it was not a choice. After the initial ERT period, some faculty continued to use interactive virtual activities, asynchronous learning, and collaborative projects. Others still relied heavily on synchronous learning activities, using platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet. Yet, some educators returned to their previous ways of teaching.

Research has shown that a low comfort or preparation level correlates with how prepared—or unprepared—faculty were for the demands of remote teaching. According to Blake et al. (2021, p. 18), "a majority of faculty in our study, including faculty who previously taught remotely, reported feeling unprepared to transition to ERT due to a lack of training in online pedagogy and low comfort with the technology required of ERT." Watermeyer et al. (2021, p. 626) reported that 49.5% either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "I feel prepared to deliver online learning, teaching and assessment." Nevertheless, they were forced to accept the paradigm shift and taught in a way that was unconventional and uncomfortable in order to provide ongoing instruction.

In 2024, Hofer et al. conducted a study that expanded the view of faculty development focusing on formal learning experiences and faculty communities as pathways to transformative learning. We found that "the modular organization of instructors' course content, offering a range of possible teaching strategies, and providing concrete tools for faculty to use to elicit student input on their experience were all instrumental to their success in responding to students' needs and preferences in their instructional design" (Hofer et al., 2024, p. 84). In a 2022 study about building resilient communities, it was established that higher education can encourage "promising practices in pedagogy by focusing on the educator experiences that allow for meaningful academic careers and resources that help through challenges, while developing resilience in the face of academic stressors and competing pressures" (Williams et al., p. 15).

We have found that faculty want to be prepared for the next emergency. Hence, higher education institutions should provide them with the professional development resources that they need (Al-Naabi et al., 2021). We suggest professional development programs that incorporate social learning, practice-based approaches, and be contextualized to instructors' everyday practices while allowing flexibility in participation and scheduling. Additionally, institutions can establish supportive policies, provide technical assistance, allocate resources, and encourage participation in professional development to enhance effectiveness during ERT contexts. Looking ahead, academic institutions should allocate efforts toward creative instructional approaches and innovative frameworks to remain timely and effective.

Institutional Support and Policies

Another issue that we witnessed is the inconsistency of institutional support and emergency planning policies. Immediately during and following the COVID-19 emergency, most higher education institutions developed and mandated institutional-wide instructional continuity plans (Hooker, 2020). An instructional continuity plan (ICP) is a framework that outlines guidelines for maintaining education continuity during emergencies. It provides faculty with instructions on handling disruptions, including technology platforms for remote learning, communication with instructors and administrators, and campus-wide information. ICPs were helpful for keeping students and faculty informed during this time period; students knew what to expect from professors if there was a need for a change in format or delivery, and faculty knew what was expected of them in terms of communication and planning. These plans should be an industry standard going forward in all areas of higher education.

We are certain that there will be another emergency (e.g., hurricane, snowstorm, protest, pandemic); and faculty should be ready to adapt immediately. "In the case of a prolonged global pandemic or crisis, the emergence of remote teaching will need to evolve beyond just ERT into

what we suggest can be more accurately characterized as Sustained Remote Teaching (SRT)" (Stewart et al., 2022, p. 188). Independent study can be used for training purposes, but instructors "require institutional support, and specific training may go a long way to aid their professional development" (Hartle & Andreolli, 2023, p. 264). To ensure readiness for future remote teaching situations, we believe that universities should develop short- and long-term strategic plans that establish consistent technology-based remote learning protocols and policies.

Conclusion

The recent "return to remote" action during the Spring 2024 campus protests highlighted that many universities may be unprepared for emergencies, similar to the lack of preparedness observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Ansuini et al. (2022, p. 48) suggested, it is important to "reimagine access based on what we learned during the radical shift to remote and virtual teaching." Given the current educational climate, we believe it is essential for higher education institutions to prioritize emergency planning. This includes dedicating time and resources to training and professional development, promoting effective teaching methods, and ensuring that technology-based plans and policies are up-to-date. By taking these steps, our feeling is that colleges and universities will be better positioned to manage future crises while also enhancing the overall quality of education. Investing in such preparation will help ensure that institutions can maintain continuity in education, regardless of the challenges that may arise.

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