An active learning leader leans into online teaching

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John Pollard says he's starting to get the hang of teaching his honors General Chemistry II class using Zoom, which is good, considering the guest who dropped by his virtual classroom last week.

"I do love acid-based chemistry," President Robert C. Robbins told the more than 80 students in the class. "Almost everything can be explained through chemistry."

Robbins, who earned a Bachelor of Science in chemistry from Millsaps College in Mississippi, also offered some words of encouragement.

"I know how difficult this has been and I miss seeing everyone on campus," he said. "I know this is a little bit of a curveball that was thrown to all of you, but just try to grind it out until the end of the term. My hope is that we'll all be back together in the fall and experiencing each other live and in person."

The transition to online learning has been a curveball for some faculty members as well, especially those who, like Pollard, had not previously used Zoom to teach. In fact, Pollard says his only experience was about 10 years ago when he "dabbled" in online instruction while helping design an online course.

The fact that he has embraced the transition is no surprise. Pollard has been at the forefront of implementing active learning strategies. In 2014, he helped lead an effort to redesign foundational chemistry courses [1], putting a focus on group-based discussions, problem-solving activities and other forms of active engagement.

"One of the distinct challenges of moving so quickly to online is that many of us on campus have been champions and practitioners of active-learning strategies," Pollard said. "So, for me, the challenge has been how can I engage my students in meaningful ways and have them engage in group work in this new platform."

Despite his inexperience with the Zoom platform, Pollard — associate dean for academic affairs and curricular innovation for the Honors College and associate professor of practice — decided to "lean straight into it." He went to a workshop held by the Office of Instruction and Assessment [2], then turned to YouTube to find videos on how to use the platform effectively. Pollard shared his takeaways with Lo Que Pasa.

Set the Stage
As a hobbyist musician since childhood, Pollard prefers to work in a studio setting. He has a video camera linked to his computer that allows him to display a whiteboard as well as himself in a box in the corner of the Zoom screen, with an extra computer available for internet searches.

Instructors can get away with a less elaborate setup, Pollard says. Zoom has its own whiteboard feature, and a smartphone can fill the need for internet searches and other uses.

**Use the Tools at Your Disposal**

Pollard says he has never relied on straight lecturing in his classes, and Zoom's features ensure that he doesn't have to online either. He uses the breakout room function to allow students to collaborate on problems and polling to get immediate feedback on a question.

One of the most useful tools, he says, is the chat function. In addition to allowing students to ask him questions, it has resulted in something he didn't originally consider: students asking and answering questions among themselves in real time throughout the class.

**Keep Students at the Center**

Pollard says communication with his students about his goals and their concerns has been key during the transition. Over spring break, he held an optional practice class with students to try out the tools and asked them for their feedback afterward.

He says he’s glad the University is allowing students to take courses on a pass/fail basis, because he wants the focus to remain on learning.

"This is not the time for us to be dropping the hammer on grading," Pollard said. "This is the time for us to be saying, 'Let's learn together. Let's commit to that.'"

Pollard says students can have trouble focusing in an online environment, so he tries to give them a structured routine. He has also increased office hours and is offering them virtually, and he regularly checks in with students both individually and in small groups to offer help or any kind of nonacademic support ? even if they just need to talk to someone.

**Looking Forward**

When the pandemic passes and students are back in classrooms, Pollard believes the techniques for engaging students that he is learning now will continue to inform his approach to teaching.

Like Pollard, Melody Buckner, associate vice provost of digital learning initiatives and online education, sees the value in both in-person and online instruction. In the March 27 edition of the "Futures in Digital Learning" podcast produced by the Digital Learning office, Buckner likens the differences between in-class and online teaching to an actor performing live in a theater versus an actor performing in a movie or television show. Both settings can help deliver a strong message, she says, as long as the "players" are willing to adapt to each medium's strengths.
Her advice to faculty members who are navigating the transition to online teaching is to treat the situation with the compassion it requires.

"We need to be kind. We need to be flexible. We need to understand that we're doing the best we can with the situation that's been given to us. Please keep your students in mind."

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/active-learning-leader-leans-online-teaching

Links
[2] https://oia.arizona.edu/