Establishing the "New Normal" Online Classroom: Students Shifting Expectations about Online Learning Since COVID-19

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Problem Statement

- Up until Spring 2020, university students registered for courses based on their learning and modality preferences. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, options became more limited and all students, regardless of preference, moved online.
- As we return to face-to-face instruction, faculty must consider how this year online has impacted student expectations.

What We Know

- The flexibility and asynchronous attendance requirements have made online learning popular with students trying to balance education, career, research, and family obligations.
- Registration options allow students to exert control. This increased autonomy may lead to greater success and satisfaction (Drea, 2021).
- Students who select online courses understand that learning will be more self-paced, and most interactions asynchronous.
- The COVID-19 pandemic forced many students and faculty who prefer face-to-face instruction to move online and learn new technologies (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.).
- Not all faculty teaching online last year had been trained in best practices which suggest maximizing interaction (student-faculty, student-content, and student-student) and active learning while maintaining flexibility. Adapting these practices has led to classes that are reading heavy, include discussions, and, more recently, narrated PowerPoint presentations, videos (e.g., YouTube), and online learning games (Hanson, 2021).
- *Question:* As face-to-face classes resume, should we believe that student expectations have returned to what they were pre-COVID? We believe that advances in education this past year have forever changed the classroom. The question is "how?"

Questions

- Did the lack of autonomy in course modality selection influence student perceptions of that class?
- How do students perceive faculty response to moving to the online classroom?
- What do students want their future classes to look like?

Method

Students enrolled in a large online undergraduate class (Social Psychology; SOP 3004) were surveyed in Spring 2020, Summer 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 about:
- Their time spent engaged in the course
- Perceptions of changes in faculty course demands
- And changes in course design preferences from before, during, and projections after the pandemic.

Student Perceptions

- *Positive:* Faculty are more flexible.
- *Neutral:* Split on changes in difficulty. No change in perception over time (χ^2 (2, N = 154) = 1.17, p = .557).
- *Negative:* Expectations changed and workload increased.

Table 1: Frequency Counts

	n	%
Have faculty expectations changed since COVID-19		
Definitely yes/yes	254	77
Definitely no/no	23	7
Maybe	52	16
Changes in difficulty since COVID-19		
More difficult	70	15
Less difficult	84	18
No opinion	312	67
Changes in course workload		
Increased workload	111	24
Decreased workload	61	13
No opinion	294	63
Flexibility with due dates		
Increased flexibility	116	25
Decreased flexibility	39	8
No opinion	311	67

Expectations

- Those who thought the workload was more reasonable were more likely to agree that expectations have changed, the class was easy, and admitted to spending less time in class/week.
- Those who felt online courses improved this year were more likely to endorse the use of recorded lectures in online courses and having synchronous (online) course meetings.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Reasonableness of workload	329	2.02	1.05	—							
2. Have Faculty expectations changed?	329	1.92	0.99	.24**	—						
3. Should there be synchronous components?	380	2.95	1.30	-.04	-.03	—					
4. Should there be recorded lectures?	329	1.53	0.81	-.00	.06	.22**	—				
5. Have online classes improved?	329	2.38	0.94	.05	.09	.04	.12**	—			
6. How challenging did you find the class?	459	2.82	0.96	-.15**	-.00	-.05	-.04	.02	-.04	—	
7. How many hours do you devote to the course/week?	459	5.21	3.97	-.11**	1.05+	0.7	.08	-.17	-.12	-.07	—

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level
+Correlation significant at the .10 level

Semester x Registration Plan

- Should online classes have virtual components?
  - $ME_{Semester}$: Fall 2020 students were most likely to endorse this ($F(3, 372)$ = 2.37, p=.071).
  - $ME_{Registration\ Plan}$: $F(1, 372)$ = 0.08, p=.781
  - *Interaction:* Those who planned on taking classes online in Summer 2021 felt stronger about adding virtual components than in other semester. Those who were not planning to take SOP 3004 online endorsed this item more in Fall and Spring than either Summer semester.

Do you like the idea of a virtual component to online classes? (1 (definitely yes) to 5 (definitely no))
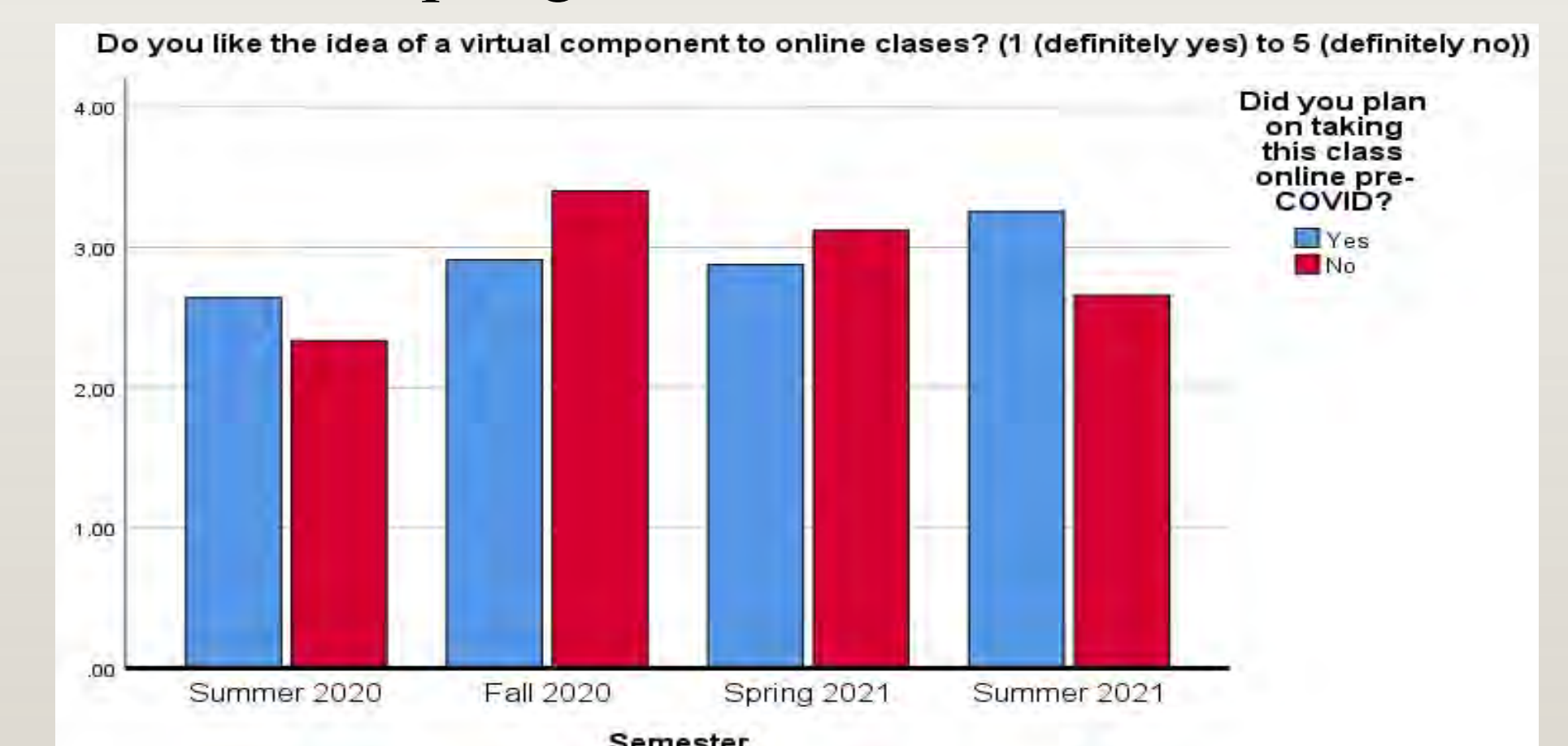
Concluding Thoughts

- Online is no longer synonymous with asynchronous learning.
- Students want the best of both worlds.
- Students who prefer in person learning are fatigued with Zoom meetings while those preferring online enjoy the synchronous option.