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Online Small Groups and Student-Faculty Connections

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Teaching Practice & the Need it Addresses

When classes moved online to protect community health, many students felt disconnected from their teachers and peers. To address this lost sense of connection, I restructured a live remote class. Rather than teaching this 400-level class live via WebEx with some breakouts for active learning assignments, I pre-recorded the lectures for each week and asked the students to watch these on their own time. I assigned the students to small (5-6 person) discussion groups and broke out our assigned class meeting times into multiple small group meetings. We meet in these small groups every week to discuss questions prepared by the students. This smaller group format facilitates better connections among students and between the students and myself.

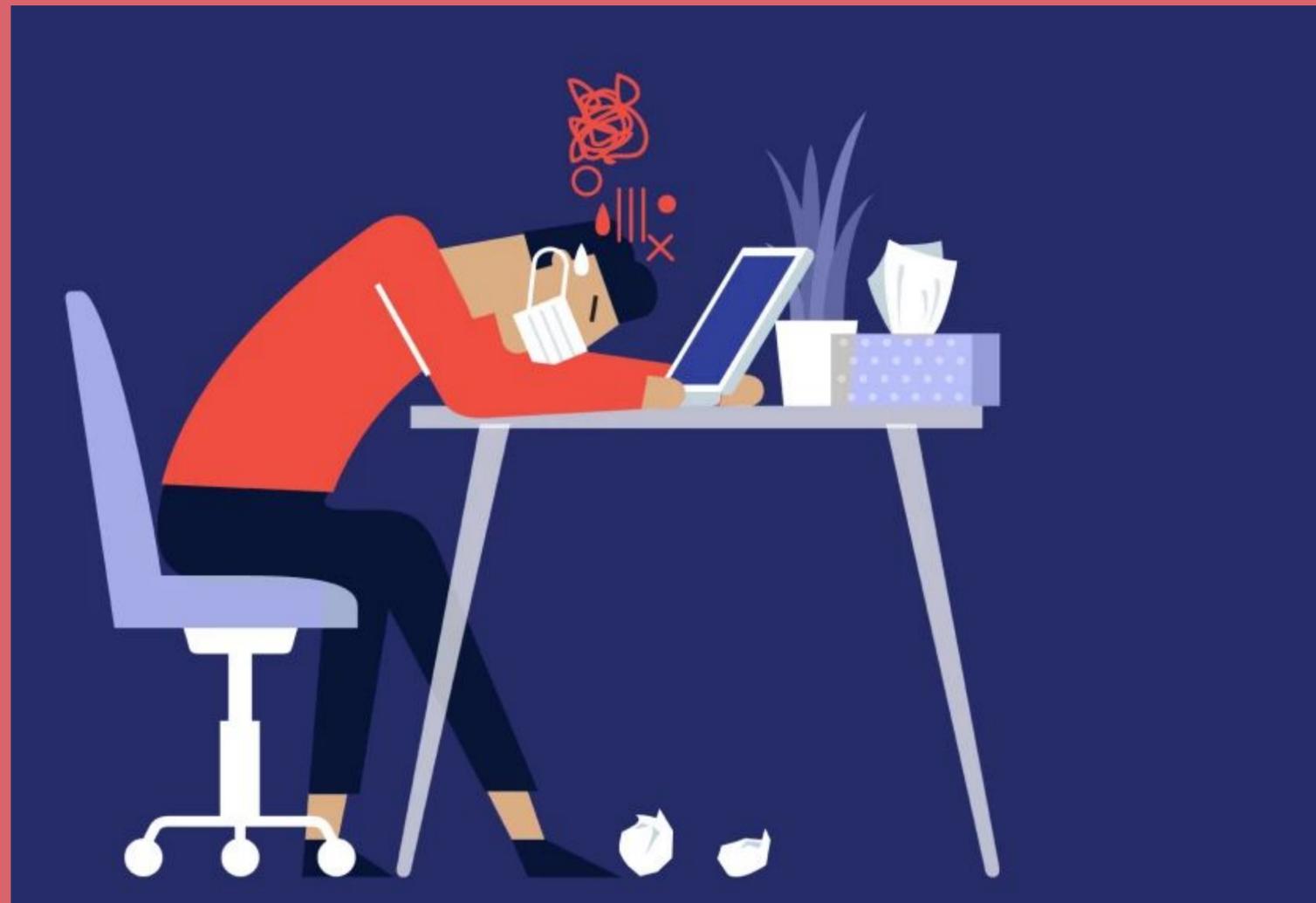
How Others Can Adopt This Practice

To adopt this practice, instructors should consider creating a preparation assignment for each meeting. In this class, students were typically expected to have read 2 textbook chapters before each meeting. For each chapter, students submitted a “3-2-1” summary with 3 main ideas from the reading, 2 important details, and 1 question they wanted to discuss with their colleagues. When the class met, students selected a question to ask and a colleague who should respond.

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Evidence it Benefits Students

I sent out a brief survey 4 weeks into the Fall 21 semester. 18 of 29 students completed the anonymous survey. 17 of the 18 indicated that they felt their learning experience in this class was “good” or “great” (4 or 5 on a 5 point Likert scale) compared to other remote synchronous classes. Surprisingly, 15 of the 18 participants responded that their learning experience in this class was “good” or “great” compared to traditional live classes. Students commented that this “feels like a graduate level class” and “I feel like I’m actually learning!!”

Resources & Where to Find Them

Flipped classrooms

- [Resources from Michigan State](#)
- [Impact of a flipped classroom](#)

3-2-1 reading summaries

- [Sample of a summary](#)
- These summaries were submitted as low stakes WebCampus assignments (5 points), 1 for each chapter, 2 chapters per week

Logistics

- Class of 30 students was divided into 5 groups
- Groups met for 15 minutes each at a consistent time each week
- Larger classes may need to schedule meetings during both class sessions
- More students per group is not recommended if all students are expected to speak
- Other instructors’ ability may be constrained by class size

Additional Information

