

Office Hours for Faculty - A Means to Increase Remote Teaching Capabilities

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Diana M. Thomas received her Ph.D. from the Georgia Institute of Technology in 1996. She then completed a National Research Council funded post-doctoral fellowship at the United States Military Academy and the Army Research Laboratory. In 2000, she joined the faculty of the Montclair State University where she was a professor of mathematics for 17 years. She also served as the director of the Montclair State University Center for Quantitative Obesity Research. Dr. Thomas is currently a professor of mathematical sciences at the United States Military Academy at West Point. She holds joint research appointments at the Columbia University New York Obesity Research Center and the Pennington Biomedical Research Center and serves on the editorial board for the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, PloS One, and Nutrition and Diabetes. She has published over 140 peer-reviewed articles in exercise, fitness, nutrition, and body weight regulation relying on diverse mathematical methods ranging from differential equations to machine learning. Some of the questions she is investigating are "Why do individuals not lose weight during exercise?", "How can we objectively monitor diet in humans?", and "Does body shape and posture predict military injury?" Her work has been covered by the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Fitness Magazine, Good Housekeeping, CBS News, and ABC News. Dr. Thomas holds the 2012 Mathematical Association of American of NJ Distinguished Teaching Award and the 2015 Obesity Society George Bray Founder's Award.

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Background: There are well-established yet non-intuitive best practices for remote teaching and learning. Faculty are generally exposed to these best practices through university teaching centers of excellence sponsored workshops. Unfortunately, these workshops are not mandatory and faculty tend to rely upon their immediate peers for information. On the other hand, relying on immediate peers only advances knowledge that is accessible in proximity.

Methods: A new forum for best practices dissemination titled, “The Remote Teaching Office Hours for Faculty” was developed. Office Hours were held at the same time weekly on Microsoft Teams. Each session was moderated by the United States Military Academy’s Remote Teaching Dean’s Fellows and faculty could drop in at any time during the scheduled period to ask any question they had. If the Dean’s fellows did not have an immediate answer, experts would be contacted to address the question after the session in the chat box or attend the session the following week. Questions ranged from technical challenges with platforms or tablets to pedagogical questions involving course design or academic integrity in the remote environment. The Office Hours were designed with short clips of information (~3 minutes) with immediate Q&A opportunities for faculty.

Results: Attendance at Office Hours has been consistent and high with no less than 20 faculty attending a session and representation from every department across campus. Discussions were routine and faculty answered each other’s questions and shared screens to convey technical solutions. At one highly attended session, students anonymously called in to describe consumption of remote classes from their point of view. Faculty enjoyed the collegiality afforded by meeting and liked the interactive dissemination of information that differs from other traditional forms. The pedagogical conversation initiated by individual faculty through the chat window spontaneously continued throughout the week until the next Office Hours. The conversations erased disciplinary boundaries and shaped pedagogy across campus with faculty building a community of peers to advance best practices.

Conclusion: Remote faculty Office Hours is a scalable and feasible method to rapidly spread best remote teaching practices university-wide. In addition to dissemination of strong online pedagogy, office hours built a diverse faculty, staff and student support services community at a time when forming face-to-face relationships were challenging.

Introduction

With the sharp shift to remote and hybrid classes, faculty in higher education were faced with a vast set of new teaching modalities, technology and class timings. To assist faculty, with this transition, colleges began offering more workshops [1] and national discipline based organizations devoted entire conferences [2] to help train faculty. While workshops and conferences may seem attractive, they are frequently poorly attended [3]. While the specific reasons for poor attendance are unknown, several of the 24 colleges and teaching centers we interviewed as part of our Remote Teaching Working Group Report [4] for the United States

Military Academy (USMA), indicated that faculty preferred to obtain information from their peers.

We hypothesized several reasons for poor faculty attendance at workshops. Faculty may not be clear on the specific intent and material coverage of the workshop in relation to their personal questions. With time at a premium, faculty may not want to commit to attending a workshop to obtain a specific piece of desired information. Second, the one-directional nature of workshops, where experts disseminate information to attendees, can be easily obtained by reading websites or viewing videos. Taken together, these reasons may factor into a faculty member's decision to rely on peers instead of attending a workshop.

The reliance on immediate peers results in information being disseminated within cells. Even faculty in one department may not know of best practices or technological solutions that another group of departmental faculty have discovered. The Dean's Fellows thought carefully about how to enlarge these cells university-wide. Specifically, we grappled with the question: Is there a way to simulate peer-to-peer interactions on a larger scale?

Addressing this question as a springboard, we conceived a method to enable faculty sharing and answering of specific questions of interest. The USMA Remote Teaching Dean's Fellows established the Remote Teaching Office Hours for Faculty. Office Hours is a weekly 45-minute session hosted on Microsoft Teams. The sessions mimic the format of traditional student-faculty office hours with a weekly topic seeded by faculty questions or institutional needs. This paper describes the structure of Office Hours, some of the more popular sessions held, and the positive outcomes experienced as a result.

Methods

In Summer 2020, Dr. Chad Topaz (Williams College) began advertising "National Office Hours" on Twitter. Conducted on Zoom, Dr. Topaz would stand by online from noon to 1:00 p.m. (EST) and discuss anything that faculty wished to discuss. What ensued were rich conversations ranging from how to best support at-risk students to the latest technology to use to achieve a desired outcome. Dr. Topaz' National Office Hours were never empty and everyone who attended walked away with something new. Based on the Dr. Topaz' success, we established a similar plan at USMA. Every Wednesday, the Dean's Fellows hosted an online Office Hours for faculty on Microsoft Teams to field questions between 1615 to 1700. Independent of attendance, the purpose was to provide a place for faculty to virtually stop by to pursue knowledge enabling improvement in teaching techniques, modality integration, and pedagogy development. If no one showed up, nothing was lost. However, for faculty that showed up, they would contribute to an evolving peer-sharing learning environment which could continue to grow.

In order to set the conditions for strong faculty attendance, Office Hours were advertised at university-wide meetings, weekly flyers (see example in Appendix A), and through the remote teaching committees. The advertisement of the Office Hours stressed the key points we hypothesized as barriers for attending workshops (Table 1). The flyers highlighted that faculty could ask any question they wish and emphasized the drop in nature of Office Hours. Office

Hours were loosely structured with 3-5 minute explanations or answers to questions followed by faculty discussion.

Table 1. Differences between workshops and office hours for faculty.

Workshops	Office Hours
Provides comprehensive tutorial on one topic.	Addresses specific questions on any topic.
Planned early with structure.	Planned by the week loosely seeded by faculty requests.
Static-disseminates information from an expert to the non-expert.	Interactive with faculty across departments answering each other's questions.
Attendance by select faculty interested in a specific topic.	Attendance by a diverse group of faculty who have many interests.

Implementation

The initial Office Hours occurred on 15 July 2020 and has occurred every week. Unlike Dr. Topaz' National Office Hours, we "lightly" seeded office hours with loosely defined topics. Topics were crowd sourced from previous office hours, university-wide meetings and institutional needs. This crowd sourcing method resulted in faculty ownership of topics covered and increased perception of the potential return on investment of their time spent and knowledge obtained. Topics have included a student panel who anonymously shared their remote learning experiences and insights. Another week, faculty shared innovative examples of remote teaching that worked well. A list of topics covered appear in Table 2. All presenters were guided to limit their presentation to 3-5 minutes so faculty could remain personally engaged and participate in the discussion with most of the time allotted for questions and answers.

Table 2. Date and highlight of topics covered driven by faculty input.

Date	Topic
15 JUL 2020	HyFlex, Student Engagement
22 JUL 2020	Making Class Recordings, Instructor Points, Class Set Up
29 JUL 2020	Engagement, Low-Stakes Assessments, Staying Productive
5 AUG 2020	Online Character, Tracking At-Risk Students
12 AUG 2020	Innovative Engaging Methods to Alter Traditional Assignment and Teaching
19 AUG 2020	Microsoft Teams
26 AUG 2020	Newly Issued Technology Use, Humor to Engage Students
2 SEP 2020	Video Record using PowerPoint, Upload of Assessments
9 SEP 2020	Student Panel – What Works and What to Improve
16 SEP 2020	Demonstration of VirBELA – 3D Virtual Experience
23 SEP 2020	Student Workload Management in the Remote Environment
30 SEP 2020	Strategies to Reduce Stress for Faculty
7 OCT 2020	Large Enrollment Courses
14 OCT 2020	Faculty Showcase of Technologies Incorporated

Each session was moderated by the Remote Teaching Dean's Fellows and faculty could drop in at any time during the scheduled period to ask any question they had. If the Dean's fellows did not have an immediate answer, experts would be contacted to address the question after the session in the chat box or attend the session the following week. Questions ranged from technical challenges with platforms or tablets to pedagogical questions involving course design or academic integrity in the remote environment.

Every Remote Teaching Office Hour session had more than 20 faculty attend (maximum of 55 attended on 12 AUG 2020) with faculty represented across the entire institution coming from STEM, the Humanities and Student Support Services. Even with the large fluctuation in the number of faculty attending, the atmosphere of Office Hours enabled those with questions to place them in the chat window or raise their hand with minimal time waiting to have their question addressed. Taken together, a surprising but very pleasant outcome is the community that was developed through Remote Teaching Office Hours.

Discussion

Here, we described the implementation of the new program to disseminate remote teaching best practices across an institution. The Remote Teaching Office Hours served as a weekly drop in question and answer forum that faculty from across the university attended and used to share their insights.

Office Hours provided an essential venue to share methods to engage students whether remote, in the classroom, or under hybrid conditions. The virtual community built through Office Hours strengthened inter-departmental engagement and collaboration. In order to maximize the impact of Office Hours, we recommend the following: (1) crowd source topics so that the faculty have ownership of the programmed discussions, (2) restrict office hour guest speakers to a 3 to 5-minute presentations, and (3) similar to student-faculty office hours, provide consistent timing and location for Office Hours.

Faculty enjoyed the collegiality afforded by meeting and liked the interactive dissemination of information. The pedagogical conversation initiated by individual faculty through the Microsoft Teams chat window spontaneously continued during the week until the next Office Hours. The conversations blurred disciplinary boundaries and shaped pedagogy across campus with faculty considering everyone in the Office Hours with the same familiarity as their colleague in the office down the hall.

Due to the numerous benefits of Office Hours, this program could be retained even after the challenges presented by COVID-19 are resolved.

Conclusion

The rapid transition to different teaching modalities such as remote and hybrid teaching requires faculty training. Because of the required planning and faculty time involved, this training is difficult to solely achieve with university sponsored workshops. Our program, the Remote Teaching Office Hours, reduces the burden on faculty time and requires little administrative

planning overhead. Remote Teaching Office Hours provides a low-cost scalable method to consistently reach faculty across the institution quickly and effectively.

References

- [1] (2020, November, 1 2020). *Resources and Strategies for Teaching Online*.
- [2] (2020, November 11, 2020). *Prepare for the challenge of teaching this fall*.
- [3] K. Field. (2018, October 21, 2018) How to Draw Faculty to Workshops? Make It Like a Game *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- [4] D. M. Thomas and B. M. Wallen, "Remote Teaching Distance Education Working Group Report," United States Military Academy, West Point, NY July 3, 2020 2020.

Appendix A. Example flyer distributed to faculty advertising Remote Teaching Office Hours.

REMOTE TEACHING OFFICE HOURS

**GET YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED AND
FIND OUT WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE
DOING!**

HOW CAN I DEVELOP ASSESSMENTS THAT PROMOTE ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND INCREASE CADET LEARNING?

HOW CAN I EFFECTIVELY APPLY HYFLEX?

HOW CAN I ASSIGN INSTRUCTOR POINTS FOR REMOTE WORK?

HOW CAN I HOLD CADETS ACCOUNTABLE FOR VIEWING/READING ASYNCHRONOUS MATERIAL WITHOUT SUBSTANTIAL INSTRUCTOR BURDEN?

HOW DO I ESTABLISH GROUPS IN TEAMS OR BLACKBOARD?

HOW DO I DEVELOP IMPACTFUL ASYNCHRONOUS MATERIALS?

HOW CAN I BUILD STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN A REMOTE ENVIRONMENT?

TOPICS ARE INITIATED BY FEEDBACK FROM YOU!

OFFICE HOURS ARE SEEDED WITH TOPICS, BUT ARE OPEN AND NOT LIMITED TO THAT TOPIC

OCTOBER 5: Large Courses with Multiple Sections

**GET RESOURCES THAT
HELP ADDRESS YOUR
QUESTIONS**
We can provide you with directed resources that address your questions.

**DISCUSS YOUR
TEACHING CONCERNS**
Share your concerns with other instructors-walk away with collective ideas!

WHEN
Every Wednesday 1615-1700
Drop in anytime during session

WHERE
Microsoft Teams
CLICK [HERE](#) TO JOIN

**SEND US YOUR
QUESTIONS FOR
OFFICE HOURS**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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