

Teaching & learning in a pandemic

By Stephani Shumaker

Though many things have come to a screeching halt due to the pandemic, LSTC has made sure education is not one of them.

Eric Kyle, associate professor and director of contextual education, spearheaded the transition from in-person classes to online.

“Immediately there was initial shock of what seemed like an overnight shift to online classes,” said Kyle, whose first step was to use Reading Week for faculty small groups that would brainstorm the transition.

Kim Wagner, assistant professor of homiletics and Axel Jacob and Gerda Maria (Swanson) Carlson Chair in Homiletics, said it became more than just learning to teach online. Everything faculty had been doing had to move online as well: “faculty meetings, committee work and we just so happened to have a faculty search amid all of this. We were not only focused on creating community for students online, but creating community for faculty.”

When faculty member Brooke Petersen first learned classes would be adapted to an online platform for the 2020-2021 academic year, she recalls thinking, “We’re going to have to make this work.”

Petersen, who wears many hats, including teaching, director of MDiv and MA programs and candidacy coordinator, took advantage of a course focused on online pedagogies offered through the University of Wisconsin. The

class put the faculty learners in the position of “online student.”

“Throughout the class, I was able to learn what I thought worked and didn’t work as an online student. I was constantly thinking about how I would tweak the class that I would be teaching.”

Wagner participated in the same course and echoed Petersen: “Through being an online student I learned just how difficult sitting and staring at a screen can be. If students are required to be in Zoom for my class, I want it to be

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Brooke Petersen, LSTC faculty member

necessary, valuable and helpful.”

Showing up fully human

Faculty have been challenged to find ways of bringing a “human touch” to a virtual setting: “It’s easier to hide your emotions when you’re on a screen. I had to show up fully human to the classroom so other students could bring their full humanity as well.” She said she wanted to normalize the struggles of students, [especially those who

were] balancing new roles that aren’t conducive to online learning.

“Many students were managing online learning with children and other family members completing online learning in the same space,” Petersen said.

“You can show up however you need to show up,” she often told her classes. “If I normalize my children popping up during class, then my students feel less shame when theirs do as well,” she said.

Wagner also struggled to create a space for students to be

authentic. “During quarantine it was very lonely,” she said. “I knew how important it was to cultivate a space where students care for one another and are cared for.”

Though the pandemic has made fostering online community and relationships with students difficult, Petersen said it has allowed professors to engage students with different learning styles—styles that might not be beneficial or utilized in a classroom setting.



Brooke Petersen teaches remotely.

She has used multiple kinds of resources, such as videos, readings, discussion posts, music and podcasts. Online learning has allowed students to access material in multiple ways, she said.

Petersen believes faculty members approached this challenge with a real desire to continue to have quality teaching. This semester the IT department and Kyle are offering faculty workshops centered around online pedagogies, as well as how to better utilize Zoom.

“I feel fortunate to be a part of a faculty that both cares about our students and cares about high-quality learning,” Petersen said. “It’s a gift to do it alongside awesome folks.”

Missing discussion the most

When Kelsey Kresse learned during internship that she’d have to spend her senior year of seminary online, she felt overwhelmed at the thought of losing the discussion-based aspect of her classes.



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When confined to Zoom squares, it’s difficult to read the room, contribute to discussions, and tell when another student or professor is done talking.

“It’s difficult to watch simultaneously what my professor and their body language is saying, along with the body language and faces of my peers,” she said. “So often, the entire class will unmute themselves at once to respond, and we’re left speaking over each other.” Or, students hold back, afraid of speaking over someone else.

Not all features of an in-person class have been lost in the transition, however. Craig Mueller, her professor for spiritual formation, for instance, used the chat feature to ask playful questions such as what they’re eating and drinking. Students’ ability to respond casually in the chat imitated the casual conversation they might have on class break, she observed.

What often can’t be replicated in an online class is the ability to be a community together. When the Jan. 6 capitol attack occurred and class ended early: “I was left to process what was unfolding in our country alone.” ❄️

Shumaker is a graduating senior and student worker in the communications and marketing department.