

# REFLECTIONS ON GOING ONLINE TOGETHER: EDUCATOR PLANNING, SUPPORT, AND SHARING

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## FOUR SEPARATE REFLECTIONS

This piece is a mosaic of four short personal reflections by a group of lecturers who, after preparing together in April of 2020, taught the same newly-online course. Each of the following sections focuses on the most essential takeaway, from each perspective. In sharing our reflections this way, we hope to legitimize each voice, extoll group dynamics among teachers, and allow readers to draw conclusions from the most relevant voice for them.

## CASUAL INTER-EDUCATOR COMMUNICATION

The recent change to an online environment has been one of the most hectic and stressful times in many educators' memories, especially mine. The feelings my fellow university lecturers and I experienced at the beginning of the semester — confusion, apprehension, frustration — had no outlet, as four of us who were teaching the same sophomore-required course on global communication sat down and, all separately, stared at the walls and screamed internally. It was not until we all met online that we agreed to a plan for how to tackle the demands of adapting the course. As with all strategies being crafted across the university at that time, we had no way of knowing if this strategy would be successful, would be harmful (adding to our stress), or would simply be ineffective. To summarize, we were part of a LINE group (LINE is a communications app, and the most widely used such app in Japan) created specifically for those of us teaching this course. While hardly innovative, in that we recommended such things to our students for the sake of socialization, the LINE group that we authors have shared has been, in my experience, absolutely invaluable — not for the quality of materials or depth of discussion exchanged, but for the off-topic, humorous, frivolous little comments that remind us what it is to have social bonds. To refresh our minds about topics, to complain about unexpected annoyances, to be a sounding board for ideas, or to check in with mutual friends and ask after each other's health, our participation in this LINE group is empowering. It validates the feelings that we all have about the difficulty of our tasks, and reduced our isolation, even as we worked to reduce our students' isolation. It has allowed us to better understand ourselves, the challenges of the online semester, and the intercultural connectivity we teach about.

## OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF CRITICISM AND FEEDBACK

Sharing and getting feedback on materials is always a little intimidating for me, as it can sometimes feel that the pointed-out flaws and suggested improvements are reflections of me as a teacher, rather than the ideas or materials themselves. Despite this fear, sharing felt especially necessary this semester as we navigated emergency online teaching. Doing so helped me to ensure that my materials aligned with course goals and that my assessments fairly and accurately measured students' growth. In addition to discussing ideas through

LINE, email, and Zoom, I shared actual worksheets and project instructions with my fellow course teachers. This allowed them to see what students would see and they could then point out the confusing or unnecessary parts, particularly with the asynchronous tasks and instructions. As we figured out the logistics and requirements of assessment online, I also shared unorganized, work-in-progress unit outlines and half-formed assessment ideas, which other teachers graciously and patiently reviewed, commented on, and helped to improve. The advice I received was invaluable and the teachers' insight gave me clarity and focus as I brainstormed, discarded, re-wrote, and finally chose activities and assessments. My final project, in particular, went through many iterations, thanks to the knowledge and feedback of other teachers. What started as a role-play, turned into a research-and-present project, which morphed into a final research-and-discuss unit assessment. Sharing ideas in writing gave us time to read and reflect, before discussing the strengths and weaknesses. This process was essential and extremely helpful for me, but it would not have been successful without the patience and cooperation of my fellow course teachers, to whom I am grateful.

### **IMPORTANCE OF NEEDS BASED ASSESSMENT DURING EMERGENCY TEACHING**

When the classroom environment is switched with short notice from a traditional classroom experience to a completely online experience, it can be fairly hard to adjust properly for both the students and the instructors. Concepts that seem like common sense in the traditional classroom, such as group sizes and how long to keep students together in a discussion, are suddenly not as simple, and have to be carefully considered. Even the platform of Zoom is something that is suddenly another element to include in the lesson planning process. That is why I believe needs assessment of the students is so important. Finding out what is connecting with the students and what is not is essential to making sure the classroom runs smoothly in the online environment. For these reasons, I presented my students with various Google Forum surveys throughout the semester to find what was and was not working. After getting a response from most of the students, I made the necessary adjustments to the classroom environment, including aspects such as synchronous class time (too long or too short?), breakout discussion times (too many, not enough?), homework load (too difficult, not engaging enough?), preference for changing discussion groups (more often, change less?), and their general feelings about the content of each unit. Not having the students physically in the classroom leads to the problem of not being able to ask them directly how they feel about the class. This is difficult to do in an online environment unless you are able to speak to them one-on-one or in small groups. While it is possible to take a class period to assess their thoughts, a survey was the best route to take as they could complete it outside the classroom and take their time to give feedback. The survey was also anonymous so they would not feel pressure when criticizing the class. These needs assessments helped me adjust the classroom experience to better fit the students, and in the end, helped the online classroom become better for everyone.

### **STAYING GROUNDED**

This semester has been an interesting one. It has been one that challenged me in a number of ways, primarily in having to juggle all my responsibilities to my teachers and my students. At the beginning of the semester, a meeting was held in which four of us teaching the same

global communication course discussed our concerns for the upcoming term; this, I believe, helped all of us come to terms with the situation. The concern I voiced was that I would lose sight of my classroom as I focused on providing support for the ELI teachers. I would not be in the position I am in if I did not love teaching in the first place, but in that moment, I was more concerned that teachers would feel unsupported. I had 15 years of experience under my belt that I planned to rely on for my classes and yet I still felt unsettled in this circumstance. It felt risky to admit this to the group, but I was hoping I would be met with something positive. The response I got is something that sustained me, emotionally, and in terms of motivation for the semester. In between meetings, we shared ideas via email and as part of a LINE group. As I sat in my apartment, staring at screens wondering how I would adapt activities, I often felt isolated and alone. Being able to fire off a message to others in the LINE group, even if it was a joke, was enough for me to know that I was not alone and that I would, eventually, figure everything out. At other times, we talked out how an activity could be best adapted (e.g. adjusting discussion groups, class times, conversation journals, grading) and these discussions helped me clarify what I would do later on my own. Still other times, we shared how students reacted to our online classrooms, and would adjust based on what was working for others. I have come to realize that being able to talk out ideas for my classroom is crucial for my planning and teaching style. The communication between all of us this semester helped keep me, and my teaching, grounded. I do not think I would have survived this semester without our little group and all the support they have given me. Thank you so much, I could not have made it without you.