

Reducing Uncertainty and Podcasting Engagement: An HR Classroom Response to COVID-19

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Abstract: The rapid spread of 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has radically reshaped the human resource (HR) management policies and practices in organizations of all sizes across the country. Additionally, COVID-19 has had a major impact on the way in which faculty members teach our classes. In this case study, I discuss the way in which I responded to these changes in the courses I teach related to HR. I start with a description of the way in which COVID-19 has impacted not only the course content, but also the pedagogical approach I use to engage students across my classes. I describe my attempt to foster trust despite the uncertainty associated with individual experiences related to COVID-19. I also explain the process for rapidly transitioning to a virtual classroom setting. I describe how I combined courses for instructional purposes and the way in which I pivoted the curriculum for each course. Specifically, I created time-relevant podcasts for students to use across different courses while maintaining distinct learning outcomes for each course. A sample podcast will be provided upon request for those interested.

Keywords: podcast, COVID-19, uncertainty, engagement, non-traditional students

Challenges

As a professor of HR, students in my classes track the national unemployment rate as an important factor in developing effective employee recruitment and compensation practices. Early in the spring 2020 semester, unemployment rates hovered at near record low levels (BLS, 2020). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the overall unemployment rate was 4.4% in March of 2020 (BLS, 2020). One month later, the unemployment rate increased to 14.7%. For context, this is the highest unemployment rate since the BLS started reporting unemployment rates in 1948 (BLS, 2020). In a matter of 30 days, greater than one out of every ten employed individuals were out of a job. As an HR professional, this has far reaching policy implications for organizations of all sizes. As a professor at a regional institution, this change created a high degree of uncertainty within my students.

My institution is a regional university with approximately 4,500 students. Additionally, 22% of the undergraduate student body is non-traditional (< 25 years old), and 29% of the student body are first-generation college students. In practical terms, this means that many of my students are employed in full-time jobs as the primary income earner for their families. Moreover, it is not uncommon for my students to have children of their own that are in primary or secondary school. On top of this, the public school districts in the area moved to asynchronous classes, causing an even greater degree of uncertainty and anxiety amongst the non-traditional students in my classes. When my institution made the decision to move fully online for the remainder of the spring semester, more than a quarter of my students expressed their concern about maintaining their course work in light of the economic, social, and schedule changes necessitated by the spread of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19). While this is purely anecdotal, it was clear that I had to proactively respond to these changes across all of my classes and pivot not only the content, but also the context of my classes to ensure that students in my courses would be able to meet the learning outcomes of the course and be prepared to enter a radically different work context in light of the high degree of uncertainty we were all facing.

I began to consider the ways in which I could rapidly change my courses to respond to the situation. The major challenge I had to address was how I would help my students through an incredibly ambiguous and uncertain period while preparing them to effectively respond to an uncertain work context. As an HR professor, I had to realize that my role was not to provide information but to foster an environment where my students could creatively respond to changing situations.

Whether a result of increased physical distance or fewer opportunities for real-time interaction, increased distance allows for fewer social cues and norms (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). The move to an online classroom format undoubtedly increased the ambiguity my students were facing. Berger and Calabrese argue that individuals are motivated to decrease uncertainty in all situations (1974). In fact, when individuals are not able to reduce uncertainty, it can lead to greater emotional and physical withdrawal (Berger, 1986). Completely reducing uncertainty for my students, however, would negatively impact their ability to develop creative solutions to their individual and collective situations. Berger and Calabrese hypothesize a positive relationship between uncertainty and information seeking (1974). As ambiguity is reduced, motivation is also reduced. Similarly, increasing ambiguity also increases reliance on individual heuristics and decreases the willingness or motivation to take risks necessary to succeed in the classroom and beyond (Frishammer, Floren, & Wincent, 2011).

Ultimately, it seemed as though I was facing a dichotomy: I could continue with the same curriculum—though now outdated as a result of the changed economic and social context—to reduce the uncertainty my students were facing and risk decreasing their motivation, or I could modify the curriculum to reflect the new economic and social context, potentially increasing the uncertainty in my students and risk decreasing their motivation. Thankfully, this is a false dichotomy. Too much and too little uncertainty does indeed negatively relate to a performance decline. The challenge is finding the appropriate level of ambiguity.

Individuals are motivated to “make sense” of the world around them and consequently attempt to reduce uncertainty in their relationships by retroactively and proactively constructing an interpretable pattern of behavior of their partner (Heider 1958; Berger & Calabrese, 1974). However, on the basis of activation theory, complete disambiguation does not always lead to positive outcomes (Gardner 1986; Gardner & Cummings, 1988). A critical concept of the theory is activation level, which Gardner defines as “the degree of neural activity in the reticular activation system, a major part of the central nervous system” (1986). Activation theory hypothesizes that there is an inverted U-shape between an individual’s experienced activation level and task performance (Gardner & Cummings, 1988). The result is that performance suffers when activation level is both high and low, and performance is optimal at a moderate amount of activation. Thus, the most effective performance of my students would be found in the ‘sweet spot’ of moderate levels of ambiguity.

Changes

During the spring 2020 semester, I was teaching two separate courses within the same plan of study. The first course is a 400-level HR course that operates like an in-depth survey of each of the functional areas of HR. This course is usually taken in the second semester of students’ sophomore year or later. This course is also the prerequisite for all other advanced HR courses. The second course I was teaching is a 400-level Wage and Salary Administration course where we cover topics that include labor market economics, benefits administration, employee motivation, and wage administration. While there is some overlap in each of these courses, they have very distinct learning outcomes. Against the backdrop of COVID-19 and having made the decision to adjust the curriculum to respond to the changes necessitated by the pandemic both logistically and economically, I had to determine my next steps. I decided to combine the courses for instructional purposes only while maintaining separate learning outcomes for each course. The key change I made to the curriculum was to reach out

to professionals across a broad spectrum of industries and record podcast-style interviews. These interviews would then serve a significant instructional aspect of the course. My hope was that engaging working professionals across a variety of industries would demonstrate that the experiences of uncertainty and ambiguity were not unique to my students and thus engage their activation level by normalizing the amount of ambiguity they were facing. In other words, hearing from working professionals could moderate my students' perception of the amount of uncertainty they were facing. This would then hopefully lead to improved efficacy and performance as we worked toward accomplishing the learning outcomes in each course through an updated curriculum.

To be clear, both courses had unique learning outcomes that had to be maintained despite the fact that I combined the two courses for instructional purposes. What this meant is that I had to manage each course independently from an administrative role. In other words, each class section used the changes in organizational HR policies and practices as a result of COVID-19 as the case study for their particular learning outcomes. This is similar to using *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in both an American literature course and a course focusing on pedagogy in secondary education. Alternatively, this would be similar to using an archeological sample in both a geology course and an anthropology course. This is important in that the students from each individual class had the opportunity to explore the content provided by the unique situation of COVID-19 through the lens of the learning outcomes for each course. This could have been done with each class individually since podcasts were recorded and available asynchronously. However, based on the uncertainty theory discussed previously, combining the courses for meetings and instructional purposes created an environment designed to foster a higher level of engagement in light of the challenges students were facing in their personal lives. The result of combining the classes for meetings did not eliminate the need to take the other course as the outcome and lens applied to each course was unique.

Both courses were originally scheduled to meet on Monday's and Wednesday's. As we moved fully online, it was clear based on communication from many non-traditional students that they would not be able to attend two weekly synchronous class sessions as a result of issues either with child care, changed work schedules, or internet access issues. What I decided to do was to hold two synchronous sessions via Zoom each week. The first was scheduled during one of the course time slots on Monday, and the second live session was scheduled for the other course time slot on Wednesday. Each Zoom session was recorded and posted in Canvas. Students were responsible for content provided in both live sessions and were expected to attend at least one of the live sessions each week for the remainder of the semester. Logistically, this had the effect of providing a variety of times for students to engage with the content and allowed each student flexibility in attending the live session that worked best for them given their individual constraints.

Combining the courses for instructional purposes also had the unintended positive outcome of further normalizing the individual experiences of students based on the structure of the live Zoom sessions. I would start each live Zoom session with a brief personal story about my experience during the week and my own experience with uncertainty. For example, during the first live Zoom session, I shared about my own challenges as a working parent during a time when my children's school closed. I then dedicated the first seven minutes of each class to Zoom breakout rooms and asked my students to share a similar story with two or three of their classmates. Because the courses had been combined for instruction, these breakout rooms would occasionally group students together who did not know one another. Since I first modeled the behavior as the instructor and then introduced new students to one another, students from both classes began to show a collective interest in the experiences of one another. While I did not have the tools to measure "the degree of neural activity in the reticular activation system" (Gardner, 1986), it became clear that this short activity stoked student curiosity about the experience of others during an unprecedented time. This led to what I believe is an increase in affective and cognitive trust amongst my students, which resulted in a higher overall tolerance for

ambiguity, in turn improving their activation level. Put differently, students began to trust one another and became genuinely interested in the experience of others as a way to normalize their own experiences. Ultimately, my students became increasingly curious about each other, which seemingly led to an increase in curiosity about the course content. This was made manifest in the discussions around the podcasts I recorded with working professionals.

I pivoted the curriculum by recording a series of weekly podcasts with working professionals from a variety of industries. These podcasts then became the topic of conversation for each of the subsequent Zoom class sessions. The synchronous time in class via Zoom was dedicated to analyzing the changes that had to be made in each of the industries as a result of COVID-19 and the impact these changes had on HR policies and practices. Using podcasts as an educational tool is not an innovative development. In fact, podcasts have been utilized in the classroom for at least the last decade (Goldman, 2018). The podcast has become one of the most ubiquitous forms of information since the turn of the century. Google currently has over 2 million registered podcasts (Jovic, 2020). As of 2018, there have been 50 billion podcast downloads (Locker, 2018). The appeal of podcasts for younger generations is exploding. According to Billboard, podcasts now represent more than 10% of everything Millennials listen to (Cirisano, 2019). Consider these statistics published by PR Neswire (2019):

60% of Gen Z and 52% of Millennials usually listen to podcasts that are at least 26 minutes in length... Millennials and Gen Z were also 5% more likely to listen to podcasts for professional reasons often or very often compared to older generations... a third of Millennials listen to podcasts daily. This trend is only likely to grow given that three-quarters of Gen Z respondents have a paid subscription for a streaming audio/music service compared to 60% of Millennials and only 52% of those over 35.

To be clear, the appeal of podcasts in a college classroom setting is not their ability to replace the traditional PowerPoint-driven lecture. In fact, podcasts are “associated with little increase in performance...and little increase in learning gains” when used solely as a lecture replacement tool (Moreavec, Williams, Aguilar-Roca, & O’Dowd, 2016). Rather, the use of podcasts is effective when they are used to augment the learning process, not replace it. As a professor facing an uncertain classroom dynamic, I had to find a way to engage with my students in a way that is native to their technological lifestyles. Recording a high-quality podcast has a relatively low barrier to entry. Simply creating the podcast is not difficult; rather, the challenge lies in effectively using the podcast to help students achieve the learning outcomes.

Podcasts and Learning Outcomes

I first had to identify various professionals that would be willing to share their experiences via a recorded podcast. For this process, I relied mostly on my existing professional network. Guests were made up of colleagues from a previous career, former students, and other professionals with which I had an existing relationship. While this is not necessarily ideal for all disciplines, it allowed me to rapidly create the content needed to create the podcasts. The podcasts included the following guests: an airline cargo pilot for UPS, a corporate recruiter for YUM! Brands, a city commissioner, the foreman for a construction company, a recent HR graduate working as a trainer for a manufacturing company, and an engineer. These podcasts followed the same general outline. We would start with a brief introduction where the guest would talk about themselves personally and professionally. I would ask the guest to then talk about their professional career and how they ended up in the position they are currently in. We would then transition into talking about what their job duties entailed before

COVID-19. As part of this discussion, I would ask follow-up questions and probe more deeply if needed. Next, the guest would share about how their job had changed as a result of COVID-19 and the impacts the pandemic had on their professional life. These were general questions that would guide the majority of the conversation. Finally, I asked each guest two to three questions pertaining to HR and the individual learning outcomes from both courses. These questions were specifically tailored to the modules from each class. Once the conversation was complete, I would export the audio file, upload it to Canvas, and send out an announcement to my students that the podcast had been uploaded. By utilizing the metrics provided by Canvas, I was able to monitor the time each student spent listening to the podcast. Overall, more than 80% of the students listened to the entire podcast each week.

As noted earlier, the weekly podcasts provided the content for the synchronous Zoom sessions each week. Because two different courses were combined for instruction purposes and each class maintained their separate learning outcomes, I had to ensure that we were able to relate the podcast back to the content of the course learning objectives. I accomplished this by crafting specific discussion questions that related the podcast back to the unique content of each course. This was perhaps the most challenging aspect of combining two distinct courses. Prior to each synchronous Zoom session, students from the different courses were given distinct discussion questions based on the specific podcast from that week. These discussion questions were directly related to each module's learning outcomes for the student's specific course. As previously noted, the first 7-10 minutes of each synchronous class was devoted to normalizing uncertainty and fostering trust across the class. The next 15 minutes of the live session was devoted to providing a brief summary of the podcast and asking students to share the aspect of the podcast they found the most interesting. Following this, students were then randomly placed into discussion rooms of three to five students. One student in each room was assigned to be the discussion lead. Discussion rooms lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. During this period, I would join each room to monitor and observe the conversation. I would typically spend one or two minutes in each discussion room to ensure that the students were engaging. After checking in on each discussion room, I would return to each room for approximately five minutes. During this time, I would take a few handwritten notes on the discussion. After the discussion rooms concluded, we would come back together as a group and spend the remaining class time debriefing the conversation as it related to the specific discussion questions. I would end each class session with a short two to three minute reflection on what I observed about the class conversation overall.

Charting a Course

Through this process, I learned a great deal about fostering engagement in the classroom and using technology to pivot the delivery mechanisms. As I reflect on the experience, there are a number of things that worked well. First, as noted earlier, there seemed to be a greater degree of trust and connection fostered across the courses. While I had hoped to normalize the experiences of each student in the class, I was surprised by the intensity of relationships developed amongst groups of students. Despite randomly assigning discussion groups across both courses, students began showing up early to the Zoom room to socialize with one another. At least three times throughout the remainder of the semester, around seven students were logged into the Zoom room 30 minutes before class officially started. When I talked with the students about why they were showing up to class early, their response was that they valued connecting with one another and that having a chance to socialize, even via Zoom, provided a sense of normalcy that they otherwise lacked. As I probed further, I found out that while some of these students had taken classes together previously, they had never socialized in a formal manner with each other. Essentially, this group of students built a connection with one

another despite the physical distance between them. I take this as qualitative evidence of the course format fostering high levels of trust with one another. This independent, non-required interaction seemed to also foster more complex in-class conversations.

Within the field of HR, I often tell students that there are very clear wrong answers but rarely is there a clear right answer. Instead, student evaluation in the HR courses I teach are frequently assessed on the complexity of their responses, their ability to explain their positions, and their justification for stances on a particular topic. The changes implemented in these courses required a greater depth of thought about specific topics. This differed significantly from the typical discussion-based classroom lecture I had conducted in the past. While students were still responsible for the course content, the shift in pedagogy away from a text-based class setting toward a ‘real world’ discussion seemed to engage a different level of critical thinking in my students. As we made the shift to addressing the way in which aspects of HR were manifested in real organizations, students seemed to suddenly begin thinking through more complex responses. Rather than relying on a ‘textbook’ answer, students were considering implications to scenarios that I as the instructor had not given thought to.

As I move forward, I absolutely plan to use aspects of this approach in my classes. Specifically, I plan to continue to record podcasts with professionals and use these as important content/case studies across multiple classes. I plan to continue devoting a portion of the beginning of each class session to building and fostering trust by sharing and inviting conversation about relevant personal experiences. Similarly, there are changes that I made as a result of COVID-19 that I do not plan on incorporating in future classes. While combining courses for instructional purposes was necessitated by some of the schedule challenges faced by a non-traditional student body, I am not eager to combine different courses in the future. Combining students from different courses into the same class session posed challenges related to maintaining distinct course learning outcomes. Overall, this made it challenging to focus the in-class conversation as specifically as I had hoped on the topics relevant to each course. Instead, I found the conversation bouncing between content from both courses. The result was a conversation that was relevant to half the class part of the time and the other half of the class part of the time.

A further question that remains is the marginal value of using podcasts over recorded video lectures. In this particular case, I opted to use podcasts based on the demographics of my students and the fact that many of my students were employed full time and/or cared for children as a result of schools being closed. I believed that providing access to podcasts would create more accessible content for my students. This is entirely speculative, however, and I am unaware of any research that specifically compares podcasts to recorded video lectures as a learning tool. While I suspect that there are differences in learning outcomes based on the use of podcasts versus recorded video lectures or interviews, this is an open question that future research should explore.

One of the other inevitable challenges I faced in pivoting to a technology-reliant course so quickly was the lack of preparation. By the end of the semester, I was completely worn out from spending hours contacting guests, recording and editing the podcasts, and preparing class discussions and relevant examples based on each podcast. Each week was an almost endless cycle of preparation. While the pandemic necessitated such a change, it is not one that I am eager to repeat. I have become a firm believer that podcasts can be an incredibly effective educational tool, but to effectively execute and incorporate podcasts within the curriculum, it would be ideal to have at least one semester in advance to prepare and relate the podcast content back to the course content. Overall, podcasts are an effective educational tool when students have a high degree of trust with one another and are able to tolerate a moderate degree of ambiguity. I will likely be using some form of podcast in each of my future courses, and I encourage other instructors to do the same. I would be happy to share an example podcast upon request.

Epilogue

Now that almost 12 months have passed since moving entirely online, I find that I have continued to incorporate podcasts into my classes. I originally noted that one of the challenges was the speed at which I had to pivot from face-to-face to an entirely virtual setting. As I am now teaching these two courses again, I do in fact find that having additional time to prepare has made the use of podcasts more effective. I have now been able to tailor specific discussion questions for each class based on the podcasts instead of combining both courses together. This has allowed me to more easily distinguish between the learning outcomes for each course and keep synchronous discussions of the material more targeted. While I faced some challenges with the combining of classes and the use of podcasts, COVID-19 has forced me to reevaluate important aspects of my pedagogy and has provided an opportunity to rapidly experiment with new tools.

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