

Strategies for Effective yet Manageable Online Teaching

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First, take a breath. If you have never taught an online course before, sure, there will be a bit of a learning curve. But you can do this! Collin College, the eCollin Learning Centers, the Center for Teaching and Learning, your Associate Deans, and your colleagues are here to support you. Don't feel as if you need to go it alone!

Here you will find some tips for making your online teaching doable, while still offering a great learning experience to your students. Many of these suggestions have been adapted from wonderful resources offered by other institutions, such as Brown University, DePaul University, Southern Oregon University, University of Cincinnati, Vanderbilt University, and Virginia Commonwealth University, organizations such as Educause and The IDEA Center, and publications such as *Faculty Focus* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Don't lose sight of the big picture.

A few general practices will help you maintain perspective so that you can be at your best during stressful situations and new experiences as an educator.

- **Practice compassion and reassure your students.** In times of stress and disruption, they are likely as anxious as you are. Some might also struggle with additional stressors such as a lack of reliable technology or internet access, or a need for accessible materials. While it's certainly important to hold students accountable, it is also important to let your students know that you understand, and to demonstrate flexibility when needed. Research tells us that when students know that their instructors care, they are more motivated, persistent, and successful.
- **Be mindful of cognitive load.** Research has also shown that in times of crisis and stress, students' cognitive load or working memory can be compromised. Consider strategies such as flexible due dates, varied assignment formats, and adjusted workload, and keep students informed about additional resources to help them stay on track.
- **Communicate with your students regularly,** and even before the course begins (or resumes). Adopt a tone of composure and encouragement as their leader, which in turn will help them remain calm and confident. But don't be afraid to acknowledge your humanity along with theirs through the process. [The ELC offers a list of communication tools in Canvas](#) that you can use to stay in touch with your students beyond email.

- **Approach your teaching with creativity and flexibility.** Some of your traditional strategies, assignments, assessment practices, and activities might need to be tweaked for the online format. Use this as an opportunity to flex your teaching muscles and try something new! You might just discover that change can be reenergizing and fun.
- **Remember your overarching learning objectives.** Above all else, bear in mind your primary learning goals. Ask yourself what your students still need to be able to do by the end of the semester, and how you can help them meet those goals in the online environment. Let those goals guide the decisions you make as you convert your course, and it bears repeating -- be willing to be flexible!
- **Demonstrate online presence.** Teaching online does not diminish the importance of the student-teacher relationship. Since you won't have the opportunity to see your students in person every week, it is imperative that you foster that connection in other ways, such as regularly scheduled online "office hours," individual and small group virtual meetings, and timely, personalized feedback.

Technology: Some nuts and bolts

Do not panic or succumb to apprehension about technology! What follows are some simple suggestions to keep in mind as you work to move your course online.

- **Be proactive about preparing your course/lessons, and take advantage of the resources that are available to you early and often.** The ELC has worked tirelessly to develop resources to help you create and implement an online course using tools such as Canvas and Zoom. You can find their [Faculty Readiness Checklist](#) and links to their numerous resources for academic continuity on their website.
- **Keep things simple.** Remember the adage that just because you can, doesn't mean you should! You are not expected to throw together a perfectly conceived online course in one week that would typically take months to build. Rest assured that your course does not have to be flashy to be effective! **Draw on tools that are already in place** and/or with which you are already familiar to ease the learning curve for both you and your students. Michelle Miller from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* presents [a helpful guide for making "smart choices" about technology usage in your teaching.](#)

Furthermore, **consider utilizing some asynchronous methods** that won't require you or your students to have continuous access to high-speed internet. The CTL at DePaul offers [a thoughtful perspective on the benefits of utilizing "lower bandwidth" tools](#) in your online teaching.

- **Remember to “chunk” information.** In both online and face-to-face formats, students respond to and retain more information when it is presented in shorter segments rather than longer forms. For instance, if you choose to offer your students recorded video lectures or demonstrations, work to make them between 2 and 5 minutes in length to maximize student viewing. Likewise, if you opt to present information to your students in text-based format, utilize good organization like clear headings and bullet points as well as visual “white space” to ensure readability.
- **Exercise best practices for instructional videos** if you choose to utilize them in your online course. Read [this article from The IDEA Center](#) for an overview of options and strategies that make for effective video lectures and presentations.

Keep students engaged

Online courses of today are certainly not the “correspondence courses” of the past, and just as in the face-to-face classroom, it is imperative that you work to keep your students actively engaged. Many of the strategies you might use in your F2F classroom can be easily adapted to an online environment. Below are a few online alternatives for facilitating active engagement in your online course.

- **Discussions and Group Work**
 - **Blogs and discussion boards** (like the “Discussion” tool in Canvas) can give your students the opportunity to converse with each other about course material, comment on posts by their peers, keep a learning journal, or share reflections. Consider breaking students into smaller discussion groups, offering a choice of questions, or providing limits on the responses to keep discussion boards manageable for everyone. Vanderbilt’s CTL offers additional [helpful tips for teaching with blogs here](#).
 - **Wikis, Google docs, or the “Collaborations” function in Canvas** can offer other sites for synchronous or asynchronous student interaction, where they can work collaboratively to share and edit content, or comment on each other’s work. These can be especially useful for group assignments or peer feedback/peer review activities.
 - **Take advantage of breakout rooms in Zoom** for smaller synchronous group discussions amongst students, which you as the instructor can likewise join and observe. For additional guidance, see this [brief article on getting started with Zoom breakout rooms](#).
 - **Conduct online office hours or more individualized conferencing with students or small groups of students.** To facilitate these interactions, several options are available, including Zoom as well as Google Hangouts (download for free online),

Microsoft Teams, and Skype for Business (the latter two are available through Office 365). Each of these applications offers video conferencing and chat functions.

- **Use Canvas Groups** to manually or automatically set up student group configurations for both class discussions and projects. This tool will further allow you to assign group leaders, create sub-groups, or let students sign up for groups themselves. For more detail, you can read the [Canvas Community guide on using Groups](#).
- **Labs, studios, and application activities.** While it may be difficult to replicate some course activities in an online environment, there are some strategies that might be adequate facsimiles for achieving some of your learning objectives.
 - **Utilize pre-existing data sets or “dummy” data**, if the goal of the activity is to analyze rather than simply collect data.
 - **Employ demonstrations of experiments or activities** as stand-ins for hands-on applications. [MERLOT](#), for instance, offers a sizeable repository of virtual labs and simulations from numerous disciplines. [Psytoolkit also offers a library of online psychology demonstrations](#) and experiments that students can run on their own computers. [PhET](#) from the University of Colorado Boulder likewise provides numerous science and math simulations for students and educators. You might even consider recording some brief demonstrations of your own to post on Canvas.
- **Additional resources on student engagement in online courses:**
 - [“Student Engagement Strategies for the Online Environment,”](#) from *Faculty Focus*.
 - [Online Instructional Activities Index](#), from the University of Illinois Springfield.
 - [“10 Tips for Effective Online Discussions”](#) from Educause.

Employ thoughtful assessment practices

Assessment obviously still matters when teaching online, even if it might need to take on slightly different forms. It is our role as instructors, now more than ever, to ensure that our students are achieving those educational goals. Below are some options for transitioning your assessment practices to the online environment.

- **Quizzes and Exams**
 - Quizzes or exams can be created in Canvas using the **“Quizzes” tool**. Canvas offers a variety of question formats and allows you to set time limits if desired, as well as

grade automatically or manually as appropriate.

- If planning to implement higher-stakes exams, be sure to consider the following to foster student focus, assess complex knowledge and skills, and maximize academic integrity:
 - **Create rich questions** that require critical and analytical thinking.
 - **Set time limits** for exam availability (such as a 24 hour window) as well as for exam completion (such as 90 minutes), and be sure to communicate that timing clearly (and often!) to your students.
 - **Randomize** questions.
 - **Have alternatives in place** to allow for internet connectivity problems or missed exams. For instance, will you allow make-up exams? If so, you might need to have a secondary exam at the ready, as well as give thought to how you will handle this in terms of your grading schema.
 - If you choose to offer students a makeup exam in the form of an essay exam, **see [this IDEA Paper for guidance on crafting effective essay prompts](#)** and more.

- **Student presentations**

- For asynchronous presentations, you might **ask students to record themselves using simple technology** such as their smart phones or computers (as available) and send the files to you or to the entire class. [Padlet](#) is a useful site where students can post images, videos, and more to a course page that you create.
- **Utilize Zoom meetings** for synchronous presentations. Students can share screens to show PowerPoint slides, and peers can utilize the chat feature to ask questions.
- Brown University suggests **considering low-tech options** such as written “scripts” in lieu of oral presentations, which still allow you to assess core objectives like content knowledge, critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication – but only if *oral* communication is not a priority.

- **Writing Assignments**

Writing assignments are relatively easy to adapt to an online learning environment, since little if any changes must be made to the process! Nevertheless, a few minor adjustments might be needed to accommodate the change in student/teacher interaction:

- As noted in the section on student engagement, **peer or instructor feedback** can be facilitated through use of applications such as Google Docs, or the Comment feature in Microsoft Word. (For peer review exercises, be sure to **provide guiding questions** to ensure useful and constructive feedback!)
 - **Online resources** such as the [Purdue OWL \(Online Writing Lab\)](#) can offer guidance to students regarding writing conventions if access to the campus writing labs is in question.
 - **Brief individual conferences** can be conducted with students using Zoom, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, or Skype for Business to offer quick feedback on drafts in progress.
 - **Introduce students to [Google Scholar](#)** to help them find *credible* online research sources.
- **Facilitating the feedback process**
 - **Rubrics** are excellent tools for expediting the often-tedious feedback and grading process, while also providing clear expectations for students. Canvas provides a [Rubrics feature](#) that you can easily plug in to your assignments. Arizona State University offers some [quick guidelines for best practices in rubric design](#).
 - **Draft student feedback more quickly using voice recordings.** [Vocaroo](#) offers free online recording software you can use for this purpose (even if you're not teaching online!).
 - **Text expansion** can expedite written feedback that repeatedly uses the same phrase/s. *PC World* offers a list of [free text expander options](#) for Windows users, while *Macworld* offers [a list of low-priced and free options](#).

For additional guidance in developing your online course, you might also review these brief pieces from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

- ["Going Online in a Hurry"](#)
- ["How to be a Better Online Teacher"](#)

And finally, if you would like to talk more about some of these and other ideas as you consider your options for teaching online, please feel free to contact Dr. Allison Boye, Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning, via email at ABoye@collin.edu.