

Online Pedagogy: Lessons Learned
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Hello All,

In the last few weeks, I have received so many texts/calls/emails from friends and colleagues afar who know that I am teaching online this semester in the absence of a partner hire opportunity at the University of Utah. Hence my decision to create a summary of sorts that is more easily shared than myriad texts and emails.

Before this Spring, I hadn't taught entirely online since I was a Doctoral student. In a word, the transition from face-to-face to online teaching has been: difficult—especially as a professor committed to critical communication pedagogy. And, I had the privilege of choosing to teach online, advance notice, and time to research and plan.

To be clear—I am not an expert and I have a lot of confidence to gain in my online teaching skills. Metaphorically, this semester has been like flying a plane and building it at the same time—super awkward, daunting, and overwhelming at times. My current online students would surely confirm that I have a lot to learn and a lot to improve in future online courses. With the intention to share information more so than expertise, below I have compiled all of my notes from my experiences teaching online in Canvas this semester—think of them as lessons learned that may or may not be helpful in your particular teaching context.

Overall, the most important lesson that I have learned is how important it is to continually be open to student feedback in real time—because many of my students have far more experience taking online courses than I do teaching online courses. Some of my students this semester have made really wise suggestions that I have been able to implement immediately to improve our virtual classroom.

Warm Regards,

Rachel

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Notes, Suggestions, and Student Feedback

- Canvas as a student/teacher interface requires a great deal more structure and organization when teaching online in comparison to teaching face-to-face. Use the headings, assignments, discussions, etc. features in each weekly module so that students do not have to click around in Canvas to access readings, assignments, etc. for any given module.
- Set start dates and end dates for every assignment with a deadline, so that every assignment populates in the Canvas calendar that many of our students rely on to stay organized.
- Use consistent deadlines—for example, students helped me understand how important it is for all of our assignments to be due on the same day of the week at the same time. For us, it is Saturdays at 11:59pm. They chimed in early to let me know that our original deadline of Fridays at 11:59pm did not work well for students who both work and go to school. I was thinking of Fridays as the end of the week from a faculty perspective, but students oftentimes need the weekend to edit, proof, and finalize their assignments.
- Encourage students to set their Canvas notifications to their personal preferences, so they are not bombarded with email updates from Canvas (unless they want to receive a message every time an instructor posts or updates something in Canvas).
- Posting information such as the syllabus in one place in Canvas is not enough in an online format. Key information (deadlines, resources, assignments, etc.) needs to be repeated in myriad places. For example, my syllabus is posted in the Syllabus Tab; weekly announcements include reminders of readings, assignments, deadlines, etc.; and the assignments in the Assignments Tab includes all of the information about assignments from the syllabus.
- A major adjustment for me was realizing that if I am not using videos or voiceover in Powerpoint, that every single thing I want students to know needs to be typed and posted in more than one accessible location. There is a lot of repetition in online teaching.

- Asynchronous communication (meaning that everyone is reading and responding to one another as individual schedules allow) changes the classroom vibe and really necessitates diligent focus and extra labor to ensure that everyone (instructors included) is being clear, timely, and humanizing. In planning our respective weeks, both students and instructors need to set aside extra time to read (or listen if there are videos) in an asynchronous context.
- Set expectations for your email response time and be clear if there are times when you will not respond to emails (e.g., after 6pm, weekends, etc.); online students tend to expect more immediate responses to emails 24/7 unless you tell them otherwise.
- Instructor to student feedback and grading are far more copious and time consuming; especially if you, like me, use weekly Online Engagements to try and mirror in class participation. I am not sure if I would call weekly Online Engagements a “mistake” per say amid my attempts to utilize critical communication pedagogy virtually, but when – for example – both of my online courses have Online Engagements during the same week, I am responding one-on-one to 60+ people. This takes an enormous amount of time.
- Building and maintaining rapport with students online has been tricky—I have found myself doing so in places that feel “strange” in the absence of connecting with students before, during, and after class and during office hours. I have been using images, brief personal narratives baked into announcements and lecture materials, etc. to do so. I have also made grading far more dialogic insofar as offering more detail intensive comments, positive feedback opposed to only corrective feedback, etc. – but this too has made grading far more time intensive.
- Grading in Canvas is complicated sometimes—especially when the server is running slowly during peak hours. At times, I have had to re-organize my schedule so I can grade during off-peak hours and – because of the enormity of weekly assignments to grade—I am always “behind” on grading. This has been especially difficult in the course that is a new prep for me because I am simultaneously: attending to the current week, grading previous weeks, and building online modules for future weeks.

- I learned that scheduling deadlines during Canvas' peak hours is unwise because it runs slow and students get understandably frustrated and anxious in terms of getting their assignments in on time.
- Encourage students to download everything they need for any given week far in advance of when they need it, so they don't have to rely on Canvas to access readings, films, assignment prompts, etc. I think of this as "offline online" work so they are not dependent on a reading downloading during the same hour they have set aside to read it.
- I post the film links to watch in our weekly modules, but I encourage students to watch them via the library instead of directly in Canvas. There has been a lot of pausing, reloading, etc. when students try to watch films in Canvas during peak hours.
- If you post announcements, assignments, etc. weekly, I've learned that most students prefer that those go up on Sundays, especially those who work part and full time. While faculty might think of our respective work weeks as beginning on Monday; for online students, their respective student and work weeks often begin on Sundays so that they can plan ahead for both school and work on the weekend.
- Discussion Forums with – I think – more than 20 participants are really hard to follow and track for students and myself. Using one Discussion Forum assignment in face-to-face classes I didn't realize this but assigning multiple weekly Discussion Forums in one class made me realize that requiring 3+ posts from every student makes the forum too big. I am going to switch to assigning discussion groups within the Discussion Forum. However, this is going to make following the discussion and grading in some ways more complex on my end. In essence, instead of following one weekly Discussion Forum, I will need to follow 4-5 discussion groups in each weekly forum.
- Sometimes DUO, our two-factor identification system, has posed a challenge in the rare instance when a student loses their phone or access for some reason. They essentially are locked out of our online course until they resolve their DUO access issue.
- Some of our online students are in different time zones whether it's because they live elsewhere or are traveling (e.g., student athletes). Making it clear

that Canvas via the U is in the Rocky Mountain Time zone and will lock according to that time zone became important so students think about deadlines not in terms of where they geographically are but in terms of where the U geographically is.

In case they are helpful, here are the resources that I bookmarked throughout the process of planning for this semester and have found the most useful thus far:

The Chronicle of Higher Education's "How to be a Better Online Teacher: Advice Guide" <https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/advice-online-teaching>

Inside Higher Education's "Take My Advice: Peer Advice for Teaching Online for the First Time" <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/11/15/peer-advice-instructors-teaching-online-first-time>

The University of Washington's "20 Tips for Teaching an Accessible Online Course" <https://www.washington.edu/doit/20-tips-teaching-accessible-online-course>

Inside Higher Education's "Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss." <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/03/27/new-approaches-discussion-boards-aim-dynamic-online-learning>

Temple University's "Mastering Online Discussion Board Facilitation: Resource Guide" <https://teaching.temple.edu/sites/tlc/files/resource/pdf/MasteringOnlineDiscussionBoardFacilitation.pdf>

The Harvard Business Publishing's "8 Tips for Teaching Online" <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/8-tips-for-teaching-online>