

Coronavirus, online teaching & learning in the immediate crisis

Introduction

There are two distinct questions floating around in conversations about putting classes online in the present emergency. One is a question of understanding the nature of online teaching and learning and how it can be designed and developed; and the other is concerned with how to respond in the immediate moment now that face-to-face contact with students already in mid-course is going to be suspended. The two are obviously related, but in these notes and suggestions we are dealing only with the second one, namely how to make the best use of technology in the present circumstance, and if possible to have done it the week before last! If we were talking about the first question, then the old adage would apply that if we wanted to get there we wouldn't be starting from here. The design of high quality online courses needs to start with the medium and not with the content of teaching, whereas in the present situation we would recommend that you start with the needs of both teachers and students and, to put it simply, do the best you can in difficult circumstances.

Many teachers who had never given any particular thought to online classes are now finding themselves in the stressful situation of trying to do something that in reality needs a lot more preparation time than is available – and students for their part are having to learn in a way that they never signed up for, and just like their teachers may not have the skills to be able to navigate all this in a stress-free way. In this situation, it is important to be realistic about what can reasonably be accomplished, and the suggestions offered here are specifically tailored to this unique set of circumstances. What we propose is a compromise that we believe could serve to address all sorts of concerns of the moment. If we were having a more general conversation about the ideal ways to teach online, we wouldn't necessarily be proposing the same solutions.

Factors informing our thinking

We all need to understand our own limitations, and those of our students, and live with them – many of which in the present set of circumstances will be nothing at all to do with learning or teaching but are a consequence of the wider emergency. You are not going to be able to create the perfect online course in the present environment. All the teachers who are now seeking our advice were unprepared for this. Many of them had no prior interest in online courses which is why they aren't already doing it – and some have doubts and hesitations about the whole thing. The expectation that existing courses can be seamlessly transferred into the online environment is at best unrealistic. For many it has come along as yet another thing to do in already pressurised lifestyles, but without adequate preparation in relation to either the pedagogy that undergirds online learning or the technology that might make it possible. So this is not a time to retreat into our inner space: in this situation being prepared to accept support from colleagues will be more important than usual. We will need to acknowledge what we don't know, or this will be more stressful than it needs to be. Given the urgency of the timescale there is no way that those with no previous experience can become instant experts in online design and delivery and the best approach will be to recognize the fact that this is an emergency situation and if you do the best you can, it will be enough.

The student angle

If you are daunted by this, then think about the students. None of them signed up for an online course, and some may not have enrolled in the first place if they had thought that was what it would be. The competitiveness of a study environment often encourages students to bluff their way through things they don't understand, so we need to be patient with their struggles and generous with our own. Here are some things that will likely be going on, many of them specific to this unique set of circumstances and which we should take account of:

- Students in general almost certainly know less about technology than they want us to think. Even younger people brought up with digital technology typically only know how to work with a small number of programs or platforms, predominantly social media and Microsoft Office (within which their knowledge is most likely limited to Word and maybe Powerpoint). Take nothing for granted, but remember you are not teaching a course in computer science – they and you only need to know enough to get through this present situation. All the popular platforms (educational tools like Moodle, Blackboard, and Canvas, and video conferencing platforms such as Google Hangouts, BlueJeans, Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc.) offer sophisticated possibilities, many of which you will never use – and if you think you might find them useful, there will be plenty of time to explore them once this is all over. Resist the temptation to over-complicate things. If your students are already familiar with Moodle, Canvas, etc. our strong recommendation is that you use that to best advantage, for psychological as much as educational reasons: the situation is stressful enough without adding to it for students who are already having to wrestle with other unknowns elsewhere in their lives.
- Some students might well be accessing the internet on their phones rather than computers. Either way, they will not necessarily have fast access to unlimited data. We are anticipating that they will be working at home – but it is most likely that other family members will be doing the same. Access to hardware might be limited either in terms of how many computers are available to them, or there may be limitations imposed by the speed and bandwidth of their home internet connections. Some students will have only one room in which the entire family might need to be occupied, and those with children at home will have particular challenges and might only have time to think about studies once they are in bed. Multitasking has its limits!
- Statistically, it seems likely that some students will themselves be infected with the virus, and those who are well might easily end up having to care for others who become ill. Dedicated time for study – whether online or off – will be constrained as a result.
- Some students will likely have older relatives to care for, or other pastoral involvements in their wider community, and will not actually be housebound 24/7 – all of which will affect the ways they can allocate time to their home responsibilities as well as their study programmes.
- We know that social isolation for any length of time is bound to have side effects that will impinge on how students can engage with their studies. It is a well-documented fact that for those who are unaccustomed to sharing workspace with a spouse, domestic violence is a frequent outcome – and even in the most harmonious

of relationships, there are bound to be tensions. Cabin fever is real, and is a key factor in mental health problems, especially for those who already struggle with anxiety and depression. Being potentially isolated from what we regard as normal social interaction for the sort of periods now being talked about will be stressful even for those who are usually resilient.

There will almost certainly be other challenges that we haven't thought of, since nobody in living memory has had to deal with anything like this and government recommendations and requirements are changing all the time. The bottom line is that online courses are not going to be a top priority for anyone right now: students will have far more important things to juggle with than whether they manage to meet our deadlines – and so will you.

How then shall we teach?

We have given a lot of thought to this, and our conclusion is that it will likely be good practice to offer flexibility to students, using a diversity of media platforms, rather than trying to replicate what might otherwise take place in a face to face class. Of course, we'll only know after the event if this is indeed good practice, so this will be a learning experience in many different senses of the word – and we could be wrong! As teachers we all have our preferred styles and ways of doing things, so some of what we suggest here may not be relevant to everyone. But these are the things we have identified in relation to putting classes online in the present context (we can't stress enough that this is for workable solutions now, and not necessarily what we would recommend as the ideal way to facilitate online learning).

Lectures and presentations are central to much teaching. If they are important to you then we recommend that they be recorded and put online for students to watch/listen at their own convenience, rather than a real-time synchronous experience. Not many academics feature in TED talks, and for a reason – they are the product of extraordinary communication skills that most of us don't have. You may fancy yourself in front of a camera but watching someone give a lecture on screen highlights quirky habits that go unnoticed in real life, and such lectures easily descend into either amusement or boredom for students. So if you wish to include presentations, record them. Powerpoint offers the facility to do this easily: once you have your slides set up, go to 'slideshow', find 'record slideshow', make sure the boxes 'play narrations' and 'use timings' are checked, and you're in business. Then transform it into an mp4 file (because they play well on a phone as well as a computer) by going to 'export', select 'create a video', and wait till the computer does the business. You won't get studio quality sound by doing this, but in the circumstances facing us right now the most important thing will be getting the material out there – and the sound will be basically fine anyway. Decide where to upload them (all ours are on YouTube) and give the students the link to view them. There's a lot of debate about the right length for an online presentation of this sort, but that's down to student preferences and ways of learning – theological students generally seem to appreciate longer rather than shorter. One thing to bear in mind is that students will be engaging with this at home, and it is likely that some will have children who will be curious to see what the parents are watching. Take account of that possibility when including things like video clips that may not be child friendly. If all that sounds too daunting, then there is a wealth of material on YouTube and Vimeo, and several of the ivy league universities in the US have free videos online covering a wide variety of topics – though to be honest, it could take you longer to find exactly what you want than it would be to make your own.

Space for conversations

Given all the factors that are likely to impinge on students' lives at this time, we are personally favouring asynchronous discussions using (since it's already set up and is familiar to students) the forum facility in (in our case) Moodle and Canvas. A typical classroom course often meets for four or five hours a week, in one or two sessions. In light of the constraints already highlighted, sticking with existing timeframes may not be the most effective way to proceed. Given all the other things people will be wrestling with, we wonder if spreading discussions over the week might be a more effective approach. It could look something like this:

- Start the course with a one-off real time session using your favoured conference call platform. Which one you choose will depend on the size of group. For smaller groups, simple things like Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Google Hangouts, or Blue Jeans will work just as well as more sophisticated tools such as Zoom. What you do in this initial session will depend on how well you know the students and they know one another. If this is an entirely new group, spend time with introductions, if you're already mid-course that won't be necessary. But in both cases, invite students to show you where they are sitting, where they will be working, and if appropriate who else is in the same space (this will be easier if you use a platform that works well on a phone). Warn students in advance that this is what you would like to do, so that any who feel strongly that you should not see their surroundings can inform you of that in advance. But ideally from a teaching point of view, knowing their various physical contexts will enable you to be more helpful in understanding the kind of support that might be appropriate – and other students will also benefit from knowing the situation in which their classmates are working. Make this a social occasion, not a teaching one (while obviously answering questions about how things will work, or anything else that might be relevant).
- Let's assume you have uploaded your presentations already so that students will be able to watch them at a time to suit their own circumstances. Encourage them to do this early in the week, and before interacting about them with other students. If you haven't made your own presentations or if you wish reading materials to be the primary resource, the same applies, though bear in mind that students will not necessarily have access to libraries at this time.
- Alongside this, use the existing forum facility in Moodle or Canvas. Identify a specified time when forum discussions will be open (say, from Monday morning), with a question/topic for discussion in the forum for each week, and a level of engagement stipulated for each student along with a time by which to contribute (eg we could say: 'make at least three significant contributions of at least 450 words each, by Thursday afternoon' – or whatever might match the likely time constraints of the group or your own expectations of what constitutes 'significance'). Keep an eye on these discussions from time to time, and feel free to contribute yourself by asking further questions, making comments, etc. This will all be asynchronous, that is contributions made as and when different individuals are able to fit it into the other demands they will be dealing with.
- Towards the end of the week, have a real-time session for maybe an hour (or as long as it takes, but probably not more than around 90 minutes which seems to be as long as most can sustain a video conference conversation), in which students can be

encouraged in relation to their forum posts, questions can be dealt with, and so on.

If all that is accomplished in 30 minutes, resist the temptation to extend it artificially. These suggested timings are all just notional, to give you the idea, and a week doesn't need to start on a Monday. You could also add a brief synchronous video conversation at the start of each week which could be an opportunity for some reflective ritual or prayer. Consultations with individual students could also be done should that become necessary. For these video conference sessions, Zoom seems to be emerging as a preferred option for many (though we have yet to discover whether their systems are robust enough to cope with the extra traffic). If you are communicating with students in real time, whether by Zoom or some other video conferencing facility, and you are not totally familiar with how to do it, then having another person to take care of the tech while you focus on the conversation will undoubtedly improve the experience for everyone, including you.

It's not all bad news

The subject matter of a particular course would determine whether what is proposed here is the ideal, but we see it as having a number of advantages in the present situation.

- An obvious one is that by not having everything in real time it offers the sort of flexibility that will be needed as students juggle with increased domestic requirements of the sort highlighted above, and hopefully guards against some of the potential flash points noted there (such as who in a household gets priority access to computers in the middle of a working day: while adults might be up for negotiation, the same will not be true of young children).
- Another one is that it guarantees every student has a voice, and even those who might say very little in a classroom or video conference will be heard more. Anecdotally this matches our own experience and there has also been a fair amount of research showing that to be the case. Be aware that it is generally even harder to ensure full participation in a real time online video conversation than it is in a physical classroom.
- Asynchronous discussions also have an advantage for individuals who don't quite think on their feet, and who only know what they would have said after the opportunity has passed. By using asynchronous forums as the main discussion space, the opportunity is there for longer reflection time and students to add more insights later. Extending the time for contributions over several days means that students will be able to deal with all the other responsibilities they may have without compromising their study time.
- Having presentations recorded means that they are easily available for repeat viewings by students – and a bonus for teachers as you may find them useful for other contexts, though don't fall into the trap of thinking you can continue to use the same material for years afterwards.

Finally, as a teacher remember that you never expected to be doing any of this. You didn't sign up for it any more than the students did. You will be doing the best you can with the time and resources available. It will not be a pattern for your future teaching. Do what you know how to do, resist the temptation to become over-complicated technologically (you'll have plenty of time to explore all that later if you're so inclined). Be aware of your own limitations as well as the many challenges facing the students. And know it will be enough.

