Teaching Conversations

OIA invited instructors to attend one of four teaching conversations in October 2020 (Oct. 5, 8, 12, or 5) to share how their classes are going, how they are adapting to remote instruction, and what support they and their students could use. This is a summary of the input we heard for each question.

1. **What is going well in your teaching so far this semester? What have you changed in response to teaching remotely so far this semester?**

   *In general, the responses focused on providing more structure to support students who are juggling classes in various modalities along with work and family commitments. Specific suggestions are listed below.*

   - Reducing high-stakes exams, just doing weekly assessments to cover one week of material. Meeting with small groups for 20 minutes/week, to review most-missed questions, discuss pre-class questions.
   - Every two-week check-in with students about our class and their other classes. This check-in is every week for asynchronous classes.
   - Daily announcements on D2L home page; these are more social than academic.
   - Very small extra credit events; these are motivational and something not explicitly in the course content. For example, I posted a photo of a satellite recon array taken from a very odd angle and asked students to identify it.
   - At the beginning of every class, go to the syllabus--what is today, what are we doing today? What will we be doing for the next week? for four weeks out? If the class is asynchronous, post a short video announcement at the beginning of every week that does the same thing.
   - Chunking of work into day-by-day bits rather than the entire week.
   - Tell students to pull out cell phones during a class session and set an alarm to remember to take a quiz.
   - We are creating “study groups” of 6-8 students. We have found that they won’t do form groups themselves.
   - We are using Teams to try to facilitate group work. We are giving them a biweekly assignment to turn in as a group.
   - One instructor was including current topics in class sessions. Students were debating issues in small groups and then presenting to the whole class.
   - Music classes are being taught in Centennial hall by necessity—they are in the “real” performance space they would be training for. Classes are MORE hands-on and relevant.
   - Points for participation in course activities rather than points for attendance seems to be a meaningful way to provide incentive for students to attend class meetings.
   - Since 5-6 minutes is the general attention span, put short videos on D2L and spend class time doing something with the course content.
   - Collaborative Google forms have been helpful in giving students a voice.
   - Google Jamboard is a great tool for collaborative sense-making. There are some limitations--cannot be saved as PDF always.
For math, Desmos activities have also been really helpful.

- Providing checklists as students move into breakout rooms so they know what to do in their small groups.
- Providing guidelines to start discussions in breakout rooms; e.g., whoever has the shirt with the most red, or lives furthest east when not at the UA needs to start the discussion.
- Starting class with lower-stakes icebreaker activities at the beginning of class in breakout rooms, then return to the main meeting after about two minutes.
- Poll Everywhere polls are a great favorite; including ~7 activities per class period provides instantaneous feedback and great participation.
- Discussion prompts that ask students to relate the content to students’ own experiences seem to generate thoughtful responses. Some instructors ask students to come up with discussion prompts, and that has been successful.
- Students get attendance points for completing an activity during a class session, but those who cannot do so do a different, threaded discussion activity. It’s more fun to come to class than to do the makeup assignment.
- Reminding struggling Graduate Teaching Assistants who are new to teaching to not forget the "joy" or "fun" of teaching despite the fact they may be live on-line. Also, try and find practical applications of the course material.

2. What is your sense of students’ engagement with the course, you, and each other?

Most instructors reported a lack of engagement among some students, as compared to their former in-person classes. Specific comments are listed below.

- We are hearing that students are feeling “lost” this semester. Just a general sense of not knowing how to structure their time, what to do, where to get help, etc.
- Feeling is that students aren’t engaged much with one another. Breakout rooms are useful for collaboration during classes, but that “family” atmosphere hasn’t been possible via Zoom. But students are responding in a positive way.
- It’s hard to track the numbers of students who are watching asynchronous videos. Students who want to, are getting a great education. But it’s hard to reach that second tier of students who aren’t participating. I’m trying not to be hard on myself as an instructor and remembering that there are advantages as well; flexibility is appreciated.
- Student engagement has been all over the place in a 4-credit course. Eight of 25 students dropped; that’s a first. Some are doing stuff, but not necessarily completely or well, or with the right priorities. Some are not really interacting at all.
- Students are not necessarily accessing course messages (emails, etc) in a timely way.
- It’s been difficult to get student-student engagement to happen; this happens best when doing a “workshop.”
- Students report finding most classes boring.
- It’s a tough sell if a class isn’t super engaging/entertaining--lots of distractions from life, technology, etc.
- Students are more engaged than usual; my courses are always offered online only.
3. **What questions/concerns do you have about the rest of the fall semester?**
   - Not that it involves me directly, but it is not clear how the change in class attendance will affect the University as a whole.
   - Will this result in permanent changes in the University; e.g., no large in-person classes anymore?
   - Large enrollment numbers are desirable from a financial standpoint, but the student experience could be off-putting.
   - Inexperienced graduate-student instructors need a standardized template for creating a lesson plan utilizing Zoom.

4. **What advice would you give to someone who will be teaching remotely during the spring semester?**
   
   *Advice was given on D2L site organization, reducing high-stakes assessments, regular communication with students, and normalizing seeking help. Specific comments are listed below.*
   
   - D2L site organization is really important to promote meaningful student engagement.
   - Reach out to the D2L team or consult the Instructor Help pages. If you leave a voice-mail message for the D2L consultants, be ready to answer a return call from an unfamiliar number, since the consultants are working from home.
   - Find ways to do “Zoom practice” with big groups, before teaching.
   - Cut back on the content for remote delivery--digging deeper, rather than “coverage.” Spreading stuff out helps students to find a way to engage.
   - Incorporate lots of smaller, lower-stakes assessments.
   - Include a cumulative assessment during finals week that can replace one test score.
   - Provide regular feedback to students.
   - Stay in contact with students, regularly.
   - Share more of yourself online--it helps to build a community.
   - Discourage students from getting caught in a “shame spiral,” where they feel hopeless about catching up in the course, and then ashamed of being behind.
   - Encourage students to seek out help; e.g., CAPS, Think Tank, Virtual Support Services, Campus Pantry.
   - Participate in one of the various FLCs, if only to stay engaged with other instructors.

5. **What kind of support would you find the most helpful?**
   
   - What is working/not working for students and instructors?
   - D2L site organization to promote better engagement with course material. iCourse/online course sites don’t necessarily translate as well to “not by choice” online courses. Students don’t actually know how to manage without the face-to-face component.
   - Monitoring/proctoring assessments is difficult; what are other strategies that can prevent inappropriate collaboration?
   - Centralized TA training resources through Graduate College--using the technologies, using available UA resources, practicing with tools.
   - What data do SSRI think would help us to understand student engagement; e.g., National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) items? Nationally, what are we looking at?
Program assessment: This year, the Writing Program is focusing on engagement via portfolio reflections. Student engagement looks different based on who your students are, what your class is, class size, etc. How do we discuss and support this based on all the differences?

6. **What kind of support would your students find the most helpful?**

- The impression is that students are floundering more in early-career courses. What is the situation across disciplines? SSRI will do a mid- to late-semester student survey; we can suggest items that address time management, balancing life/school.
- More students are falling out of classes/falling behind. Could there be a collective effort to list students and find a group of people to help reach out to students?
- Can SSRI put together resources to communicate with students? With instructors?
- Time management - reminders & maybe flexible deadlines.
- Organized offline study groups.
- A module showing how to use Google email/calendar to set up notifications and harness tools they have on hand; e.g., [Semester on a Page](#).
- Making sure students still have access to advisor appointments.
- How can we help students make the most of this very experimental time period, when the world is changing? What are the opportunities we can take advantage of?

**General Comments:**

- Online teaching takes a lot more work. Everyone is working harder and having less security. Just doing a good job takes a huge amount of time--forget “great.”
- Four times the work, but half as satisfying for everyone.
- New Zoom breakout room tool seems nicer:
  - Students can move between rooms on their own.
  - Chat persists between breakout rooms and back to the main room.