We now have about 1½ semesters experience in mostly-remote, pandemic teaching, and I expect most of us have learned some things about the challenges of teaching when we are working remotely with students. In recent conversations, one theme that arose repeatedly was how difficult it is to create a course structure that promotes and incentivizes the activities we know promote learning (attending class, reading, homework, quizzes, etc.), while also demonstrating the flexibility we know is important in this uncertain and traumatic time. We are all learning about how best to do this.

We heard from several instructors who perceived that increased flexibility around class attendance and assignment due dates seemed to serve as a disincentive for students to complete the work they needed for learning. In particular:

- Flexible due dates for assignments completed outside class time, meant to accommodate students who had unprecedented demands on their time, resulted in some students not completing work until absolutely required (a major assignment or exam), and then running into time constraints in completing the assignments or exams. Worse yet, some students simply completed the assignments or exams without doing the required learning, which impacted their grades negatively.

- Flexible attendance policies, in which a student could miss up to a week of classes without a Dean of Students excuse, were wrongly interpreted by students (and some instructors) as a “get out of jail free” card that automatically excused them from turning in assignments or taking exams during the week. This complicated instructors’ lives and also slowed the progress of learning.

- Flexible attendance policies also resulted in students not prioritizing course attendance and relying on recordings of course sessions, which resulted in shallow engagement with the learning activities and a lack of interaction with the instructor and fellow students.

A take-away from these scenarios, consistent with the literature on teaching and learning, is that a high degree of structure, time for meaningful engagement with learning tasks, and deadlines are all critical elements to promote the hard work necessary for learning.

Is it possible to develop policies and structures that simultaneously allow for flexibility and structure? It is, and although no approach will work for every course situation, there is evidence to support the following strategies:

1. Early in the course, explicitly discuss the structure of the class, and share the anticipated outcomes from each course component. This helps students understand that there is intent behind the design, and that the intent is based on the learning value of the components.

2. Create and share a policy for missed assignment deadlines that is not overly punitive, but requires students to connect with you if they will miss a deadline. For example, specify that there will be no point deduction for late work, as long as students contact you at least 24 hours in advance to let you know they will miss the deadline, and then meet the revised deadline. This allows for communication around factors limiting their ability to complete work and reinforces the two-way nature of communication about course progress.
3. Share with students that many studies (for example, Kassarnig et al., 2017) show that consistent class attendance correlates with strong course performance. (Perhaps you have data from previous years of this class to demonstrate that?) Incentivize attendance and active participation in class sessions with an appropriate number of points, but tell students you will drop a small number of days to allow for unanticipated challenges.

4. Use collaborative assignments and provide time in class to facilitate collaboration on these assignments. Make it clear that students who do not attend class will miss out on the valuable learning opportunities provided by peer collaboration. This is easiest for Live Online classes taught via Zoom. In-person classes that maximize student distancing can promote collaboration through use of shared electronic documents and/or Zoom breakout rooms.

5. Be explicit about the importance of real-time interaction with you, your teaching-team members, and other students during class sessions. Many students believe that simply listening to a course recording will allow them to stay caught up if they miss class; be sure to point out to students what they will miss, if they rely on this strategy. (On the other hand, course recordings are an essential lifeline for students who struggle in any number of ways—attention challenges, some neurological processing disorders, low English proficiency—so don’t simply stop making the course recordings!)

6. Increased course structure (many course elements and different types of activities) promotes learning (for example, Eddy and Hogan, 2017), and the effects are largest for students who are less experienced students. So, design your class with many opportunities for direct student engagement with the content—before class, during class, and after class—and give each component a small point incentive for completion. But, to support the need for flexibility, drop a small number of the lowest scores for these activities. For example, give 15 weekly quizzes, but drop the lowest 2. This strategy promotes active engagement, but also allows flexibility for the unavoidable challenges many students will face.

With luck, the pandemic will soon be behind us. But the strategies above, drawn from research in teaching and learning, can work regardless of course modality to promote better communication, more engagement, and better learning. If you have questions about how you might incorporate some of these ideas, reach out to the Office of Instruction and Assessment to schedule a consult.