Reflecting and Adjusting after Your First Weeks of Remote Teaching

The transition to remote teaching was rapid and unprecedented, but you managed it. As your first weeks of remote teaching come to a close, this is a good time to pause and reflect on what went well and what you and your students found challenging. This short guide suggests ways to make the most of these early experiences so that you (and your students!) can successfully navigate the weeks ahead.

Seek feedback from your students—and respond to what they tell you

Seeking feedback from students

All of us are facing a learning curve as we shift to remote learning. Many of us have had to learn how to navigate new platforms and technologies, and our students are also adjusting to a whole new way of learning (while, in many cases, navigating significant changes in their personal and home lives). One of the best ways to find out whether students are effectively making this transition is to seek feedback from them. Not only will this help you make any needed changes, but it will also help them feel more connected to you and to your course. Here are two manageable ways to seek feedback from your students:

• If you teach a small class, post an announcement on Blackboard asking students to email you and tell you one thing that is working well and one thing that is challenging them as they learn remotely.
• If you teach a larger class, create a Survey in Blackboard and ask students to respond to the same questions.

It will take students a day or two to respond to your questions. During that time, don’t forget to give yourself time to pause and consider your own responses to the questions you are posing to your students. We can’t make productive changes if we don’t identify the challenges that both we and our students are facing.

Responding to student feedback productively

After you have received this feedback, take some time to read through students’ responses and identify the patterns that emerge. Choose two or three areas in their feedback that you want to address, share those with your students, and assure them that you will find a solution. You might want to reach out to consultants in ITLAL and ITS to find solutions that you and your students can manage. Most importantly, make sure that you maintain open communication with your students so that even as your plans continue to develop, they can trust that you are taking their feedback seriously and working in their best interest. Below are the key elements of this communication:

• Tell students that you are responding to their feedback. (Students need to feel included in any changes or adjustments that you make.)
• Tell students that you are making changes or adjustments in order to help them learn more effectively and be successful as they navigate these complex times. (Students are more
likely to accept changes if they understand that those changes are made for their own good.)

- Tell students clearly what will change, explaining your new plans in a logical and succinct way. (Students need detailed, step-wise guidance in a remote learning environment so that there are no questions in their minds about the work they need to do.)

When you communicate with them in these ways, students will feel grateful that you are taking steps to improve their learning and keeping the lines of communication open.

**Don’t be afraid to simplify**

It’s not uncommon to realize after the first weeks of remote teaching and learning that your initial plan was overly ambitious or complex. Some instructors initially plan to recreate their face-to-face course online using a synchronous approach and find that students (or the instructors themselves) cannot work successfully with the technology or the time constraints of such a plan. Other instructors initially plan an asynchronous approach and find that the greater amount of written work they’d asked for overwhelms their students and results in an unmanageable amount of grading or feedback for the instructor. The key in these (and other) situations is to simplify. Here are two examples of how to do so.

- If your plan for synchronous learning is simply not working, you can create an asynchronous plan in which you post modified, shorter versions of your lectures at the beginning of the week, require students to respond to a short quiz in the middle of the week, and respond in some detail to a prompt on a Discussion Board that requires application of key principles from the lecture and readings.

- If your plan for asynchronous learning is overwhelming because you’ve required more written work from students than previously, reduce the amount of writing they are doing. You can create a Blackboard Journal that students write in once a week: skim a few journal entries each week and respond to the trends in thinking that you are seeing. Or you might require students to respond to a prompt on Discussion Board once a week and comment on one other classmate’s response once a week. You can read through some of these threads and respond to the whole class with key feedback about insights, misconceptions, and novel ideas you are seeing.

As you simplify, stick to a plan that involves 2-4 predictable steps every week, and organize those steps for you and your students in Blackboard. You can make the structure of your course clear in Blackboard by creating a folder for each week and making that folder available at the same time (e.g., every Monday morning). That folder should include (1) a document that guides students through the sequence of students’ work for that week and (2) instructions and links to all the work that students need to complete (e.g., assignments, discussion boards, journals, quizzes, etc.). When we create a simple plan and communicate it clearly, we increase our students’ chances of success.
Find the opportunities in remote learning and take advantage of them

There are myriad ways in which remote learning may surprise us with unexpected learning opportunities for our students. Here are two common examples of such surprises.

- You may learn more about your students as they share what they can and can’t do remotely and as they share how they are managing their home lives and the pandemic. The advantage is that you can reach and teach students more effectively when they share their challenges with you. Ask for support from ITLAL and ITS as you learn more about what your students need.
- You may discover more about all your students’ learning because they will be doing more writing for you than they have done previously: in asynchronous courses, Discussion Board posts or other short written responses will stand in for oral responses in class. Asking students to write one short, focused essay a week has the advantage of requiring students to go into greater depth in their thinking than they might in a face-to-face class and they thus learn more. It also gives you the opportunity to hear from some students who would never speak up in a face-to-face class. Keep in mind that you don’t have to respond to every single piece of writing students do. Sometimes it is enough for them to feel that you are reading their work. Other times, skim student work and provide focused feedback to the entire class.

These unexpected learning opportunities become more apparent when you give yourself time to reflect on them. To engaged in structured reflection, we encourage you to talk with one of ITLAL’s Instructional Consultants or join a virtual Brown Bag session on Remote Teaching. (To learn about the brown bag series, scroll to the bottom of the Keep Teaching UAlbany page for details, including a link to those sessions.)

Work to prevent incivility—but manage incidents with compassion and grace

Remote learning in our current situation can result in student behaviors that you haven’t seen before. It’s helpful to take a step back and consider why you see such behavior. Students are stressed, feel disconnected, and are now communicating using remote platforms that may be similar to virtual spaces where uncivil behavior is tolerated or even encouraged. It’s helpful to have a plan to respond to this behavior.

Preventing incivility

- When students know how to succeed in your course, they feel included and safe and will be less apt to behave in upsetting ways. Make sure students have a clear sense of your plans and expectations for them. They also need to know how they can seek help if they are struggling, either academically or personally. Campus resources are still available to them virtually.
- When students feel connected to you, they won’t need to get your attention in ways that are upsetting. Hold virtual office hours in Zoom at times that students are likely to be able to join. If some students can’t make those office hours, have phone conferences with
students. In general keep lines of communication open with students through frequent announcements and emails that guide students’ efforts.

- When students feel connected to other students, they won’t need to get attention in ways that are upsetting. Encourage students to stay connected to each other. For example, you might use the Groups function of Blackboard to create groups in asynchronous plans for work. For synchronous communication, you can use Breakout Rooms in Zoom if you feel students know one another and work well together.

- Use settings on Blackboard, Zoom, and other platforms to create and maintain civility. For example, you can create Groups in Blackboard to mirror a social setting that encourages civil behavior. You can also also limit how students can use the email tool in Blackboard (you may want to prevent students from sending mass emails). In Zoom, you can use settings that prevent unenrolled persons from entering your remote classroom. You can also mute participants and have students use the Raise Hands icon so that you can moderate discussions in large classes. You also have control over screen sharing in Zoom. Use ITS to learn more about settings such as these.

**Responding to incivility**

- If a student behaves in ways that are upsetting, respond in ways that support all students. Communicate with the student whose behavior was upsetting privately rather than shaming the student in front of others. If an incident happens in the presence of other students, reach out immediately to the class and let them know that what happened was upsetting. Tell them how you are working to make the class a safe and welcoming place, and follow through with concrete actions. Use the event as an opportunity to communicate with students about creating community and civility in the remote learning environment. And if necessary, reach out to [Student CARE Services](#) so that the student can get the support they need.

- If you encounter problematic or upsetting behavior, you don’t have to go it alone! [ITLAL consultants](#) are glad to help you think through these issues, and [Student CARE Services](#) can offer advice for responding to student behaviors and coordinate support for student in need.

**Add more interactive elements of your course slowly and thoughtfully**

A simple but effective plan for remote learning results from reflecting and adjusting after your initial first week or two. As things stabilize you may want to add more complex elements into your plan to ensure interaction or deeper application of principles and processes. We recommend you engage in these kinds of changes with support, either by consulting with ITLAL or by joining us on Fridays for our virtual Brown Bag sessions on Remote Teaching. (To learn about the brown bag series, scroll to the bottom of the [Keep Teaching UAlbany](#) page for details, including a link to those sessions.)