These notes are not exhaustive but address important pedagogical issues that provided focus for some of our conversation. These include many suggestions that came up during the session as well as some additional strategies and best practices.

**Issue 1: Attending to your mental health and well-being**
We have all spent a great deal of time and energy thinking about our students’ well-being—and we should absolutely do that. But we also have to realize that we won’t be able to help our students if we don’t take care of ourselves. We need to be deliberate about how we manage our time, our relationship with our work as teachers, and our relationship with our students.

*Some strategies to attend to your own mental health and well-being*

1. *Be honest*—with yourself and with your students—*about what is happening*. If you are feeling overwhelmed, don’t ignore it. It is easy to convince ourselves that we just need to “soldier on,” but instead we need to pay attention to signals that are telling us something needs to change. Acknowledge what you are experiencing in a professional way, and don’t be afraid to tell students that you may have to make some adjustments to how you work with them so that you can manage.

2. *Schedule time to correspond with students and make them aware of those times*. The circumstances we are teaching and living in right now mean that students may believe they have (or should have) access to us 24/7. That isn’t sustainable, though, and if we set the expectation that we are always available to students, they will respond accordingly. Tell your students (and yourself!) that you will respond to emails twice a day within a designated time frame (e.g., “I will respond to emails at 10am and 4pm each weekday.”)—and stick to that schedule.

3. *Collect questions and respond to the class instead of just to individual students*. If the same questions keep coming up, consider periodically posting a “Frequently Asked Questions” announcement or email to all students, which includes responses to all the questions you received. You might use this format, also, for questions that you know are likely to come up for multiple students. This can help ensure that you are responding to important concerns and can also preempt individual questions.

4. *Create space for students to answer each other’s questions*. You do not have to be students’ only source of information. In fact, you empower them by helping them become resources for their classmates and recognize that they actually have access to multiple sources of information about your course. Consider setting up an “Ask a Question” discussion forum that is easily visible in your course; students can use this space to post and respond to each other’s questions.

**Issue 2: Managing and aligning expectations**
Because the shift to remote teaching was unexpected and happened quickly, we may not have had sufficient time to make sense of what we can reasonably expect of our students—and ourselves—in this new context. Moreover, we may not have figured out how best to communicate those expectations.
Some best practices for managing expectations

1. **Have an explicit and ongoing conversation with your students about what is working well—and what isn’t—in this new environment.** If students aren’t doing the work that you expect, that may signal the need for a conversation about where they are struggling. Students may be facing problems with access, finances, health, or family illness, or they may simply not have adjusted to learning in a new setting. Keeping the lines of communication open and asking students explicit questions gives you an opportunity to make adjustments to your expectations if necessary. And don’t forget that keeping the lines of communication may mean that you need to reach out to individual students who are falling behind.

2. **Focus on what really matters.** Sometimes in our enthusiasm to make sure we are giving students an educational experience that equates with what they would have received during a regular semester, we can overreach. However, it simply isn’t possible to recreate our classroom in the context we are living in—we can’t do everything we had planned to do in our face-to-face class. We need to ask ourselves what is essential to our students’ learning in the course: what are the skills and knowledge they have to leave with? If an assignment helps them gain those skills and knowledge, it should probably stay in your course. If it doesn’t, then you don’t need to include it.

3. **Clarify your expectations for students.** One of the big challenges of moving from a face-to-face classroom to remote teaching is that you don’t have the opportunity for the kind of impromptu explanations or reminders that can come up as the result of student questions or spontaneous in-class discussions. This means that you have to be even more explicit in communicating instructions and expectations. Pay attention to places where students seem to be struggling to meet expectations—that may be a signal that they need more explicit guidance to do the work. You can offer that additional guidance by modifying instructions and grading criteria for upcoming activities and assignments.

Teaching about sensitive topics online

Teaching about controversial or sensitive topics is challenging in any setting: considering how to manage discussions around these topics when you are teaching remotely means we have to take new factors into consideration. While we may consider avoiding topics like death, illness, or social inequities because we don’t want to add to students’ stress, our disciplinary tools can help students make sense of these difficult topics in productive ways.

Some best practices for teaching sensitive topics in a remote class

1. **Slow down discussions by using Discussion Boards.** If you are going to have class discussions about sensitive topics, having students think and write on their own first can provide an opportunity for them to process their emotions before engaging with their classmates. In a real-time face-to-face discussion, students can feel “on the spot” and may be witnessing other students’ strong emotional responses in the moment: this can amplify their feelings. If students respond to a discussion prompt or question in writing, they are forced to slow down, giving them a chance to think through their ideas before sharing. If you are concerned that students may write posts that are inappropriate or insensitive, you can set up discussions so that they require moderation. (You can find instructions to set up moderated
2. Acknowledge that these topics may provoke emotional responses, and normalize that. Sometimes instructors’ anxiety about a conversation going “off the rails” can lead us to want to tamp down or ignore students’ emotional responses. The reality, though, is that we can’t simply bypass an emotional response for the sake of getting to a more detached or academic view of a subject. Instead, we have to acknowledge those responses before we can move on. Students need to know that it’s normal for certain topics to provoke strong feelings, and they need time and space to reflect on the emotions they experience.

3. Consider giving students space to process their thinking about these topics privately. While some of the work students do with these topics may happen in the presence of their classmates, they may need private space to think and reflect as well. You can use a Blackboard Journal to give students a space where they can write about topics in whatever way they choose—you might read those, or you might not. The point is for students to be able to process their thinking on their own before they have to share ideas with their classmates. Some topics may hit a little too close to home for our students right now, and they may need to work through their own ideas before they are ready to share them with other students.

4. Be clear about your expectations. It can be helpful to work with your students to establish some guidelines for how students should engage in discussions of sensitive topics. Before you begin working with a sensitive topic, engage students in a structured discussion about the purpose and value of working with the topic, of what kinds of discussion will and won’t be productive or acceptable, and how you and they can respond if someone in the class violates those guidelines. While this won’t eliminate the potential for unexpected or difficult responses, it creates a path for working with and through those responses. If students aren’t clear about how they are supposed to respond to an assignment or prompt, they are more likely to respond inappropriately (or, in some cases, not to respond at all).