

AUC Faculty Summer Online Teaching Reflections

In this special two part issue of CLT's New Chalk Talk, we share the stories of four AUC faculty who are teaching online this summer, and comparing how this experience has been different from the emergency remote teaching experience of the spring semester.

You will find a few faculty referring to a CLT workshop. This was our June Online Teaching Institute, which accompanied our Blackboard course that provided guidelines and resources on summer teaching online. If you are teaching in the fall, we are offering a similar Online Teaching Institute to help faculty prepare for the fall several times in July and August. This is also accompanied by a Blackboard resource on teaching online for fall 2020.

Part 1

Firas Al-Atraqchi, Chair and Associate Professor of Practice, Department of Journalism - School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

Our students have been through challenging experiences this past spring, yet they still had the advantage of starting off the semester on campus, using that time to get to know their teachers and classmates.

This summer, however, many have had anxiety about jumping back into online learning without knowing the teacher or their classmates.

In order to ease students back into the online learning experience, it became necessary to reboot how faculty design their syllabi. Through a number of CLT exercises and workshops, all summer faculty reconfigured their traditional syllabi to ones which have online learning at their heart. It was a laborious, yet rewarding task which strengthened faculty understanding of how to best utilize technology (and sometimes psychology) to give students the most comprehensive online learning experience.

This is where the CLT suggested series of exercises come in. As an icebreaker, for example, use a few minutes of the first class having students with their cameras turned on to introduce themselves, their majors, their hobbies, and so on. The teacher would also have to participate in this by sharing something about themselves.

Another exercise to get students engaged is to review at the beginning of the semester the syllabus and course outline with them, and answer the questions they may have. Using their feedback, I was able to tweak the syllabus to make it a perfect balance between learning outcomes and student expectations. Students begin to feel invested when we routinely revisit and fine-tune the syllabus and course outline. Communicating these changes back to the students is also critical as it begins to establish rapport and trust.

It really makes a difference. It creates a community experience and allows the students to ease into the process of learning without any emotional pressures.

Starting off each class by asking how everyone is doing also makes the online teaching experience a welcoming one for everyone. In fact, given that they don't have much to do all summer, the icebreaking measures encourage students to attend the class.

This has been driven home by the CLT ethos that student welfare is an urgent concern.

Kate Ellis, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology - School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Moving into full time online teaching as the reality of Covid 19 hit was a shock for most of us. For me, I was simultaneously undergoing a surgical recovery, so the move in some way allowed me to continue to teach for the rest of the spring semester when otherwise I would have been on medical leave as my physical presence at the university was not possible.

In the midst of the shock of what was going on, despite having had some previous experience of teaching collaborative online interactive learning courses, I certainly felt anxiety at the sudden switch to fully online delivery. It was a real time of uncertainty as an instructor; how much should I contact the students, what is too much and what is not enough contact? How is best to convey course information, how do I deal with large class sizes using online platforms such as zoom? How do I fully use zoom? Panopto? What works best? Should I record my classes and post them, or teach simultaneously online, or a mixture of both? How do I cope with the internet issues we have here in Cairo? How available should I be? What can the students cope with, do they know how to use these technologies? How will I manage their anxiety? These were things that were not figured out quickly or fully during the spring semester, so many more hours of preparation were poured into trying to keep things going as 'normal', to give the 'same or as good as' an experience. It took some time to realize these were not very realistic goals and that some things would have to be 'different', that also did not have to mean less of a learning experience, just different.

What helped with these difficult times in a truly significant way was having a weekly department meeting focused on discussing the challenges, sharing solutions and offering support. We have wonderful full time and adjunct faculty with so much experience in the Psychology department that this group was undoubtedly invaluable. The weekly feedback provided by the university from students was also helpful in measuring the feeling of how things were being received amongst my students, though at times what one found helpful, provoked anxiety in another, and so led to more questions as to how was best to proceed. And so it was with a feeling of relief (and exhaustion) to have kept things going along without any major bumps in the road that the end of spring was upon us.

It was clear to me that major themes of anxiety, how to find information, feeling overwhelmed with too much information and too frequent communication (albeit with good intentions on my part) and a great sense of loss of the classroom interaction and overall isolation had dominated the latter part of spring semester. Being a very social and interactive instructor, it had been no walk in the park for me either. As a practicing clinical psychologist, I know only too well how we can project our own anxieties onto each other!

Moving into the summer semester was such a different experience. Armed with this feedback and the ability to prepare ahead of time to teach a course fully online rather than being thrown in head first made a big difference. But what really made things different was the support given from the CLT, after attending the preparation for summer workshop delivered by the CLT (I can't recommend this short course enough), and then having individual consultation sessions with the team there, what emerged was a new confidence in using several online platforms, a well-designed and easily navigated syllabus (after several rounds of review, tips and advice, thank you Maha, Hoda, Paul, Caroline, Aziza and everyone else at the CLT) and weekly plans for the students to find all they needed in an easy to access, all in one place format. Added to this, I have completely become addicted to the use of break out rooms on zoom (again a huge thank you to the CLT, in just two hours they delivered a fun and easy to follow training on how to use this function), and finally this summer, I have been able to easily divide my class into groups on zoom, bringing back the interaction in large groups that was missing often during spring.

My summer class is now in its 5th week and the feedback from my students so far has been very positive. Despite the occasional internet issues (I record and post our live classes on a Google drive in case anyone can't connect, so this has been navigated well), things are going smoothly. It has been a fun semester, and being an introduction to psychology class, it is always so wonderful to hear and experience the differing contributions from students with diverse backgrounds. This richness has been returned to my online classroom using tools such as the breakout rooms and discussion boards. I have found myself looking forward to class each morning with something close to pre Covid 19, rather than worrying about a lack of interaction and how to do things well. The feedback from students has been that this has allowed them to develop relationships and get to know each other in a similar way as to how they would in a face to face environment; they find things clear and really enjoy our daily discussions and learning together. As we move towards fall and still are in a position of not knowing if we shall get back into our physical classrooms in the near future, this experience and the huge amount of support and resources provided by AUC make me feel ready either way and whilst I absolutely cannot wait to get back onto our beautiful campus, I am feeling much more confident and inspired to provide the best learning experience that our students both expect and deserve. Thank you again to all of you at AUC who have made this transition a positive learning experience and kept us guided in a time of great uncertainty.