

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 2

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I love teaching fully online. It's exciting, it's new, and I feel that I have really developed my teaching and plan to continue using the very same techniques even when we go back to in-person traditional classrooms.

A few years ago, I took the blended learning course through CLT and had already started to use some of the tools that I am using today. Then in 2018, I took a certificate in designing an online course waiting for the moment when we can introduce fully online courses at AUC. I didn't wish for a pandemic but I must say this has been an incredibly fulfilling experience and I do love the challenge. Switching to remote teaching in the spring was easy because we already knew our students and really the focus was on teaching in an emergency mode to save the semester. No one was thinking long-term.

The summer semester has been another experience altogether. I started by designing the course that I was to teach and then improved the course design further after taking the CLT online workshop. I had the time during the long Eid holiday to focus on this endeavor so I began by trying to mimic the introductory class by presenting the lectures in a Panopto pre-recorded format and by writing the test content. I quickly realized that I had all the tools in the world to go beyond this basic form. I then decided to write new activities that are intended to engage and resonate with students instead of the traditional assignments and to post on Blackboard (BB) discussion board after the end of every topic so that students could share their knowledge, ideas and experiences not just for my benefit but for that of the entire class. I also proceeded to add additional material in the form of short YouTube videos, blogs, tweets, current event articles and PowerPoint of lectures. By the time the semester had begun, almost all content and material a student needed was available on their BB account. This way, I could use our Zoom sessions exclusively for live discussions, Q&A sessions and interaction with students.

Along the way, I discovered the reasons why I loved the experience:

- Students became 100 percent independent in their learning and self-sufficient. The first week, students were asking questions that were typical of what they would ask during face to face courses until they realized that the answers could easily be found in their course materials. With less hand-holding, they learnt quickly to make the effort themselves, becoming more interested in learning and dare I say more mature in their approach. The class of mostly freshmen students displayed capabilities that I had never witnessed before.
- The experience has improved my online teaching but I will also use many of the same methods to teach in the regular classroom. The class is designed to be sequential in ways that I hadn't thought of before. I am even better organized than I was in the past. I plan to design future classes similarly and use classroom time for engagement with students and active learning. No more traditional lecturing for me.
- Up close and personal connections with my students have been formed. This is a large class of 38 students. I normally find it difficult to get to know each and every one but the online environment and tools allowed me

to connect more closely with the students, gave me better opportunity to deal with mixed levels and student difficulties, and helped me keep the more advanced students challenged throughout the semester.

Finally, I would like to add that learning to use BB and Zoom tools was not too difficult. I took CLT workshops, watched BB videos and if I got stuck, I asked for CLT student technology assistants or one-on-one consultations. I am so pleased with the effort I put into this course. The synchronous and asynchronous delivery of lectures, tests, and assignments, grading and online interaction have resulted in an effective and seamless learning opportunity for students and their instructor.

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The shift to online teaching in early spring 2020 was abrupt, involved great uncertainty, and a lot of trial and error. However, benchmarking against local, regional, and even global peers I strongly believe that the quality, thoughtfulness, and speed of AUC's response was great. Four elements made this happen (1) The faculty's instinctive commitment to their students' learning, (2) The academic leadership's adamant posture towards teaching continuity, (3) The amplified pedagogical support and guidance by the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT), and (4) The agile and advanced communication infrastructure and support provided by AUC's IT team. I teach accounting, a quantitative discipline which heavily depends on instructional problem-solving. From spring to date I, like many other fellow faculty colleagues, underwent a very steep learning curve. The below are some general reflections based on my experience so far:

- 1- Keeping your students engaged:** A percentage of my grades is based on class performance. Of course a necessary condition for performance is attendance which is now easily tracked minute by minute through Zoom. I found that randomly "Cold calling" on students while projecting an amicable learning environment which allows for errors with zero-tolerance for ridicule yields very positive results. Furthermore, the lack of 'cues' an instructor gets for students' understanding in a classroom was compensated by more than usual intermittent soliciting of feedback along the lines of "Any questions?" Or "Is this clear?"
- 2- Increasing Availability and Accessibility:** From the outset of the pandemic and the resulting switch to virtual classrooms students' anxiety and stress naturally increased. The social routine of these young active individuals was totally changed due to the lockdown. To make things more stressful after 12 years of schooling and one or more years of university study with physical classrooms, all of this was now reduced to a screen. I had to counter balance this uncertainty by signaling that "I genuinely understand and care". Besides the standard Black Board and email communications, one-on-one zoom office hours, I did something for the very first time in my 13 years of post-PhD teaching; I shared by personal mobile number with all of my students. Thus I became more available and reduced the response time to their queries. I believe that just having your instructor a phone call or WhatsApp message away, even if not used, is comforting.
- 3- Providing Multiple 'Learning Safety Nets' for Students:** I mix synchronous (i.e. Zoom sessions) and asynchronous (i.e. pre-recorded Panopto lectures) instruction. However, the different learning pace of each student and the periodic internet connectivity problems dedicated to making all material, including live zoom sessions recordings available on Black Board. This allowed for convenient retrieval by students who attended a class and wanted to review and those who missed it and wanted to catch up.
- 4- Promoting more Learning Independence and Accountability:** For some topics I used a form of a flipped classroom approach. Theoretical concepts and simple numerical applications were introduced through short asynchronous pre-recorded lectures while step-by-step problem solving was conducted through live synchronous Zoom sessions. This meant that students became more independent and responsible in terms of preparing for a class, making sure to seek assistance with any unclear points, and be ready to be called upon to answer questions during the live sessions.
- 5- Devise Methods to corroborate Assessment Results:** I found assessment to be the most challenging aspect of online teaching, especially for my introductory accounting course. In addition to assignments and quizzes, I used carefully timed fast-paced, non-proctored, non-monitored, staggered (i.e. question by question) take

home exams with multiple versions. Together with frequent written reminders of the need to fully comply with AUC's academic integrity policy, I believe that collectively these measures provided reasonable assurance concerning the reliability of assessment results. For my summer intro financial accounting course I also used "Live assessments". These are one-on-one Zoom short quizzes during which I verbally ask the student two or three questions which could capture the degree of his/her understanding. For upper level courses such as Intermediate Accounting II, I use a group project based on real corporate financial statements with a peer evaluation component to mitigate free-ridership.

Overall I find that this has been an unprecedented opportunity for faculty development, a great lesson of preparedness and adaptability, and a reminder of the importance of focusing on the core of what faculty do best without getting distracted by the tools and methods. "Just teach with care for students", everything else would fall into place.