

NEW CHALK TALK

Making Online Teaching Work for You and Your Students: Insights from AUC Faculty

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This year has been an exceptionally challenging one for students and faculty alike. We have been preparing for it, sharing experiences and tips, making recommendations and inviting feedback from faculty members throughout the period of online instruction with the goal of improving the student learning experience as well as supporting faculty in their efforts to enhance the online class experience.

In acknowledging the good work that faculty members at AUC have been doing, we asked them for tips in the Spring ([Showcase of AUC Faculty Teaching During Emergency Online Instruction - Spring 2020](#)) and Summer (AUC Faculty Online Teaching Reflections [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)). We also invited ideas on how [faculty started off the fall semester](#) and are now continuing this conversation with insights crafted from our engagement with faculty across several learning communities [17 faculty from across the Schools responded to our questions about student stress and anxiety, engagement and online instruction practices]

Faculty Insights: Responding to Students' Online Learning Feedback

Following feedback from student surveys, school-led fora and communications, we have all gained more **student driven insights** on needs, concerns and experiences around online learning, which we can now try to address. We chose to do this as a community of learners. Here are some classroom-tested strategies that have worked well for our faculty contributors and may inspire others. We asked faculty for insights on this challenge:

How might we find simple strategies that work well for faculty AND enhance the student learning experience?

In summary, key focus areas included:

1. Maintain **social connection** with students: check in on students and provide different paths for them to interact with you (e.g. WhatsApp groups) and each other (e.g. effective use of breakout rooms).
2. **Participation**: offer students different options to participate in your class: orally, via chat, Padlet, Google slides, etc., and the main room as well as breakout rooms.
3. **Listen empathetically** to your students and **discuss** your plans with them.
4. Help students manage their **workload**, by estimating workload, reducing email load, helping them manage their time, and help reduce **stress** and **anxiety** - in ways that reduce your workload as the teacher, too
5. Make effective use of **pre-recorded lectures**, if applicable.
6. Consider multiple modes of giving **feedback** (e.g. audio as well as written).
7. Create a sense of **continuity** via using a common "anchor" for students to refer to, in order to reduce cognitive load.

Faculty Insights: Strategies that make the online classroom work for both you and your students?

Create Social Connection

We know most faculty care about their students, but it can be harder to demonstrate it online. Showing students we care can go a long way. Several faculty (Ramy Aly, SEA; Magda Mostafa ARCH; Rania Jabr, ELI; Iman Soliman, ALI; Thomas Wolsey, GSE) regularly check in with students at the beginning of class, and occasionally make extra time for "heart to heart" (Rania Jabr) discussions if needed. This may seem like wasted time that could have gone to covering content, but if students are distracted by a major life event, they probably weren't going to focus anyway, right? The long-term effects of doing these discussions can motivate students and help them perform better.

Magda Mostafa (ARCH) *“Do mental health check-ins and share your own experiences- I often instruct my students to take a breath.”*

If you can't dedicate class time to this kind of discussion, having a semi synchronous backchannel like WhatsApp or Slack can help create space for airing anxieties and won't take up class time. For example, Iman Soliman (ALI) says:

“I use a WhatsApp [for] group informal communication which revealed to me how lost and disorientated they were despite all milestones and scaffolded course design. They informally asked about where to find this or when to submit that or where is the link to such and such or why the course calendar was not showing on their browser. It also showed me that these students did not get enough sleep. They would communicate at 4:00am and come to class at 10:00am tired. This made me more understanding of the mess they were in and consequently I became more understanding of their problems.”

WhatsApp/Slack groups have an additional advantage that students can respond to each other before you do, and reduce everyone's email load.

Ramy Aly (SEA): *“I'm asking students how they are feeling and coping at the beginning of each class and if there are any issues they want to raise in private or the context of the course and group.”*

Sophie Farag (ELI) uses Google slides to check in on students:

“I share a Google Slide with the instructions, and ask students to create a new slide and write their name. I give them 5-10 minutes to write their feelings and reflections. I have also done this when I want to check-in with students to see how they are feeling, especially mid-semester when I could sense a slump in their energy levels.

Using Slides instead of individual Google Docs means I only have one document open. By clicking on Grid View (at the bottom left of the Slides), I can see all the slides at the same time. This allows me to monitor the students' progress as they work, and I can easily leave them comments on their slide.

My students have given me positive feedback about this activity and they enjoy changing the background color of the slide to suit their mood, and adding images and Gifs to better reflect what they want to say.”

A useful reminder from Firas Al-Atraqchi (JRMC) is: *“When faculty seem to show that they do not care enough to meet with their students, how can we expect students to care about their courses? Morale will drop, as will productivity, ultimately leading to a disconnect between students and their institution... They need to know that we care. And we do care. I know dozens of faculty who really are doing their utmost and bending over backwards to accommodate students as best they can. It isn't easy, to be sure”.*

Participation: It's the voices not only the faces

We know many students don't turn their cameras on and it's difficult to teach blank screens, but we also know connectivity issues can make it impossible for some students to have good audio while their video is on. We also know students are anxious about how their participation will be graded.

Camera or no camera, students can participate via audio, chat, Google doc, or doing formative quizzes or polls using tools like Slido, Kahoot or Nearpod. You can ensure every student participates multiple times during a class session using these options. This is actually one of the advantages of online learning - there is space to ensure *everyone* participates.

Ramy Aly (SEA) writes: “Students can participate verbally, via Zoom chat or via Padlet (which is a great tool), I am also using all the features I can on Zoom to manage participation turn taking. I should say that most of them are speaking during Zoom to my surprise, there are a handful who are not engaging using any of these options even though I have sent them many reminders that participation is key and that they can choose their mode of participation. These students will have low participation grades - but there is no way that they don't know that and in any case that happens whether or not we are online.”

Tarek ElSayed (PHYS) has a simple way of quizzing students during the live lecture: “I scattered throughout all my slides many MCQ quizzes in the content of the current slides. I ask students to write down the answer in the Zoom chat box, and then I can see the answer of each student and select one to discuss the quiz with him/her. It is the same idea of clickers, done on Zoom.” Tarek also highlights student achievements in a "hall of fame" Padlet to encourage them.

However, as a teacher, keeping your camera on, at least some of the time (when your connectivity allows) can help students feel connected. Students like seeing your face. “All lectures are synchronous but also recorded for those who are not able to attend - my camera is always on” (Ramy Aly, SEA).

“When students don’t want to turn on their cameras, it can be a challenge to get to know them. I awarded a badge to students who created an avatar or put a photo up on their Zoom profile. The avatar or photo doesn’t always show up depending on how students access Zoom, but it does help them build a sense of connection to the others in the class. Plus, I learn a bit about them from their photos and avatars. One of my undergraduates has a photo of him leaning on a fence in Germany. Another is at Hurghada. Several of the students' avatars show a playful side that is hard to project in virtual environments.” (Thomas Wolsey, GSE).

Make the Most of Breakout Rooms

Faculty and students alike are reporting success with breakout rooms. General good practice for breakout rooms includes giving students clear written instructions for what to do in the breakout rooms, giving students enough time to work on it, and choosing group sizes appropriate for the task. It is also important for teachers to have a way of keeping track of what is happening in the breakout rooms.

Matthew Hendershot (RHET) regularly has students take notes of their breakout room discussions in Google slides, one slide per group. He checks progress of the different rooms as they unfold (and recognizes when he might need to drop in) and it helps keep a record of participation. Taking notes on slides makes it easier for students to report back to the main room at the end of class, and all students have documentation of everyone else's notes automatically.

You can also make one of the breakout room groups stay in the main room with you, to help you see how students are responding to the instructions you give them and help you gauge if students might need more time for the task.

Listen Empathetically & Discuss: Keep a Channel Open

Listening to students’ concerns, and discussing our own thinking with them, can make all the difference in allowing us to respond to their needs while also helping them understand why we do what we do.

Nellie el Enany (MGMT) suggests: *“Explaining the rationale behind the workload, learning outcomes, assessments and deadlines is really important, it encourages a more open and empathetic space and allows students to understand what is going on. Let's all agree though, overburdening students with work, assessments and learning material is not helpful to them or to us, and there is more and more evidence on how it negatively impacts mental health and wellbeing.”*

Ramy Aly (SEA) says: *“I am discussing deadlines with students and responding to their sense of how and when they can complete assignments. I am providing individualized deadlines where I feel that a student is genuinely struggling. The substance of their learning is more important than deadlines that apply to all, of course this means I am marking all the time basically - but these are exceptional times”.*

Other faculty like Maurice Hines (LALT) reduces the ongoing-grading workload by not allowing students to redo assignments, but providing extra credit assignments towards the end of the semester.

“On the other hand, I have encouraged resubmissions of work,” Thomas Wolsey (GSE) says. “It is more work at first, but students come to realize what I think a quality performance looks like and strive to achieve it. And, they appreciate the flexibility.”

Workload Issues

Achieving the same outcomes with lower workload

Magda Mostafa (ARCH) recommends we “remain focused on maintaining achievement of course outcomes, but not necessarily how they are achieved. We should be reaching the same destination but do not [have] to take the same route we did in the past. We need to be flexible and agile, and be willing to put in the effort to change how (we) divert from "business as usual"”.

Workload Estimation

Magda Mostafa (ARCH) *“I also give some time in class to share any challenges they are facing, and have shared with them some of the techniques I use to manage my own workload- like binaural focus music. They are very surprised to hear that faculty are also anxious and stressed, and that we too struggle to do our jobs and balance everything else.”*

If students are complaining about workload, try using this Rice University workload calculator (<https://cte.rice.edu/workload>), and recognize that workload is not just about how many pages they have to read or write, but about how cognitively challenging the task is. The added stress of the pandemic may mean there is a higher cognitive load on students than in a regular semester, their reading speed may be slower, they may be more easily distracted and they may be struggling with time management. Or try this one that includes discussion posts and class meetings (so well adapted for online learning): <https://cat.wfu.edu/resources/tools/estimator2/>

Workload Perception

Ahmed Tolba writes "In terms of workload, if... pre-recorded sessions are over and above the regular classes, students will perceive them as extra workload. I am not too convinced about that as they would replace pre-reading for example, but students in general have a harder time online, and such sessions increase their workload perception. I think mentally, they need to interact with other students, so productivity online is lower, leading to this feeling [of higher workload]."

Firas Al-Atraqchi (JPMC Chair) writes: *"Reduce workload? Absolutely. But I have to stress again that the onus is with us and all faculty. Students will look to us for guidance and support - these are critical... But even the smallest effort goes a long way with our students. When [they] see we are trying, they will perk up and reciprocate."*

Stress and Anxiety Are Real

Students are anxious, overwhelmed and stressed. They are living and learning in a global pandemic, separated from the learning environment that they know best and the social campus environment they enjoy. Faculty are working hard and most are teaching online for the first or second time. Are you overwhelmed with the amount of digital communication and emails? So are students, even if they are contributing to your load. To reduce load on faculty and students, see these insights from other faculty:

Time Management (Elisabeth Kennedy HIST): *"Here is one thing I've done that is simple but has made a huge difference for my students: I planned my syllabus so that I can consolidate all course deadlines to be at the same time each week. Whether it is a minor or major assessment, and/or ongoing submissions of regular course contributions, they are all due at midnight on Thursday that week. I also consolidate all course announcements into one email each week, sent at the same time each week. Students can settle into a predictable rhythm for my course with no unpleasant surprises, or stress about missing one of many announcements. I hear they are inundated with notifications and struggling to keep track of numerous deadlines, so this consolidation is very helpful."*

Lower Sense of Email Urgency (Yasmine Motawy RHET): *"Consider if there is a pressing need to email students at all, and set clear expectations about when you respond to your own emails. Use the "schedule send" feature if you are a compulsive emailer so that weekend emails/responses are only sent at 6 am on Sunday for instance.) There are few real emergencies and most things can wait until we are in class (meet synchronously). This reduces anxiety, information overload, and fosters respect for the increasingly fluid boundaries online learning creates."*

Helping Students Without Overloading the Teacher (Maurice Hines, LALT): *"In terms of helping students and myself manage the stress of this semester, I decided not to allow students to do make up work. Instead, I offer more extra credit opportunities in the latter part of the semester (when they realize something's wrong) as a way to make up points without backtracking and retroactive grading, which is difficult to keep track of with so many students."*

Availability to Students, Course Management Tips

Iman Soliman (ALI) suggests we "Avoid technical clutter with shared documents, such as Google Docs, and Google Slides, voice chats, and zoom meetings. Keep everything clearly laid out and linked in Blackboard. Ensure clear communication of expectations with weekly schedules, course assignment overview, rubrics, grading scheme and outcomes."

And finally, if your class size allows it, Iman Soliman (ALI) suggests you "enhance immediacy behavior": by making yourself available for your students at different times and through different channels: online office hours with accommodating time slots, with an open Zoom link in case someone pops into my "office" just like in a F2F modality.

Using Pre-Recorded Lectures/Video Most Effectively (if applicable)

Balance is key with short pre-recorded lectures focusing on key content to prepare students for a synchronous lecture that is discussion-based and interactive. AUC has required that at least 50% of our classes be held synchronously allowing students access to live classes and time with peers and professors. Keeping pre-recorded lectures short (10-20 minutes) is good practice with a check-your-understanding touch point such as a short non-graded or low-stakes quiz.

Tips from Elisabeth Kennedy (HIST):

Length and structure: *"My pre-recorded lectures take the place of one class session per week; our second class session is always synchronous and discussion-based. I divide my lectures into 10-15 minute videos, with the total time not exceeding the equivalent of one in-person class session. Each video segment has a clear title, covers a free-standing chunk of material, and has an arc. I begin each segment with a few sentences of introduction and end with a brief wrap-up."*

How to create videos: *"I dress up, project a lot of positive energy, and smile a lot!*

I set up a simple recording space in my home office with the purchase of an inexpensive photography backdrop frame available on Souq.com. This allows me to have an uncomplicated simple fabric background and to record my videos where the lighting is best, moving the backdrop according to the natural light.

I record using Panopto, with PowerPoint displaying slides as I speak. I make sure to have a good-quality, full-screen photo slide for every point I make. More slides with limited, bold content in each slide are preferable to a small number of static, crowded slides. I do not combine texts and photos within slides, and I keep text to the minimum when I use it. The result is a visually-rich video presentation that keeps moving. You can look up TED Talks' guidance on using slides and visuals for tips and the rationale on this approach to presentations."

How to post videos: *"I post them on Blackboard as links, not embedded files."*

Time management and value: *"I record my videos several days in advance of posting, to make sure there is time for the videos to upload and process. It takes me the better part of a work day to record a full lecture video [segments]. My family knows I will be exhausted by the end of a recording day and in need of food, drink, and TLC! But the investment is worth the time because once I have made the videos, I can use them again the following semester. Even when we return to in-person instruction they can be useful in case of illness, travel, or just to provide occasional variety in format. Students find them very useful for finals review as well."*

Engage with Questions: *"I end my lecture segments with open-ended, reflective questions that can only be answered based on the video material. Students have until the end of the week to post their response to our class Slack channel. Responses must be unique, so students need to read everyone else's posts first."*

Tips from Karim Addas (PHYS) using a video playlist approach with flipped teaching.

"I have over 200 short videos on youtube that cover all the course material for one of my courses

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDpoGa0QHwWVimKP45h1vZQ>

During class, depending on how far I'm going with the material, I try to see if I can assign some of the remaining material that is not so essential to explain in class as videos for them to watch at home. The maximum time I would assign for videos is about 10 mins and not more than 15 mins. At the beginning of next class, I ask if they have any questions about the material and address those then move on without explaining that material again.

I also developed excel sheets with links to the class notes and also the videos. They just need to look up the topic in the sheet and they can click on the videos for that topic. This is useful if a student could not attend class or wants to review the lecture explanation after class; they have access to what was explained in class. Usually they prefer the synchronous explanation in class since they can ask questions while I'm explaining, but it's good to have the explanation also available if they need it later."

"Similar to Karim, I use pre-recorded videos when it is something that students will want to check out on demand (such as APA formatting) or as a kind of job aid" (Thomas Wolsey, GSE).

Giving Feedback Online

Thomas Wolsey (GSE) reminds us: "Effective feedback has many qualities, but three of the most important are that feedback is timely, useful, and kind".

Yasmine Motawy (RHET) suggests: "Consider giving audio feedback to students on projects in process: It is much faster to give, the coaching tone and replayability of the feedback makes it preferable to most. It is also supported by the literature: Pearson, John (2018) Engaging practical students through audio feedback. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 11 (1). pp. 87-94."

Magda Mostafa (ARCH) suggests using one place (in her case a visual board tool called Mural) for "day-to-day classwork: it is where they submit their work, get it graded, view their rubric, discuss it with us in class and where we

as a teaching team annotate their work, give them visual and oral feedback, share resources in the chat ... I am also able to later go back to the board and add more notes and annotations, and can meet a student there during office hours to review their work and my notes. It also gives them a place to go to view others work and see the feedback they received and perhaps generalize that feedback to their own work.”

Magda Mostafa (ARCH) suggests “Give ‘feed-forward’ not feedback- we have invented this concept of feed-forward which focuses on constructive comments about students projects and provides suggestions that are both doable and build on the students own ideas”.

Nellie El Enany (MGMT) “Feedback seems to be even more important with online, for a whole range of reasons. Magda's points about feedforward [are] really important, this concept was really brought to the forefront of learning and assessment about 15 years ago or so (by Neil Duncan and others) and is reemerging with its links to improved grades, motivation and perceived self-efficacy.. A discussion about what 'good' feedback is would be useful, particularly at the department level.”

Khalil El Khodary (MENG) gives students group work with slightly different starting points, “giving them thorough feedback on their progress at a major milestone prior to final submission”, and grading their process and reflections, rather than (only) grading correctness/incorrectness of their submission.

Streamlining and Continuity in the Classroom

Using a common “**anchor**” such as a Google Slide deck or Google Doc can help focus a student's attention during class on the activities at hand both in the main room and in any breakout rooms you run during your session. Sticking to one method is always best so that students know what to expect and can adopt a rhythm for your class. This can also lessen confusion and stress.

Alyssa Young (RHET) explains: “I'd like to add one tip that I've found helpful for the Google Slides activities -- I create one Google Slides slide deck called the "Class Whiteboard" and use it all semester. That way students can bookmark the link and I can easily link it into any of my materials. I just add each new day at the beginning of the slide deck with a "section header" slide to distinguish between each day”.

Magda Mostafa (ARCH) suggests that we “consolidate all information: find a setup that works for you and that can be a one-stop-shop for students with all the multiple spaces that they get information about classes from- banner, blackboard, AUCportal, google drive, zoom, email etc. Try and create one or two clear places where everything is”. For her class, this was Mural, but for you it can be anything else.

Create a go-to place for students who miss class sessions

Yasmine Motawy (RHET) reminds us “Not everyone can watch the zoom recorded lecture later. Perhaps assign a **class blogger** for each class to take notes of the most important things said in the class that are not in the text, the valuable ideas and comments made by colleagues, etc. and post it on your LMS. This can be a quick read for those who missed the class and blogging can be graded as part of participation.”

Let's Continue to Support Each Other

As we face the probability of another semester of mostly online learning, we need to seriously consider our community's wellbeing, while also focusing on the learning experience and the achievement of learning outcomes. This challenge cannot be undertaken without an ongoing conversation between peers, students and leadership. Deans have opened up channels of communication, listening to students and faculty as well as sharing student concerns as we seek out solutions that can make a difference. Although the task may seem daunting, the choices we have ahead can be much simpler and easier to implement when we work together within our community of learners that is grounded in communication, empathy and commitment to learning in the era of this global pandemic. And as always, CLT welcomes AUC faculty requests for individual or group consultations (you can find the form [here](#)).