

Steven D. Krause

Writer, Professor, and Everything Else

Help! I have to suddenly teach online! What should I do?

As the number of universities (including my own) announce covid-19 plans that include requiring all classes finish out their terms online, I'm imagining an increasing number of college instructor and faculty-types doing a Google search along these lines of "how to teach a course online."

Some of these administrators requiring this move or faculty who have avoided and/or complained about online courses might want to ask for advice from people like me who have a lot of experience teaching online, though frankly, that's far from certain. After all, MOOC developers didn't ask experts in online pedagogy when they launched. (Which reminds me, [More Than A Moment: Contextualizing the Past, Present, and Future of MOOCs](#) seems like it might all of a sudden be a little more relevant right now. [Take a look at the free sample](#) that includes the introduction and first chapter and [if you want the book, use the promo code KRAU at checkout](#) and then it's only \$13.77).

In case there is someone who has been asked to suddenly stop what they've been doing for decades (let alone all semester) in order to shift everything online, and that person did a Google search and then landed here, I thought I'd jot down a few bits of advice based on my experiences and research about online teaching.

1. **You're going to have to muddle through as best you can, this is going to fuck up the plans you have, and it is not the same as actually developing a class from the ground up to teach online.**

Being required to move everything online in the middle of the semester in 72 or so hours is not online teaching. **This is a lifeboat, a means of getting everyone safe and sound to the end term.**

And listen, it's going to be a shit show. You know that really intensive in-class collaboration two-week activity you planned, that field trip to a specific place, that performance or a campus speaker or classroom visitor that was going to be the showcase event of the term? All fucked. Sorry, but it's true. It's going to suck.

Moving it all online in the middle of the term is a *terrible* idea, but it's better than administrators saying "give students a grade and send them home right now." And, besides, slowing the spread of a disease that is not necessarily that serious for most of us but that has the potential of killing thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of people around the world and crippling the health care system is *certainly* more important than any of our classes running smoothly. So yeah, climb into the lifeboat.

It may be less stressful to understand that what you are (likely) being asked to do is *not online teaching*. To do that effectively takes a *lot* of planning ahead. In my book, there's a chapter where I interviewed a bunch of faculty who taught in MOOCs, all of whom had no previous experience teaching an entirely online class. One of the *many* frustrations/realizations these folks had about the differences between teaching face-to-face (f2f) and online is you simply cannot rearrange or do things on the fly in an online class the same way you can in a traditional f2f class.

(As a scholar of online pedagogy, I worry that this sudden forcing of faculty to "take it online" to rescue what would otherwise be a lost semester is going to cause an ill-informed backlash. I can picture specific colleagues of mine in the next year or two complaining about online classes by saying stuff like "Well, I taught online during the coronavirus scare when we *all* had to teach online, and so I can tell you now *with experience* that there is no way an online class can work as well as a face-to-face one." I've even already seen the start of that grumbling on Facebook and the like. That's nonsense.)

2. **Talk with your students about the online "plan B" NOW, and start figuring it out.**

Now is the time to develop a plan and to start talking with your students about what you have in mind for "plan B."

For example, one thing I did yesterday in my f2f class was to practice using Google Hangouts. Last week, we chatted a bit about the possibility of closing and how we'd continue to use Canvas to make things work.

If it's too late to have that f2f class meeting where you go over what you are imagining before we board the online lifeboats, I'd suggest that instructors email, tell students the plan, *and reassure students that this is going to work out*. Rumors spread faster than viruses among students at a time like this, and based on the limited interactions I've had recently, a lot of students are hearing a lot of crazy rumors, they don't know what's going on, and they kind of need to know that you and the university are going to have their backs.

3. **Keep it as simple as possible.**

I was talking the other day with students in my f2f class (the other two classes I'm teaching have been online from the beginning of the term) about how difficult it will be for faculty in their other classes to make the shift. My students thought moving online might be possible because almost all of their instructors were already using Canvas to handle routine course business. If that's the case in your courses, you're two-thirds of the way there.

This is not the time to start figuring out some of the more complex features of Canvas (or whatever your Learning Management Software might be). But it's pretty easy to set up discussion spaces to take the place of some f2f classroom activities, to share notes/slides from lectures, do tests and quizzes, etc. So, for example: if I was teaching a traditional section of first year writing (or another course that depended on a lot of small group and/or peer review work), I'd put students in virtual groups, ask them to share electronic drafts with each other, and post their thoughts in a discussion space. If it's a class that depends on reading and discussion, I'd set up a discussion space for each text being discussed and ask students to participate within some time-frame, say a week. If I was teaching a class that was mostly lecture, I'd share slides and maybe Youtube videos of myself talking.

Mind you, *really* teaching online— that is, planning from the beginning and not just jumping on the online lifeboat and hoping for the best— allows you to do these things in a more detailed, elaborate, robust way that is as useful and effective as teaching face-to-face. Plus I really don't know what to tell folks who are teaching very tactile things, ceramics classes or music tutorials, not to mention any sort of science work that depends on a lab.

But again, all you're trying to do is make it through the term. You don't have time for anything more elaborate now. Keep it simple.

4. **Ask your university's support staff for help, sure, but ask your colleagues and students too.**

Faculty who haven't taught online or done much to make use of the campus LMS might be unaware that most universities have a decent-sized group of staff folks who are there to help you with getting your online or hybrid courses to work. Take advantage of those resources.

Of course, this group of helpful staff are liable to be completely swamped, so it might be also a good time to ask your colleagues who have taught online and students who have taken a fair number of online classes. Everyone I know who has taught online and who has thought about it a lot is more than willing to share what they know and, given that the majority of college students nowadays have taken at least one online class, they might be a good resource for how online classes typically work.

Plus you've probably Googled other things by now as resources, like [this little cheat sheet from Stanford](#). I am certain that in the coming days we'll see a lot more of this kind of thing, and I'll post those resources here and on social media as I come across them.

Update: ["Going Online in a Hurry: What to Do and Where to Start" from ChronicleVitae](#).

5. Take advantage of synchronous/video conferencing software (because you can).

My normal online classes are asynchronous, meaning there is not set time when students all agree to attend and participate. I use video conferencing (Google Hangouts specifically) to meet with my online students one-on-one, but because they all have very different schedules, I can't set up one video conference at say 10 am on Mondays and Wednesdays and expect them all to be able to make it.

For those f2f classes forced to finish things out in the online lifeboat: you do have an already agreed-upon time when you and your students can all be "present" at the same time. You can still use that time slot.

One obvious choice is video conferencing. Google Hangouts is essentially free to anyone with a Google account, and a lot of universities subscribe to Zoom, which seems to be the preferred (though not free) option nowadays. Canvas has a built-in video conferencing software that is also quite easy to use. Your local options will vary.

But keep in mind that, to have a *really* high quality video conference – the kind where the responsiveness of the video and audio makes it feel like you're in the same room – you need to have excellent network connectivity and more than basic computers. Sure, the software matters, but the real choke point is with less than great network connectivity and computers. A lot of my students and probably a few of my colleagues are relying on kind of sketchy wifi (an underpowered router, a cell phone, a neighbor's wifi, etc.) and working with an old and underpowered computer that's fine for 90% of things that only require a browser but which will struggle with video conferencing. I have two not great but very good computers, a desktop and a laptop, and Google Hangouts is one of the few things I do that routinely forces the cooling fan in these computers to kick into high gear.

So it will *work*, but it's not going to be like watching Netflix with each other. It's a lot more like being on a group Facetime call because that's essentially what it is. I ask students to try to as hard as they can to be someplace with good network connectivity and good lighting, and to practice a bit with their laptop or cell phone camera so it doesn't look like they are trying to show me a video of their chin.

But beyond and/or in addition to video conferencing, there's always group chatting, also something easily done with Google Hangouts and most of these other conferencing tools. Students, and most of the rest of us, are used to these kind of group chats, it doesn't take much technology-wise to make it work, it's very responsive, etc. I can imagine a combination of an instructor lecture with a group chat for questions and comments could work well.

(And as a wonky aside: this is feels like a throwback to synchronous communication in the 1990s. I was never that into [MUDs](#) and [MOOs](#) when I was in graduate school way back then, but I knew a lot of people in the computers and writing community who regularly met and socialized in these spaces, I knew people who taught with MOOs, and some of the best early scholarship about online culture and life were about MUDs and MOOs. Everything old is new again.)

6. Last for now: always remember it's all about the affordances.

This is a theme I return back to in my book about MOOCs often: the issue is not which format is "better," online classes (ones that are fully planned and executed, *not lifeboats*) or traditional face-to-face classes. For starters, how do you measure that? For me and the classes I teach, I think the measure is what do students ultimately learn and "deliver" at the end of the term in terms of their writing and the complete portfolio of their work. If I showed you the work of students who took the same course from me but some students took that course online and some took that course face-to-face, I am quite sure you could not tell the difference.

Online teaching has different *affordances* than teaching face-to-face. There are things you can do online that you can't do f2f, and vice-versa. It's not unlike the choices we make between talking with someone in person, on the phone, or via texting. It's not always "better" to talk with someone face-to-face – I for one can think of several conversations I've had where I much prefer the phone or texting. But each format has advantages and disadvantages.

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