Pandemic Pedagogy: Getting Your Classes Ready for the Coronavirus

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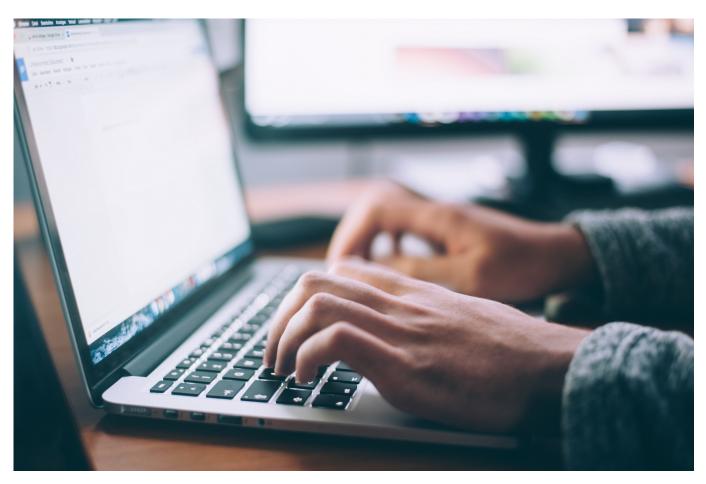
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Perhaps ironically, as I was grading earlier in the week, the old song "Everybody Loves You Now" by Billy Joel streamed through my computer. It was the capstone of a long week — I had suddenly heard from a number of old colleagues who had questions about putting their courses online. Many of my fellow instructors, especially the Luddites who never did believe in online education, were now reaching out to me for help as their institutions were moving classes online as a precaution against the spread of Covid-19.

frustration, sure putting content online seems easy enough, but for those who have never really used a Learning Management System (LMS) before, it can be a daunting task. To those of you out there facing the same prospect, I say fear not — moving your classes online for the rest of the semester is doable — regardless of your comfort level with your institution's online platform.

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The good news is that our end-users, the students, have likely all taken online classes before, so they're already comfortable in the distance learning environment. Since most of the work now involves moving mid-stream, ongoing courses online, your students already know you and their fellow classmates, so there are preexisting relationships and, therefore fewer barriers than you might typically face in a purely online environment.

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As with anything else in higher education, student communication is critical. The first thing you want to do as an instructor is to reach out to all of your students. For some, you will use the messaging capabilities in your LMS, for others who are unfamiliar with the platform, you will contact students using your institution's Student Information System (SIS). Just a quick email to your classes letting everyone know you are moving online will suffice, although I would suggest a quick video — but I don't want to get ahead of myself. Students may feel isolated during a quarantine, so it's good to encourage communications whenever possible. One activity to consider is to ask students to reflect on their feelings about the pandemic either on an LMS discussion board or even via email if you're not quite up to speed on LMS technology.

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At this point in time, your school's online support staff and instructional designers may become your new best friends — you know who these people are, they're the ones you've

support staffers I know are happy to meet you where you are, whether you are a complete novice as an online teacher or not. At a bare minimum, you want to make sure your syllabus is posted (it already should have been), and you want to set up a class discussion board ASAP as a virtual office for students that have questions. When you do get the discussion board set up, make sure you monitor it. There's nothing more frustrating for students than to wait too long to get a response from their professor, I recommend checking and responding every few hours and never longer than 24 hours.

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After you send an initial communication to your students informing them of the move from face-to-face to online, let them know that the syllabus is posted and that assignments are still due on time. Discussion boards online, which are built into all LMSs, are the best way to foster active conversations among yourself and students. Although discussion boards aren't the same as in-person lectures and classroom interactions, they provide a place for your students to interact and communicate, which is essential when students may be feeling alone.

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Although I already touched upon the importance of communications, let's dig into this subject in greater detail. Although I know many of you are old pros when it comes to technology, I also know many others are not. The good news is that you can leverage the knowledge you already have to create an engaging online learning environment quickly. During a time of student trepidation and uncertainty, a feeling of connectedness is vitally important, and the best way to do this is by posting videos of yourself as often as possible.

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While many of you are familiar with making desktop lectures to post, others may not

or QuickTime on my Mac to make short and simple online lectures, Windows and Chromebooks have similar capabilities, as does your cellphone. Don't worry about over-producing your videos. Sure, the first few may be a little rough, but simply talk as you always do, chunk your content into short sessions (no video should be over 5–10 minutes) and post the finished product to your LMS (if you know how) or post it on YouTube (there is plenty of help online if you don't know how to do this). YouTube is a good option for your emergency content because it will close-caption any videos for you, which will keep you compliant with ADA directives. Another thing to keep in mind is that Google, Zoom, and others are making many of their communication tools available for free during the pandemic, to learn more check out this article.

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Anytime you can show your smiling face through video, whether it's synchronous or asynchronous, you are helping students cope with the isolation that comes from quarantine. Set the tone by letting the students know that the show must go on and that just because you've moved to an online environment, that the work doesn't stop. Maintaining the rigor of the class is vital in that it helps students stay engaged and keeps the class's structure in place — another important factor for students who are dealing with issues of fear and loneliness.

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If you can make and post a short desktop lecture video weekly, and pair it with a discussion or reflection exercise, your students will be re-engaged with your content quickly. Although it may seem daunting at first, I also suggest video feedback on major assignments. If you have 25 or more in your classes, video feedback to individual students may not be possible, if this is the case, record a feedback video to the entire class that summarizes the week's takeaways.

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Remember, just because the modality of your course has changed, it doesn't mean that course objectives have gone out the window. If there are activities that you usually handled in class or lecture, you have to find a way to replicate them online, which, between recorded lectures, discussion activities, and Web links, should be easy to do. It's also smart to be thinking about any exams or finals coming up — anything you passed out in class as tests in the past needs to be moved to your LMS's testing environment. If you usually hand out in-class tests and intend to convert them to an online format, get started soon. In almost all cases, you can't simply upload a Word document and magically turn it into an online test — its typically an online slog of rewriting your questions — and the answer choices — one at a time. If you're fortunate, the instructional designers at your university can help but plan ahead. You may have to change your exam format to a more open-ended structure because, unless you have proctoring software built into your LMS, your online exams will become open-resource tests whether you like it or not.

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Okay, so maybe you shouldn't have ignored all of those online teaching faculty training opportunities, but never fear, you and your students will get through this. As long as you keep the line of communications open, respond promptly, and stay present in your student's lives, the disruptions should be minimal. Students understand that the fast move to an online environment may be fraught with hiccups and are generally forgiving. If you can stay a week or two ahead of the content and start planning for exams now, your students will be happy and successful in class. Depending upon what you are teaching, the online platform may not be able to replicate the in-person experience perfectly. Fear not, with some creativity and a tight focus on your teaching objectives, you can provide your students with the education and engagement that they are expecting to receive.

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It's impossible to cover all scenarios in all LMSs in a short essay. Still, whether your

plenty of resources online. This is not the time to be shy, so reach out to your school's instructional designers for help as needed, they are more than happy to assist you. Finally, feel free to contact me if you have any questions, need advice, or other tech assistance, I work well remotely…

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