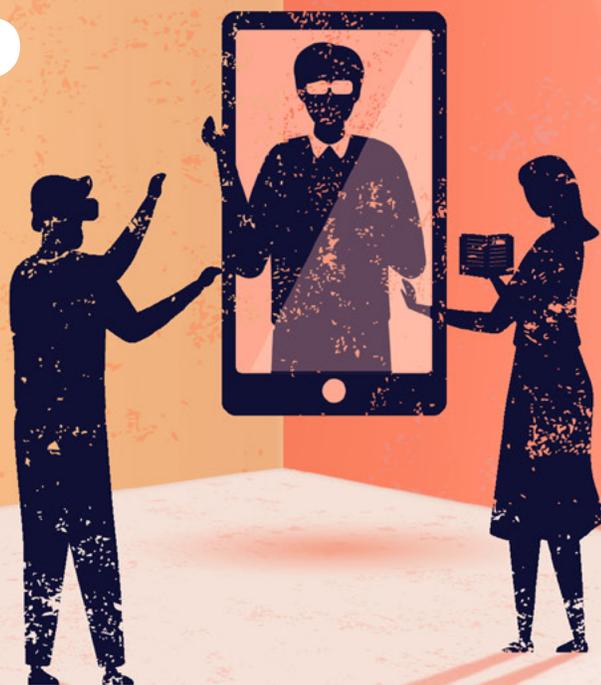


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The Next Generation of Teaching and Learning

The pandemic triggered a crash course in online teaching for higher education. Institutions rapidly developed or expanded ways to engage students and trained faculty members in new skills. Now as college leaders look forward to a time when campuses can reopen fully, they want to know how to maintain that momentum and make instructional

innovation — both online and in-person — part of the institutional ethos.

This collection includes analysis and opinion articles about what senior administrators and faculty members have learned about teaching since the outbreak started. It previews ideas that will be discussed at a *Chronicle* virtual event on April 20-22, titled “[Higher Ed’s Reset.](#)”

4 Our HyFlex Experiment: What’s Worked and What Hasn’t

At one university, the results have been decidedly mixed.

9 Some Colleges Planned Early for Remote Teaching. Here’s What They Learned.

The success and failures in the preparation for fall 2020.

15 The Academic Calendar Reconsidered

Some colleges revamped theirs in response to the pandemic.

19 Ways to Assess Students Online and Minimize Cheating

How to do it without joining the “arms race” in cheating-prevention tools.

22 Ways to Be More Inclusive in a Virtual Classroom

Creating courses with an ethos of inclusion and equity embedded throughout.

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ADVICE

Our HyFlex Experiment: What's Worked and What Hasn't

Armed with a can-do spirit, faculty members leaped into hybrid teaching this fall. The results have been decidedly mixed.

BY KEVIN GANNON



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For a large swath of higher education, this is not just a “Covid semester”; it’s become a “[HyFlex semester](#),” too. As colleges and universities finished a chaotic spring and contemplated an equally uncertain fall, many of us embarked on a crash course in HyFlex learning. It offered compelling answers to the many questions we had about the semester ahead:

- *What if we don’t know whether we’ll be teaching in person, online, or both in the fall?* HyFlex lets you build multi-modal classes, so we’ll be prepared for anything.
- *What if we want to offer in-person classes but some students refuse to come to the campus?* HyFlex allows for both in-person and remote learning simultaneously.
- *What if we start in one mode but have to [pivot to another](#) again?* A HyFlex course, out of all the alternatives, is the most “pivot-able.” Unlike in the spring, we would be prepared to move online in a hurry.
- *Gee, is HyFlex the answer to our prayers?* Sure sounds that way. LET’S DO IT.

One measure of how HyFlex courses have swept across the higher-education landscape is to Google the term. In April, when I first began investigating HyFlex courses for my own institution — having recalled an article I’d read a few years ago about them but nothing more — a Google search for HyFlex returned results mostly pertaining to [a company](#) making industrial pumps, mixers, and sprayers, with a few pedagogical references scattered downpage. Today, the same search brings up pages of results to click through before reaching any that *don’t* have to do with higher education.

And now we find ourselves roughly at the midpoint of the semester, and it’s worth asking: What have we learned so far? Both at my institution and more broadly — if my email lists and Twitter feed are any indication — the results have been decidedly mixed.

Under the HyFlex model, developed by Brian Beatty at San Francisco State University, students can take a HyFlex course in one of three ways: in-person synchronous, online synchronous, and online asynchronous. The idea is that they can move back and forth between those modes throughout the duration of the course as it fits their needs and contexts. That means HyFlex courses are built along three interrelated, yet still distinct, tracks. What Beatty calls the “[four pillars](#)” of HyFlex courses — learner choice, equivalence between modes, reusability of course materials across modes, and accessibility — would ensure a meaningful student-learning experience in any of the options.

Given a choice, students aren’t necessarily opting for the mode that would best advance their own learning, and the criteria that they’ve used to choose how they’ll “attend” class have not been the most effective.

The flexibility afforded to students by HyFlex courses has been evident this semester, but the style of teaching required has proven more difficult to maintain than anticipated. Moreover, that same flexibility has been the proverbial double-edged sword when it comes to student success.

Given a choice, students aren’t necessarily opting for the mode that would best advance their own learning, and the criteria that they’ve used to choose how they’ll “attend” class have not been the most effective. There’s always a difference between plan and implementation, and HyFlex learning is no different. In assessing the results so far, I’d like to venture the following lessons from a wide deployment of HyFlex courses at my own undergraduate institution.

HyFlex courses are hard to build, and even harder to teach. It's an obvious point but bears repeating: Teaching online involves far more than simply dropping a face-to-face course into the campus learning-management system. Designing effective online courses is hard work and differs significantly from in-person teaching. HyFlex courses essentially braid the two together. Moreover, the braiding is even more complicated because the online strand is further divided into synchronous and asynchronous paths.

For all of us, but particularly for instructors with little-to-no experience teaching online, this has been a heavy lift. On top of that, once the course is designed, the actual day-to-day practice of teaching it effectively is complex, indeed:

- Enter the physical classroom.
- Wipe down the instructor station.
- Log in. Log in to Blackboard. Log in to Zoom.
- Start the Zoom meeting.
- Greet the students who are attending in person.
- DON'T FORGET TO HIT "RECORD" LIKE YOU DID LAST CLASS.
- Share the computer screen.
- Make sure you're not walking too far from the mic.
- Repeat the in-person student's question so the students on Zoom can hear it.
- Ask for a response from the Zoom students.
- Wait. Wait. Wait.
- Repeat the question.
- Realize you didn't turn up the volume.
- Take off your glasses because they're fogging up again, even with your new mask that was supposed to minimize that.

I've been teaching college classes for 23 years, and there have been times this semester when I've felt less like a teacher and more like one of those circus performers spinning stacks of plates and cups on my

arms and head — except in my case, there are many more drops and crashes.

What seems clear is that institutions using the HyFlex model need to find more and different ways to support faculty members than before. Hire work-study students to wrangle Zoom? Improve the integration and workflow of these various tools? At the very least, we have to acknowledge the significant burden now on classroom instructors, a burden for which very few of us were prepared.

HyFlex's origin story matters. HyFlex courses were initially developed for graduate students in an educational-technology program. The students tended to be full-time educational professionals (i.e., they already had day jobs), and were pursuing graduate work from a variety of locations and experiences. For that type of cohort — a self-selected set of experienced learners, familiar with a variety of technologies — HyFlex is a perfectly tailored mode of teaching and learning.

For first-year college students whose prior experience with online learning in the spring of their senior year in high school was, shall we say, suboptimal, HyFlex courses are a more daunting task. In retrospect, we needed more in the way of introducing students to HyFlex — more clearly and specifically outlining how the courses work and how to navigate them most successfully.

What seems clear is that institutions using the HyFlex model need to find more and different ways to support faculty members than before.

It's one thing to know intellectually that HyFlex is different. It's another thing entirely to see students struggling with just how deep those differences are in practice. And moving from their high school, where there was no flexibility in format, to college, where course delivery is even more flexible this year than usual, presents a steep learning curve for most students.

HyFlex works better for some types of classes than others. It's no coincidence that faculty members who are finding HyFlex a difficult fit are those whose classes are either completely or mostly discussion-based, perhaps even student-led. The traditional seminar model in the humanities — with a small number of students gathered around a table dissecting a text or arguing an interpretation — doesn't replicate well into a HyFlex format, where there are two interrelated but still separate “classroom” spaces. That issue certainly can be overcome, but in a Covid-19 semester, amid all the extra cognitive load involved for both instructors and students, the resources for doing so may simply not be available.

While HyFlex can be used across disciplines, its suitability and effectiveness can be decisively shaped by the disciplinary and pedagogical context of a particular course.

On the other hand, HyFlex is eminently suited to classes that are more content exposition in nature, or ones in which presentations with brief discussion or Q&A interludes are the norm. It offers the advantage of having class sessions recorded (including what's been shared on the screen), which is a useful resource for all students, not just those attending asynchronously. What we've learned at my university, which likely mirrors the experience of many others, is that while HyFlex can be used across disciplines, its suitability and effectiveness can be decisively shaped by the disciplinary and pedagogical context of a particular course. As we look toward the spring semester, an awareness of this variability needs to inform our planning.

We need to help students learn to become online learners. Those of us who've taught

online courses for a while know that they're a different animal, and that we need to prepare students to adjust to the differences in order to succeed in class. But when you make what is essentially an institutional shift into online teaching and learning — even if there's an in-person dimension — you need to scale up your attention to student success online, too.

Time and material resources go a long way here, and most of us had little to none of either this summer. Learning is hard, but online learning adds an extra layer of difficulty, particularly for students who've not experienced it before. Moreover, differing levels of access to both the resources and the cultural capital to thrive online mean that our students' HyFlex experiences — and their success within them — vary greatly.

Faculty members cannot hide from structural racism and economic inequality any more, because our students were never able to in the first place. That is perhaps the most important lesson we've learned in our HyFlex semester.

In the Before Times, when most courses were taught in physical classrooms, it was all too easy for instructors and institutions to dismiss student struggles with access to technology and available bandwidth. In some quarters, “I couldn't upload the assignment to Blackboard” has been caricatured as the 21st-century version of “the dog ate my homework.”

But after our pandemic-induced pivot, the dramatic disparities in this area became brutally evident. We have students who:

- Share iffy Wi-Fi with other family members all trying to do some form of online schooling at the same time.
- Try to do their coursework on a smartphone, since the computers they relied on are in now-shuttered campus computer labs.
- Do not have reliable internet access at all, and attend class on Zoom while parked in the McDonald's parking lot, hoping the restaurant's guest Wi-Fi signal is strong enough.
- Keep their cameras off, not because they're zoning out or playing video

games during class, but because they're crammed into a tiny apartment with the rest of their family and they're sitting in the bathroom because it's the only quiet place to attend class virtually.

None of those inequities are new, but the abrupt shift in modality has both exacerbated and intensified them. If all your schooling is now online, and you can't get online, then for you, school is closed. And with the similar online shift in learning-support services, the scaffolding that many of our students depended upon — and which we told them they were entitled to and exhorted them to use — became unreachable. Covid-19 has laid bare the profound inequities in our society, from the global scale all the way down to my section of “Ancient World History.”

Differing levels of access to both the resources and the cultural capital to thrive online mean that our students' HyFlex experiences — and their success within them — vary greatly.

HyFlex classes didn't cause those inequities, but they can reflect and intensify them. If we employ an instructional model that is dependent upon things like live videoconferencing and streaming media — without ensuring that all students are able to access their courses — we've committed

institutional malpractice, and it doesn't matter if we're in a pandemic. If we are open for learning, it has to be for all our students or none. To do otherwise is to intensify the very inequities we say we want to fix.

All of these lessons sound fairly negative. But I think that reflects the extraordinarily difficult circumstances in which all of us find ourselves this fall as much as, or more than, any particular shortcoming of the HyFlex model itself.

While there have been implementation issues, technological snafus, and steep learning curves — as you'd expect with any changes this significant — there have also been a number of HyFlex success stories on my campus, and likely yours, too. I have colleagues who, having learned particular technologies to teach a HyFlex course, are now integrating that knowledge into all of their teaching and making plans to incorporate these new skills and abilities (*Remote office hours can be more flexible! Recording videos students can always access is a great way to start reviewing for an exam! Having students all on the same digital whiteboard space to mark up a paper draft is really cool!*) across all their future courses.

We have students who, quite literally, would have had to drop out if their courses had not been available in the HyFlex format. All of us are learning how to increase our capacity for compassion, flexibility, and empathy. Given the circumstances in which we find ourselves, that may be the most important outcome of all.

Kevin Gannon is a professor of history at Grand View University and director of its Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

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Some Colleges Planned Early for an Online Fall. Here's What They Learned.

BY BETH MCMURTRIE

As the coronavirus caused classes to shift abruptly online in March, Adam Golub did something likely familiar to many professors: He punted. He scaled back expectations for his two seminar-style courses, told students to work on their own, met with them one on one through phone calls or Zoom, and allowed them to finish up their projects as best they could.

"I'm not proud, but I'm also not embarrassed. I did what I thought I could do," says Golub, an American studies professor at California State University at Fullerton. "I was more worried about my students' well-being: getting them across the finish line rather than trying to construct a curriculum."

Fall will be a different story. Because the Cal State system decided early that the semester would largely be online, professors like Golub were given plenty of time to prepare. Over the summer, after taking a few weeks off to regroup, he signed up for two courses on effective online teaching, which encouraged him to rethink not only what he will teach but how.

He learned how to use ed-tech tools to foster online discussions, prepared an introductory video, and made course material accessible to students with tech challenges or learning disabilities. He's also planning a group project, where students put together a podcast, for example, to keep the feeling of isolation at bay.

"We're doing what we can to deliver courses that keep students engaged and keep students enrolled," he says. "We want them to feel good enough to come back in the spring."

Yet places like Cal State are in the minority. By the end of June, just 80 of the roughly 1,000 institutions for which *The Chronicle* had collected data had announced plans for a fall online, including 30 Cal State and Los Angeles Community College District campuses, compared to 655 that said they were planning to teach in person.

As other colleges make late pivots to online learning, professors are scrambling once again to figure out how to teach their classes remotely. And this time the stakes are a lot higher. Not willing to put up with emergency measures anymore, students and their families are questioning whether the fall will be any better, using derisive terms like "[glorified Skype](#)" to describe the experience they hope to avoid.

While many instructors — regardless of their institutions' stated plans — have been trying to learn how to become better online teachers, colleges that decided in May or June to teach the fall online have been better positioned to help them make such improvements. Instead of spending their summers planning to teach hybrid courses in socially distant classrooms, professors at Fullerton and elsewhere have been able to focus their attention on how to design a fully online course.

Departments have met regularly to think through the complexities of designing,

say, an online chemistry class for 200 students or a service-learning course. Registrars have been mapping out revised course schedules to take into account students who live in different time zones or may not be able to attend "live" classes because of work or family responsibilities.

Surveys and conversations with students and faculty members have informed what teaching 2.0 will look like on these campuses in the fall. Gone, teaching experts hope, are poorly thought-out practices, like hour-long Zoom lectures. The focus now is on engagement: What can instructors do to help students feel like active participants in their own education, not solitary learners staring at a screen? Colleges are also asking — sometimes requiring — instructors to use standard course designs and methods of communication to avoid overwhelming students, who expressed frustration in the spring over having to use multiple learning-management systems and tools to keep track of their work.

But, even if fall's version of online learning is more planned out than the spring's, will it be able to deliver for students, many of whom have been deeply stressed and had their learning impeded during the past several months?

Four hours north of Fullerton, Cal State Fresno's faculty, administrators, and students sensed that more certainty — and better planning — would help avoid a repeat of the worst aspects of the spring.

Saúl Jiménez-Sandoval, Fresno's provost, says that those stressors, including the constant sense of flux and "moment by moment reassessment of where we were," created tremendous anxiety among faculty members and students alike. "What professors wanted was clear, concrete direction," he says. Deciding to go remote early helped alleviate a lot of that stress. "If you act fast and have a plan, and the plan is backed up by facts and data, people would say, 'OK, we are going to invest in this plan and make the best of it.'"

Over the summer, the campus spent \$1.2 million on training, the bulk of it going toward stipends for faculty who enrolled in online-teaching workshops. "Every single faculty member who asked for training

in the summer was given training,” says Jiménez-Sandoval.

Many students at Fresno and elsewhere in the Cal State system live in multigenerational households, where privacy is scarce, resources are limited, and the internet is unreliable. Designing courses that don’t require a lot of bandwidth to participate is key, say design specialists. And allowing flexibility with attendance when students may need to help younger siblings or older relatives is important.

Joy Goto, chair of the chemistry department at Fresno, says her colleagues have been holding weekly virtual meetings since March to talk about the spring and plan for a better experience in the fall. Goto herself ran a three-week boot camp for faculty members across campus on how to better use Canvas, their learning-management system, and Zoom.

In the spring, Goto said, instructors felt frustrated because students became names on a Zoom call, and it felt impossible to engage them in live classes. Exams, too, were a challenge, and many instructors redid assessments to make them open-book to avoid cheating.

Over the summer, then, faculty members focused on shifting to asynchronous classes, using a flipped model where students will watch short, taped lectures on their own and use class time for discussion. Faculty members have also been trained on best practices in holding open office hours, creating regularly scheduled times in which students can pop in to ask questions.

Fresno has invested in training other staff members as well, such as teaching associates, who run smaller lab sections of large courses like general chemistry. Advising and tutoring staff have also been preparing for a fully online, and accessible, “walk-in” model for students seeking help.

Despite national concerns that students might not want to continue to study online in the fall, Cal State Fresno has not seen its enrollment suffer. In fact, it reported a record-breaking number of new students this fall. That’s a sign, Jiménez-Sandoval says, of how necessary students consider a college education to give them a leg up in a struggling economy. “A lot of our students don’t have wealthy parents who can simply

say, You can take a year off and I’ll pay for your apartment,” he says.

Getting students to show up is just the first step. The next is convincing them to stay.

Understanding how to keep students engaged will be critical to colleges’ success, says Vikki Katz, an associate professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University. In April she and a colleague, Amy Jordan, surveyed more than 3,000 undergraduates across the country about their remote-learning experiences. They wanted to know what challenges students experienced and what colleges could do better for the fall.

“One of the things that really emerged from that is how overwhelmed they were from the different platforms and programs they were expected to know,” says Katz.

Professors communicated with students in a host of different ways; some through email, others through the learning-management system, which made it hard for them to keep track of messages. And everyone seemed to have their own way of posting assignments and deciding when things were due, throwing off students’ routines.

Students complained that some professors expected them to watch live lectures, which requires uninterrupted viewing and a strong internet connection, or to do additional work, on the assumption that because they were stuck at home they had extra time.

“That’s really tough for kids who don’t have computers that work well, that share computers with others, and who don’t have reliable internet,” says Katz. “It’s not just learning the content, but getting the content that becomes so challenging.”

Students also struggled with motivation, Katz says. “They’re missing the rituals of campus. They’re missing their peers. No amount of clever content will replace that.”

Those findings suggest a few things that professors can do to improve online coursework for the fall, say Katz. She boils it down to rhythm, routine, and relationships. “The degree to which we can help maintain that,” she says, “will make a massive difference in how connected they felt to the course over all.”

Be consistent about where you post assignments and when work is due, Katz [advises](#). Communicate regularly with students. Flip the classroom so that class time is spent on small-group discussions, whether synchronously or asynchronously. Create regular office hours, which Katz suggests calling “student hours,” since many first-generation students think office hours are for when professors want time alone.

Why are these routines important? Because otherwise students will burn out, says Luna Laliberte, a senior at Rutgers.

A communications major interested in instructional design, Laliberte says she was better equipped than many of her classmates because her high-school experience was entirely online.

“My peers felt like whatever routine they had with school was gone,” she says. “I really empathized with that. You’re great for a couple of months, and then all of a sudden you drop off a cliff. You’re not productive, you’re not going outside, you’re not exercising.”

Despite her familiarity with online education, Laliberte, too, struggled to get through the spring and summer. At Rutgers, she notes, different schools used different learning-management systems, and she had to toggle among three different ones.

While the school of communication made sure professors were consistent in where they posted materials in Canvas and how they communicated with students, that was not true in her other classes.

In one summer course, there was no contact with the professor unless Laliberte initiated it. “It was like, Here’s a list of instructions. Read this thing, watch this thing, write a paper about it,” she says. “It felt like one big cram session.” Another course was better in that the professor tried to make it engaging. The one problem: All of the “live” classes were condensed into one week, which gave the course a strange rhythm. “You’re not speaking with anyone for weeks, then all of a sudden you’re speaking with everyone for four days straight.”

During this stretch, Laliberte, the first in her family to attend college, also had to contend with a broken computer and finding secure off-campus housing. She worries about what’s in store for the fall. As of mid-August, her course schedule provided almost no information about how classes are structured or will be taught, other than that they will be online. And when she pressed administrators in a town hall about faculty training, she was only told that it was really good, she says. “I was kind of scared that it was going to be as disorganized as in the spring.”

“It’s not just learning the content, but getting the content that becomes so challenging.”

Some universities have included students in their plans to improve online learning in the fall.

Cal State Fresno put students on its fall-planning task force and invited them to talk to faculty members during online-teaching work-

shops. Hisham Ayman Qutob, president of Fresno State Associated Students Inc., the campus student-government organization, has told faculty members about the importance of empathy and understanding. Some students will have technological or family challenges, he has said. Others will have trouble simply keeping track of everything going on.

Qutob, a senior, took seven courses in the spring, and while he normally considers himself organized, he would lose track of the stream of communication he was getting from professors on different platforms. Another concern he heard from students: How will they get to know their classmates? Students often learn best from other students, he says, and may be hesitant to reach out to a professor with questions. To that end, he says, he asks faculty members to build breakout sessions into their live video sessions, or otherwise find ways to connect students with one another.

The University of Texas at San Antonio, which also decided early to stay almost entirely online, has similarly included students in planning. As a result of talking to,

and surveying, its often local and first-generation students, San Antonio has asked faculty members to design asynchronous courses whenever possible.

To help build connections with and among students, faculty members have been receiving training on ed-tech tools that support various types of communication, like posting notes in a collaborative work space, or commenting on videos. The university also has a standard course “shell” in its learning-management system and has all instructors follow the template, when possible, so that students know where to find the syllabus, how to sign up for office hours, and how long each assignment is expected to take.

The additional time also helped faculty members work through trickier challenges, like rethinking coursework that relies heavily on experiential learning.

K. Jill Fleuriot, acting dean of the Honors College, says faculty members spent their summer constructing new ways to teach such courses, which are a central part of the honors experience. In a couple of humanities courses, where students study concepts like peace and justice alongside people who have been incarcerated, students will now work collaboratively through the mail, a process which took time to set up given the complexity of the prison system.

“Time allowed us to figure out, What do we really need to pay attention to and what do we need in terms of resources?” she says.

For a required civics course, professors designed an online version that uses tools like taped video lessons, facilitated live discussion sessions, and peer review. All of that leads up to the final project: designing a service experience that fits students’ beliefs about civic engagement and issues that excite them. Faculty members are so pleased with the redesign of the course, she says, that they plan to keep it online even after face-to-face teaching returns.

Engagement is something that Robert Morrison is taking to heart. A religion professor at Bowdoin College, he understands how high the stakes are for liberal-arts colleges like his, one of the

first to choose to remain online for the fall. Baked into their identity are small, discussion-driven classes, regular and informal contact with professors, and close ties with classmates, with whom they study and talk, often late into the night.

How can you foster those connections online? This summer, Morrison took a course-development workshop to try to figure that out. Part of a three-college [program](#), with Colby and Bates, Bowdoin was helping professors like him create a sense of community remotely.

Normally, says Morrison, the course he’s teaching this fall, on the Quran, is driven by the reading list, on the idea that you put a bunch of good books together with interested students, “and I’m fired up, and it all works out.”

Now, he’s leaving little to chance. For Morrison, that meant working backward by deciding first what he wanted students to learn, then determining how to get there. He also wanted to reduce the cognitive loads, knowing students were going to be more distracted than usual. So he began building in weekly assignments and regular group work to help keep them on track and more regularly demonstrate what they’re learning.

He is also mandating that his students engage with him at least every other week, through email, Zoom, or group chats. And he is putting his students into learning communities. Some are fixed — the same three or four students will be part of a group all semester long — and some are organized around a single assignment.

“I’d rather lose a little serendipity,” he says, “than a lot of students.”

Morrison’s training this summer was made possible by Bowdoin’s Continuity in Teaching and Learning group, created in the spring to help map out the possibility of an online fall. “This was one of those committee reports I was hoping to be buried in a drawer,” admits Rick Broene, a chemistry professor and the group’s chair.

Instead, its [recommendations](#) have provided a blueprint for the campus, emphasizing that professors place values such as student-centered learning, universal design principles, equity, and community at the heart of their online coursework.

Faculty members have been asked to be flexible with deadlines, for example, after a campus survey found that students who ran into inflexibility tended to disengage with their courses. Bowdoin also devised an entirely new [course schedule](#), in which classes are held more often, and at different times, throughout the week, to accommodate students who are in different time zones or need options.

Broene, for example, has moved his organic chemistry class, which he normally teaches three mornings a week for an hour, to Mondays at 10 a.m., Tuesdays at 5 p.m., and Thursday at 11:30 a.m. Students only need to attend two of the three classes, which meet for 90 minutes.

“I’d rather lose a little serendipity than a lot of students.”

That, of course, places additional challenges on professors, who now have to think about how to make those synchronous classes valuable to everyone in the room, he says, no matter who shows up.

Teaching students how to learn effectively online is another common element of fall preparation. For faculty members, that typically means planning out strategies for students to take charge of their own learning instead of lecturing to them.

That may mean designating class time for small-group work or asking students to create projects that explain their understanding of the material. “Doing effective learning is not easy,” says Katie Byrnes, director of Bowdoin’s center for teaching and learning, and another member of the continuity group, pointing out that students often resist active-learning strategies. That, she says, is why connection and communication are also integral parts of their online strategy. “The relationship with faculty is often what keeps these students going.”

Community colleges have typically been quicker to move to a largely virtual fall. Primarily commuter schools with large adult enrollments, their calculations are different from residential colleges. And although they continue to wrestle with the challenges of teaching hands-on courses, such as welding or nursing, safely in person, four times as many community colleges have said they will be fully or primarily online as have said they will teach in person.

The Alamo Colleges District, which has five campuses around San Antonio, began offering online-teaching boot camps for faculty members in March, shifting more than 6,000 courses online. Many of their students are in high need, so the district spent about \$10 million eliminating outstanding balances and offering free online summer courses, as well as free assessment tests, to keep them enrolled.

The spring results were solid enough — with spring completion rates equal to the previous fall — that administrators felt they could stay online without harming students’ chances for success. Those spring boot camps were enhanced and continued throughout the summer. Luke Dowden, the district’s chief online-learning officer, estimates that virtually all 2,200 faculty members have received some training.

The district’s human-resources department has been calling 100 employees every day to ask them about the challenges they are facing. Early on, says Kristi Wyatt, associate vice chancellor for communications, instructors expressed a sense of worry about whether they could be successful teaching remotely. Now, she says, those questions have dropped away. Faculty members seem to feel a different emotion about an online fall: confidence.

Beth McMurtrie, a senior writer for The Chronicle, writes about the future of learning and technology’s influence on teaching.

Originally published August 27, 2020

The Academic Calendar Reconsidered

BY BETH MCMURTRIE

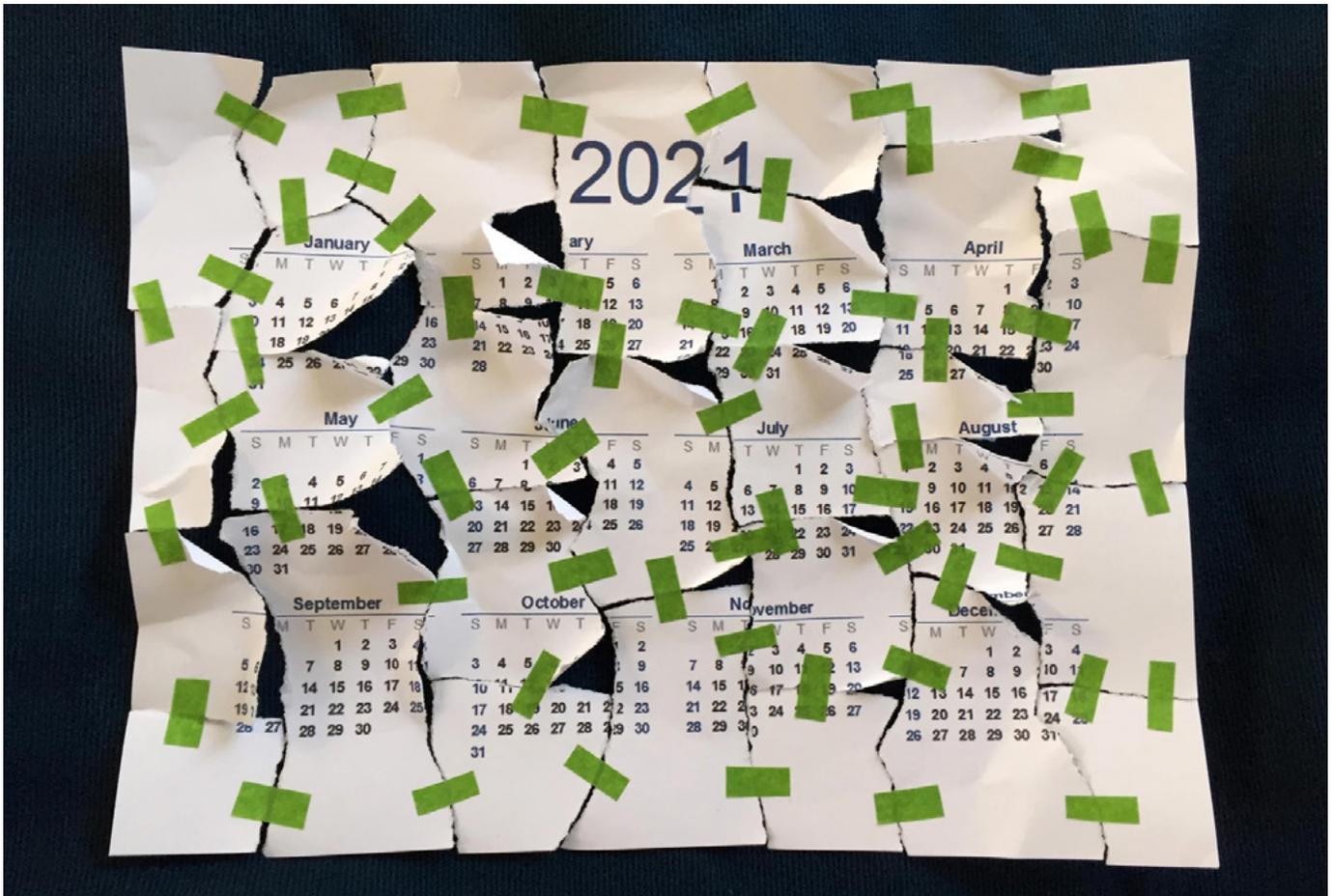


ILLUSTRATION BY THE CHRONICLE

As the fall approached and colleges considered what impact Covid-19 would have on their campuses, some of them settled on a solution: an altered [academic calendar](#).

Many made adjustments like delaying the start of the semester for a couple of weeks or moving classes online after Thanksgiving to keep students at home. But a number of small liberal-arts colleges did something more radical: They cut their

semester into halves, on the idea that navigating two courses at a time — albeit at a much quicker pace — would be logistically and intellectually easier for students than juggling four at once.

Now, with one semester under their belts, these colleges are looking back on what they learned. The experiment with the academic calendar came with its share of stress. But as often happens with innovations that emerge in response to a crisis, it

also sparked other changes — in this case, to central elements of course design and teaching — that were less obviously connected to the logistics of the class schedule.

Many of the colleges believe their decision to break up the semester in the midst of the pandemic was the right one, says

Eric Boynton, provost and dean of Beloit College, which was among the first to convert to modules, or “mods” as many now call them. He helped organize a conference this month in which about 20 institutions that had transitioned to modules gathered virtually to talk about the experience.

Among the virtues of splitting up the semester: Colleges that went fully remote were relieved that students didn’t have to shoulder four online courses simultaneously. Those that taught in person could safely socially distance because only half as many classes as usual were in session. Others that enroll a substantial number of international students say time-zone differences were easier to manage with a smaller course load. Still others found that five days a week of contact between students and professors allowed people to form closer bonds and helped mitigate the alienating aspects of social distancing, including masks and the use of videoconferencing.

At the same time, when considering whether they want to continue with the shorter, more intense schedule post-Covid, many say no. Teaching at such a rapid clip, they found, is exhausting, makes it hard for students to catch up if they fall behind, and can inhibit learning.

“To quote Churchill, Democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others,” says Boynton. “Mods is the worst delivery module in the time of Covid except for all the others.”

Focusing on What Matters

One potentially longer-term benefit, many say, is that professors had to ask themselves: What really matters in this

course and what do I want students to get out of it? The transition to abbreviated terms ramped up training and campus conversation around effective teaching and learning.

“Being forced to experiment in a sense was, I hate to say ‘exciting,’ but it made my brain work in ways it hasn’t had

The pandemic forced professors to strip teaching down to the essentials.

to,” says Katrina Phillips, an assistant professor of history at Macalester College.

Like many professors, Phillips spent the summer reimagining her courses to make them adaptable to online teaching, such as videotaping her lectures in order to create a “flipped” classroom, in which students watch the video beforehand and spend class time in discussion.

But because of the shorter terms, she also had to strip her teaching down to the essentials. What did she absolutely need to cover in “American Indian History to 1871,” for example, given that she only had 7.5 weeks to do so?

Because she is the only professor on campus teaching Native history, Phillips says the hardest part was knowing she had to let go of some content. To compensate, she asked her students to collaborate on a timeline of key events, something that proved hugely successful. Not only did students cover material she could not get to in her lectures, they learned from one another, as each focused on historical events that meant something to them.

As to whether students learned as much, or as effectively, in the shorter terms, Phillips says it’s hard to know because of other limitations created by the pandemic.

Boynton says that was a common refrain at the conference. “One of the topics of this meeting was, How do you assess this thing? No one really can,” he says. “It’s hard to disentangle mods from Covid from online from no breaks in the semester. It made for this pressure-cooker atmosphere.”

Karine Moe, Macalester’s provost and dean of the faculty, says that when she’s asked professors and students what they thought of the shorter terms, views were

mixed. And sometimes what people complained about had more to do with the pandemic, like having to stare at screens for hours on end.

“I think we made the best choice we could in a very hard situation. The module plan allowed us to pivot, to have as much in-class instruction as we were able to. It contributed to low Covid cases on campus.”

Deeper Changes

At Mount Holyoke College, professors and administrators faced two key challenges: More than a quarter of their students are international — including many from China — and the college remained online this year. That meant that students were learning together but in vastly different time zones.

As at many of the colleges that switched to modules, faculty members were given a lot of discretion in how to teach their courses. Aside from meeting federal and accreditation requirements for contact hours and course hours, professors could determine how much and how frequently to meet synchronously and asynchronously, says Elizabeth Markovits, associate dean of the faculty and director of the campus teaching and learning center at Mount Holyoke.

Some professors might come up with a weekly schedule: Mondays are for videotaped lectures, Tuesdays are for live discussions, Wednesdays are for one-on-one meetings, and so on. “We wanted to give faculty the autonomy to make their choices,” she says. “Dance class is going to look very different from an upper-level English seminar.”

While faculty and student reactions were all over the map, Markovits noticed a few patterns. First-year students seemed to adapt the easiest, probably because they had nothing to compare it to. And pre-tenure and visiting faculty members got particularly involved in revamping their courses. About a third of the faculty decided to teach the same material as always, just at double the pace, she says. The rest were willing to rework their courses, and those that did tended to report better outcomes.

“I talked to one scientist who said, ‘I’ve known I should have flipped my classroom for years. But I never had time,’” she says. “It’s not like we had time to undertake major curriculum renovation, but what was the choice?”

“I think we made the best choice we could in a very hard situation. The module plan allowed us to pivot, to have as much in-class instruction as we were able to. It contributed to low Covid cases on campus.”

When attending the conference on modules, Markovits was struck by how many campuses reported that there was widespread faculty engagement around course design. Mount Holyoke doesn’t plan to continue with mods in the fall, but she can see the benefits it has brought to the campuses that have tried it.

“It really has created this community of teachers,” she says. “We talk about teaching in a way that we have never done, in such a sustainable, deep way.”

One common element to teaching at an accelerated pace, several faculty and administrators say, has been a shift toward inclusive teaching. That might mean, for example, breaking assignments down into smaller components, and spelling out expectations in greater detail. Professors say this has been helpful in keeping students on track when the fast pace leaves little room for procrastination or stumbling.

A surprise benefit, says Renae Brodie, a professor of biological sciences at Mount Holyoke, is that all of her students in an upper-level behavioral ecology course performed better. Normally, says Brodie, she might have a few superstars in each class. This year, she saw a higher level of quality in all of the assignments, spread out more evenly among the students.

She attributes that to the fact that she reduced the number of projects from five to three but asked students to dive more deeply into each one. Because students spent time revising their work, with more immediate and intensive feedback from her instead of moving on to the next project, she says, everyone's writing and research skills improved.

“Every frill had to come off. If you couldn't justify something or it was repetitious, it had to go.”

Like a lot of professors, particularly those in STEM fields, she worries about the longer-term impact of learning under Covid. If students are learning less content, as many are, even at campuses that have retained the semester system, will that hurt them next year or the year after? She doesn't know the answer yet but is grateful for the chance to rethink her teaching this year.

“The mod system was hard — really hard to do. But it really forced you to look at your course and say, What is absolutely core?” she says. “Every frill had to come off. If you couldn't justify something or it was repetitious, it had to go.”

Mods May Stick Around

Looking ahead, some colleges are keeping mods on the table, possibly because the pandemic will still be affecting college campuses into the fall.

“It remains an open question” at Bates College, says Joshua McIntosh, vice president for campus life. While everyone has been exhausted by the intensity of modular teaching, he says, if physical-distancing requirements remain, then it might need to continue. The alternative would be adding classes at night and on weekends.

Other campuses say they could see incorporating modules in some form, even after they revert to semesters. At Beloit, for

example, two professors might be able to team-teach an interdisciplinary class, says Boynton, by combining two mods into one semester-long course. Others have talked about how short, immersive terms are particularly well suited for community-based learning, where students benefit from spending time together on projects outside the classroom.

Community colleges have a longer history with short-term courses, in part to accommodate the schedules of working adults who may find eight weeks manageable but 15 weeks unworkable. Four-year colleges that enroll a lot of students with outside obligations might find mods similarly useful.

Travis Frampton, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Schreiner University, a small, Hispanic-serving institution in Texas, says he was struck by how many academically strong students ended up dropping some of their courses last spring, after the pandemic hit. Sent back home, sometimes into chaotic circumstances, students had to take on additional family responsibilities, making it harder to keep up with multiple courses.

That was one reason Schreiner broke its semester into two terms this year, he says, and may be an argument for keeping that system even after the pandemic is under control. This fall, student grades were up over all and the number of D's, F's and withdrawals was down. Many students seemed to like the more flexible, concentrated schedule, he says. “Our students did not fail in the eight-week Covid environment.”

While it's ultimately a decision that will be made in consultation with faculty, Frampton is optimistic that shorter terms can play a role in undergraduate education. “Let's give this a shot. It not only helps students with learning outcomes and concentration, but it also helps accessibility efforts.”

Beth McMurtrie, a senior writer for The Chronicle, writes about the future of learning and technology's influence on teaching.

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How can you make sure your online students take tests without cheating? It's one of the most-frequent questions asked by new online instructors and even some experienced ones.

The short answer: You can't.

You might be tempted to join the “arms race” in cheating-prevention tools, or to adopt punitive approaches such as [proctored online exams](#) and [time limits](#) for online tests. But the reality is, students will always find new and creative ways to get around your policing efforts. So what to do?

I'm not in favor of punitive approaches (though I recognize that proctored tests may be required in some STEM disciplines). Another school of thought is [ungrading](#). Many passionate, committed, and caring educators advocate *not* grading student work and instead rely on self-assessments and peer assessments. While I respect their approach, I am not in that camp, either.

As a veteran online instructor writing this [series on effective online teaching](#), I've found it's nigh impossible to create a cheat-proof online test. Instead, I recommend something both simpler and more effective: Assume that every online quiz or test you give is open-book and open-note. Students tend to cheat when the stakes of a course are high and they feel pressured to do well — for example, when their grade is based solely on a midterm and a final exam. What follows are seven of my tried-and-true ways to both meaningfully assess student learning *and* foster academic integrity.

Break up a big high-stakes exam into small weekly tests. Students are under a lot of pressure to do well on an exam that accounts for a third or a half of their grade. Instead, lessen that pressure — and thus the urge to cheat — by giving them a series of weekly tests that equal the weight of the high-stakes exam. The weekly tests should be just as rigorous, but if students bomb on one or two of them, all is not lost. It is possible to recover from a low score on one of 14 short tests.

Pair that strategy with a deliberate system to reach out to students who performed poorly on a weekly test. Offer extra help via tutoring services or office hours. Students who feel supported in their learning are less likely to cheat.

Skeptics might object that students may still be tempted to cheat by, for example, paying someone else to take their weekly tests. But arranging that actually takes a lot of work, not to mention money. Lower the pressure, and students are far more likely to take the tests without cheating.

Start and end each test with an honor statement. As the first step of an online test, and again as the last, ask students to affirm that they are practicing academic integrity. Start each test with explicit instructions: “You may use your book and your notes while you take this test. Do not share your answers with anyone during or after the test. By clicking ‘Begin,’ you agree to the following statement: ‘I affirm that I am the assigned student taking

It's nigh impossible to create a cheat-proof online test.

the test, and this is entirely my own work.”

As they finish, ask students to reaffirm that they completed it on their own. Bookending the test in that way can help nudge students toward integrity, especially when you've reduced the pressure to cheat in the first place with shorter, more frequent tests.

Ask students to explain their problem-solving process. If you give students a set of problems to solve, some may search online for answers to similar problems. However, it's harder to find student-generated explanations of the steps they took to solve those problems.

Adding a short narrative question to an online test requires students to do more than just provide the correct answer. This can be a short, open-ended test question that takes seconds to grade.

Get to know each student's writing style in low- or no-stakes tasks. To prevent or detect plagiarism without relying on imperfect software solutions, ask students to complete brief weekly writing assignments. In the English courses I teach, I get to know my students' narrative voices in their online discussion posts and journal entries. When I grade a paper that is weighted more heavily, I can quickly detect plagiarized text because it doesn't “sound” like that student's usual style.

Admittedly, this approach works best in classes with limited enrollment (say, 35 students or fewer). But if you're teaching a writing-intensive course, consider adding lots of informal tasks to get to know your students' style (and provide them with valuable writing practice, too).

Concerned about the time needed to grade those written reflections? Assess them on a complete/incomplete scale. With practice, you'll develop the ability to tell at a glance whether students have made a good-faith effort to reflect on your writing prompt. Use a simple rubric in your institution's learning-management system, or LMS, to speed up your grading even more.

Assess learning in online discussion forums. Don't overlook the potential of [online discussion forums](#) as a valuable yet low-stakes source of feedback on whether students are learning the material.

Structure your discussion questions in ways that unearth what students know about a topic. Use the "post-first" setting to require students to submit their responses before they can read what others have posted. (But be aware: The post-first setting can increase student anxiety, so you may prefer not to use it.) Ask students to cite additional sources for their comments. In STEM courses, ask students to talk about where they see scientific and mathematical principles at work in the world around them.

If you give points for discussion comments, be sure to provide clear criteria for what you consider to be a substantive post. Once again the rubric tool of your campus LMS can help you communicate your expectations and streamline your grading, too.

Don't base grades solely on tests. Some students know course material inside and out, but struggle with test anxiety. Others don't perform well on tests for reasons related to their cultural backgrounds, home environments, access to reliable internet service and computers, and many other factors.

So mix it up. Give students a variety of ways to show their learning, and not just the usual papers, projects, and homework. Get creative. Ask students to: (a) submit a weekly reflection on the reading, (b) create a brief video or audio about their stance on some current event, or (c) interview professionals

in their desired career. Adding other forms of assessment — when weighted intentionally in your grading scheme — allows students who struggle with test anxiety to show their learning in other ways.

Give students a variety of ways to show their learning.

Offer students choice in how they demonstrate their knowledge. In line with the principles of [Universal Design for Learning and culturally responsive pedagogy](#), let students decide (when possible) how they can best show their learning. Options allow students from all backgrounds, dealing with all kinds of unique circumstances and preferences, to shine. For example:

- Will either a paper or a polished video presentation work equally well to share research and analysis on a particular topic?
- Can students choose to either write a paragraph or present a bulleted list to summarize a reading or video?
- Can they video-record themselves performing a new dance step, musical challenge, or theatrical skill, or can they write about their process of practicing that new skill?
- How about giving them a choice between a two-paragraph written journal entry or a 90-second recorded reflection?

As we all work to improve our online teaching, we have the opportunity to rethink practices we've relied on for years in our physical classrooms. If monitoring in-person tests has been a mainstay of your approach, never fear. The silver lining of the pandemic is the chance to think in new ways about how you teach, how students learn, and how they show it.

Flower Darby is an instructional designer and the author, with James M. Lang, of [Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes](#).

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ADVICE

Ways to Be More Inclusive in a Virtual Classroom

How do you create online or hybrid courses with an ethos of inclusion and equity embedded throughout?

BY FLOWER DARBY

If you're teaching this fall, you're probably trying to figure out how your courses will be affected by the dual reverberations of Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter. Being prepared for an uncertain semester means both improving your re-

mote-teaching skills and finding ways to make your classroom more inclusive.

The two aims overlap, given that online teaching will figure heavily in the coming semester. As someone who has taught in virtual classrooms for 12 years, I have

been writing this series on quick, practical ways [to get better](#) at online teaching (for latecomers, here's [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)). This month's column turns to inclusive teaching in a virtual classroom.

The ethos of an [equitable and inclusive classroom](#) is simple: "Everybody gets to learn. No one has to out themselves. All are welcome. All are supported by the very design of this class." The hard part: How do you create online or hybrid courses with that ethos embedded throughout? Two frameworks in your teaching toolkit — Universal Design for Learning and culturally responsive pedagogy — create a powerful way forward. Let's look at each in turn.

Universal Design for Learning. UDL takes research on how people learn and [applies it](#) to course design and teaching. A good way to think about this is to consider the concept of "universal design" in architecture. Picture a ramp alongside a set of stairs; both lead up to a building entrance. The ramp was constructed to help wheelchair users get where they want to go — that is, into the building. But the ramp benefits others, too: people using walkers, strollers, luggage on wheels, or cargo dollies. The ramp wasn't originally conceived for them but once it's in place, they benefit from it, too.

UDL applies that idea to the classroom. It's about offering choices — akin to the stairs or the ramp — to support learning and get students where they want to go. With UDL, you can plan your course from the outset in ways that, while they lower barriers to learning for students with certain needs, benefit all students. Specifically, this approach flips the idea of needing to provide an accommodation in class for a student with disabilities — something that risks stigmatizing the student and imposes extra work on a faculty member. Instead of rushing to adapt to a last-minute accommodation for a particular student, UDL helps you design "ramps" as part of your course, so they're already in place for anyone who needs (or wants) to take advantage of them.

A classic example of UDL for an online course is providing captions for or

transcripts of videos. Prerecorded videos (as [I've noted before](#)) are a great way to communicate and build connections with online students. Besides being easy to create, videos are a powerful means of explaining complicated concepts and are more efficient than Zoom teaching (for those who like videoconferencing, check out "[8 Ways to Be More Inclusive in Your Zoom Teaching](#)"). You can reuse your videos in future semesters, too, if you make the content evergreen.

**“Everybody gets to learn.
No one has to out
themselves. All are welcome.
All are supported by the very
design of this class.”**

But videos need captions in order to be of use to students with hearing loss. Instead of letting that extra step — and extra work — stop you from creating videos, think of it as a way to lower barriers for everyone in your class. Many students prefer to read along while they watch an instructional video; it helps them absorb and process information. A text transcript is a good alternative to captions (or you can offer both). Some students like to print out transcripts, take notes on them, and then use them to study for a quiz. The point again: By offering this option to help students with hearing loss, you aid all students.

Ready to use UDL in designing your online courses for the fall? There are loads of options, but here are some simple, practical ideas to get you started:

- **Provide the same course content in two different formats.** I just mentioned a good example of this — videos with captions — but there are many other ways to do it. Give students a piece of text, and offer the same content in a visual format such as a chart or [infographic](#). Or, when you ask students to read a chapter of

the textbook, make an audio file of you reading it, so students can “read” it on the go or to absorb new ideas in a way that works best for them.

- **Allow two options for how students can complete an assignment.** For example, permit them to submit a weekly reflection on their learning either in writing or by smartphone video. Some students process information and express their ideas better in speech than in writing.
- **Offer students a choice in completing a final project.** Will a research paper or a video presentation enable students to achieve the learning goals and show what they know? Let them decide which one they prefer to create.

Does all of this sound like a lot of work for faculty members? It doesn’t have to be. Nor does it have to cost a lot of time or money. Thomas J. Tobin, a distance-learning guru at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, advocates a “plus-one” approach to UDL: Simply add one option to help your students engage with the content in ways they prefer. For more, listen to [his interview](#) on Bonni Stachowiak’s *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast, or read his [recent book](#), written with Kirsten T. Behling, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* (West Virginia University Press, 2018).

Does all of this sound like a lot of work for faculty members? It doesn’t have to be. Nor does it have to cost a lot of time or money.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. An equally important consideration for the fall is how you will [support culturally diverse learners](#) in your online courses. Especially at this moment in American history, you must think critically about how to help

Black, Latinx, and other students in historically underrepresented groups succeed in your online (or in-person) courses.

Courtney Plotts is a [researcher and educator](#) who specializes in supporting culturally diverse students in online classes. Her [recent interview](#) on the *Teaching in Higher Ed* podcast is a good place to start. There and elsewhere, she argues that online classes function in very transactional and Eurocentric ways. Students who do best in online courses, she says, are self-directed learners, have been shaped by cultures that value individual well-being, or both. What about students from cultures that value community over individual success? What about students who, for a variety of good reasons, don’t possess a strong self-identity, or who feel uncertain or worried about asking the instructor for help?

This is a complicated, sensitive subject. But again, there are simple, practical things you can do to be more equitable and inclusive in your online teaching. Here are a few of Plotts’s suggestions:

- **Lead an exercise asking students to help set classroom values.** Create a [Padlet](#) (an online visual Post-it board with [limitless uses in teaching](#)), and ask students to post words and images that represent what’s important to them in a classroom. Students might come up with things like respecting all perspectives, creating and maintaining a safe space for all, engaging in civil discourse, using person-centered language, etc. You can refine their ideas into a list or leave them gloriously unstructured on Padlet. Revisit these co-constructed values throughout the term, asking how well the class is doing in upholding them. You can try an anonymous survey or poll, a classwide discussion, or both, for different purposes.
- **“Which picture best describes how you’re feeling?”** Here’s a quick exercise (another good use of Padlet) to help you gauge how students of different backgrounds feel about your online course. Provide a variety of images — a serene

landscape, a feisty cat, a race car, a stormy sea cliff, a mournful hound dog — and ask students to write or record themselves talking about which one best represents how they feel, whether about online learning, about the fall semester, about the subject matter, or about anything else you want to know about. Best suited for a small class, this activity shows students that you care about them as people and are not fixated on just their meeting class deadlines. Follow up by emailing those students who selected images that conveyed anxiety or other negative emotions, and periodically check in with them throughout the semester.

- **Remind them to reach out to you for help.** Be aware, Plotts says, that students from some cultural backgrounds may hesitate to ask an instructor for assistance. The same goes for introverted students. In remote teaching, you can use announcements, short recorded videos, and email messages to encourage students to contact you, even if it's outside their comfort zone. Repeat that message frequently enough for them to believe you mean it. Use a warm and

encouraging tone. Respond quickly to their emails and questions. All of that will encourage students to take you up on your offer.

Be aware that students from some cultural backgrounds may hesitate to ask an instructor for assistance.

Be patient with yourself as you try these new approaches. Both UDL and culturally responsive pedagogy can feel overwhelming. So do just one new thing this fall. Add another in the spring, or improve upon your approach from the fall. We say we support our students. We say we want all of them to learn and succeed. Let's show them we mean it by working to lower barriers in our course design.

Flower Darby is an instructional designer and the author, with James M. Lang, of Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes.

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1255 Twenty-Third Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037
202 466 1000 | [Chronicle.com](https://www.chronicle.com)