

These are challenging times for teachers and students alike. Moving all at once online wasn't something many of us wanted or were prepared for. Some of us like myself are lucky because we have been teaching and learning online for many years. But I recognise that I am in the minority and I remember all too well that the transition to online learning is NOT an easy one; especially when, as so many are saying, "I didn't sign up for this!"

And I sympathise with students and teachers who are angry and scared because they didn't sign up for online learning. This isn't what they wanted, and they are unsure about many things:

Does online learning work? – Yes, it does

Am I going to be able to finish my degree/diploma/year? – Yes, you will

But it occurred to me watching various discussion forums all over the globe as well as talking to my own children that I am perhaps being a little facetious in telling people to simply "trust me...I've been doing this for a long time and it will all work out."

It really will work out though. Trust me.

But I know that ignores the very real fears people have and I wanted to use this space to speak directly to some of the concerns people have with advice on how to solve or at least mitigate some of these concerns. Thus far most of these concerns have been focussed on technical barriers (lack of Internet access etc...) but I think we are past these barriers and are now more engaged in what I would call social and pedagogical challenges. I'd like to thank Doug Hamilton at Royal Roads University for providing the basis for the responses to the challenges listed below. Doug has been a colleague and friend for many years and is truly a master at teaching generally and online teaching specifically.

There are 13 such questions but I will post just 3 for now. Stay tuned for more.

So here we go:

What we are hearing #1:

I am upset my course is now online. I didn't sign up for an online course, have never taken an online course before and I don't know what to expect

For Students:

- Try to find a quiet place to work on your course. Make it a "**sacred space**" where you go to only work on your course. No Facebook, Instagram etc... And try to prevent others from using your sacred space or disturbing you when you are in your sacred space. Clear your sacred space of other documents before you start working on course activities and homework.
- Look for advice on how to learn effectively online - there are many websites that contain these resources - or your university or college may have them already prepared for you.

- Ask a friend, relative or colleague who has taken an online course to coach or advise you.

For Instructors:

- Take the opportunity to re-imagine your course. Ask yourself “What do students need to be successful in this course?”
- Be sensitive to the fact that students will struggle to be engaged. Sometimes regular school was their oasis. We don’t really know what their home lives are like. They likely will have distractions and interruptions and might not be very well supported at home – technologically, intellectually nor emotionally.
- Ensure you are working with **simple** and **clear** learning outcomes as you plan course activities and assignments.
- Make a simplified syllabus available to help “ground” students. This can just be a topic list, a reading list and an assignment list.
- Reduce the amount of content delivered both synchronously and asynchronously to focus on the essential aspects of the course. Once the students are used to independent learning they will excel at it.
- Keep the online requirements simple at first to build confidence while students are still getting oriented to learning online. Start by asking students to introduce themselves online. If you all know each other already ask them to tell you what their favourite food or sport is.
- Give students more control over their online learning experience. For example, provide options for completing assignments to encourage creativity and student choice
- Establish a list of key questions for each course unit and ask students to share ways of answering these questions in class discussion forums to build community and create a peer-based support system.

What we are hearing #2:

It’s the first week of class and I don’t know what to do nor where to start

For Students:

- Look for a course schedule or outline (sometimes this is labelled “Start here” or “syllabus”) that will allow you to see the “big picture” of the course which will clarify the expectations about what is going to be required from you.
- Set up appointments with yourself to block off time to be online, to do the readings, and complete the assignments.

For Instructors:

- Send out a welcoming email a few days in advance that gives students clear instructions on how to log into the course.
- Acknowledge with the class that learning online may feel different at first and seem overwhelming.

- Provide some low-risk “transferring in” or ice-breaking activities at the beginning of the first week to help students get to know each other. This can be as simple as asking students to use the forum to introduce themselves
- Consider holding a synchronous session (only if possible for everyone or some students will feel left out and very frustrated or angry) using technologies such as Zoom during the first week to introduce yourself, to have students introduce themselves (if the class is small in size), and to summarize the key activities and assignments in the course.
- Create a “café” discussion forum where students can raise topics not directly relevant to the course but which allow them to ask questions or build deeper social relationships with other class members.

What we are hearing #3:

I’m having difficulty meeting assignment deadlines and discussion post timelines during my online course.

For Students:

- Place deadlines in your calendar with reminders added.
- Print out a schedule and leave it beside your computer.
- Check online calendars built into the course that list assignment dates.
- Don’t wait until the last minute to do an assignment. Think about how you can break a large assignment into more manageable chunks.
- Look for reminders from class reps and the instructor that provide further information about the details of activities and assignments.
- Stay actively engaged by volunteering to be a “schedule-minder” who sends out regular notices to classmates about learning activity and assignment due dates and responsibilities.

For Instructors:

- Consult with class representatives before confirming assignment dates to ensure that they do not interfere with deadlines in other courses.
- Send out a weekly posting reminding the class of upcoming learning activities and assignment deadlines.

What we are hearing #4:

“I keep forgetting. I forget that:

- I have ongoing responsibilities in my online course.
- I must log into the course everyday.
- There is discussion forum that I’m supposed to post my thoughts to on a regular basis.
- Learning online is very different than my regular class schedule where I can just show up at a certain time and place.”

For Students & Instructors:

- Set up the calendar feature on your phone or computer to remind you of important course responsibilities.
- Check in on your course everyday at the same time so it becomes habit.

What we are hearing #5:

“I don’t know how to start a discussion in the forum. I don’t know what to say. I am worried this will affect my grade.”

For Students:

- Read posting instructions carefully and look for the key question to answer or a “call to action” that will help frame your response.
- First poster--Don’t be afraid if your answer is not conclusive. Your role is to get the online discussion started. End your post with an invitation to other students to share their perspectives or to ask you questions about your ideas.
- Review “Contribution to the Learning Community” or “Participation” rubric (if available) to understand participation and contribution responsibilities.

For Instructors:

- Be explicit about what you want students to do in each forum. “In this forum I would like you to describe the greatest day ever. Please limit yourself to 300 words. I also want you to respond to at least one other posting by asking the person a question about their greatest day”
- Create a “Contribution to the Learning Community” or “Participation” rubric so students are clear their participation and contribution responsibilities and how they will be assessed.

What we are hearing #6:

I’m having difficulty sustaining my interest in continuing and deepening discussions especially when the instructor appears not to be actively engaged in the forum.

For Students:

- Review the existing posts and determine how you can add more value to the existing discussion. You can do this by (1) building on an existing point; (2) offering a contrasting point of view; (3) asking a question that you still have; (4) telling a story that helps to reinforce a particular perspective; (5) connecting the posting to course readings or outside readings and (6) summarizing and synthesizing the points already raised.
- Think about your own responsibility for being a catalyst for deepening online conversations in a discussion post. Ask yourself: How can I help move the discussion forward? How can I help explore alternative perspectives? How can I help to encourage the sharing of ‘unheard’ perspectives?

For Instructors:

- Make sure you are carefully monitoring all online discussions. You need not respond to each posting but you can summarise a series of postings and respond to the summary.
- Keep your postings positive. Avoid statements like “No, you are wrong.” Try statements like “That’s an interesting approach. I wonder if we might instead consider the following...”
- Connect your postings to course readings and activities. “In our textbook, the author describes the following. How does that connect to our discussion last week? Or how does that connect to a post Covid-19 world?”
- Check for students who seem to have disappeared and send them a private message to see if everything is ok

What we are hearing #7:

“I am feeling lost in the course and don’t know what I should be doing next.”

For Students:

- Use the course schedule as your “home page” so you can see which activities or assignments are due or currently need to be done.
- Ask your instructor for guidance.
- Post a “call for help” in the Help Discussion Forum.

For Instructors:

- In addition to using the course calendar post reminders of upcoming assignments to the forum
- Create a forum specially to discuss upcoming assignments
- Offer live tutorial sessions to discuss upcoming assignments

What we are hearing #8:

“My professor shows very long Powerpoint presentations or video lectures online. They average about an hour or sometimes even 90 minutes. After about 15-20 minutes, I’m starting to check out. I actually fell asleep once at my desk.”

For Students:

- Take a quick stretch break, walk around the room, get a glass of water and return to your seat refreshed.

- Make notes as the professor is speaking to stay attentive.
- Do your own research while the professor is talking. Look up definitions of key terms, find key authors, or seek out other helpful resources.
- Use the chat window to ask questions, share relevant links, or share your own thoughts.
- If all else fails, ensure that the session is being recorded, log out of the session, and watch it at another time when you are more attentive.

For Instructors:

Divide your course into digestible chunks. Each chunk should require no more than 20 minutes to complete. So divide your 90 minute lecture into 5 sections. In between each section give the students something to do like a reading, a discussion or an activity or simply give them a break.

What we are hearing #9:

“At times, the readings didn’t seem to be directly connected to the assignments, so I felt like I didn’t know how to begin working on the assignment.”

For Students:

- Post a question in the Help Discussion Forum.
- Ask your instructor to explain the relevance of the readings to the class or to you, personally.
- Consider doing your own research to find articles that build a better bridge between the readings and the assignments. Once you have found some articles, post a link in the Help Discussion Forum so others can benefit from them.

For Instructors:

Ensure that everything in your course connects to everything else in your course. The readings, the lectures, the materials and the assignments should all be connected and contribute to the goals of the course. Students notice quickly in online learning where the disconnects are and it causes them to be stressed.

What we are hearing #10:

“I was unclear about the expectations of the assignment, so I felt frustrated and rather stupid.”

For Students:

- For team assignments: discuss the expectations as a team, then appoint one person to bring any questions to the instructor or the other teams, or to a discussion forum.
- Post a question in the Help Discussion Forum.
- Ask your instructor to explain the relevance of the readings to the class or to you, personally.

- Consider doing your own research to find articles that build a better bridge between the readings and the assignments. Once you have found some articles, post a link in the Help Discussion Forum so others can benefit from them.

For Instructors:

- Create a marking rubric for each assignment so students know exactly what you are looking for and how you will assess the assignment.
- Include an introduction to each assignment that explains why that assignment is important to the students' learning and how it connects to the rest of the course materials

What we are hearing #11:

“I feel frustrated in my course but I have no idea how I can share my feelings of frustration with others. Am I the only one feeling this way or are others experiencing the same thing?”

For Students:

- Monitor the course café discussion to see if others are raising any similar frustrations.
- Reflect on your frustrations and why you are feeling this way. Is it because you are learning in a new way or are there other reasons?
- Establish a learning buddy in the class so that you can offer each other support when needed.
- Contact your instructor to share your feelings if they are getting in the way of your course experience.
- Take advantage of all the feedback mechanisms in the course. Many courses have built-in feedback opportunities such as mid-course surveys to help the instructors learn about students' experiences in the course in order to make any mid-course adjustments.

For Instructors:

- Be attentive to learners' frustration. This can show up either directly (by learners telling you directly) or indirectly (by the tone they use in their discussion posts, assignment submissions or emails).
- Positively acknowledge and respond to students' frustrations (“I understand you are frustrated and you have good reason to be frustrated. Here's how we can try to make things better.”)
- Create a discussion forum where people can discuss course issues not related to actual learning.
- Create a private discussion forum that **only** students can access
- Encourage students to use any available student services (counselling etc...). Sometimes people just need to vent.

What we are hearing #12:

“Some of my team members have had critical and possible emergency work responsibilities that have affected their contributions to our team’s work on our assignment.”

For Students:

- As a team, give yourselves enough time to plan out the requirements of the assignment and to divide up the work in a fair and equitable way. Discuss how to match components of the assignment to the strengths and availability of your team members.
- For students who have unanticipated work assignments that will significantly affect their teams’ outcomes and ability to meet the assignment requirements, please contact the instructor to make alternative arrangements to complete the assignment requirements.

For Instructors:

- Be sensitive to possible emergencies on the part of your students and discuss these possibilities with all students early in the course.
- Ask students to tell you early if they anticipate emergencies (if they or a spouse or parent work for emergency services for example) and plan accordingly
- Have a frank discussion about what constitutes an emergency. A relative dying is an emergency. A golfing vacation to Mexico is not an emergency
- Keep an open dialogue with students and emphasise that they will not be unduly punished because of emergencies

What we are hearing #13:

“Our team seems directionless and potentially dysfunctional and we don’t know what to do next in the team assignment.”

For Students:

- When your new team is assigned, discuss in your team helpful ways to manage conflict and expectations throughout the assignment.
- Appoint a representative from the team to contact the instructor for advice and help on clarifying assignment expectations.
- Consider developing a set of guiding principles that everyone on the team can support in order to be a highly effective team. Develop a team charter.
- Look for ways to take advantage of everyone’s strengths in team assignments.
- Approach your instructor, or a team coach, for assistance in addressing major group challenges and barriers to achieving positive momentum in team activities and assignments.
- Teamwork takes time, so start your team discussions in the first couple of weeks of the term.

- Test your team technology and systems by building in an easy deliverable early in the term. This will help build trust. That way you have time to fix any problems that arise.
- Online teams need to accomplish a variety of tasks transparently – be sure to use a range of technology for these tasks including:
 - Social interactions (e.g. social media)
 - Scheduling and planning (e.g. calendar)
 - Sharing and editing files (e.g. file sharing and online apps)
 - Brainstorming (e.g. collaboration apps)
- All team interactions should be documented and transparent to the team and the instructor. That way, if there's an issue the instructor has a record upon which to act.
- Consider including a “silence is acceptance” clause.
- DON'T try to write as a team. Rather agree on a detailed outline including arguments, evidence, and citations and then get one person to write the document.

For Instructors:

- Appoint yourself as a member of every team in your class so you can directly monitor and trace activities. You don't have to participate in every meeting (or any meetings)
- Develop some team building materials/activities for teams to use before they even begin working on the team assignment – there are many of these available on the web
- Have teams check in with you at regular intervals to explain how things are going
- Emphasise that most team problems can be resolved if caught early. If the problem is identified near the deadline or after the grade is assigned then likely there is little you can do.
- Use the team coaching services at your institute if available.
- Be open to alternative arrangements and assignment presentations.

What do you think? What strategies could you add to this list? Let me know if you want more information about any of these. Drop me a line anytime at raucoin424@gmail.com

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