

Seven Things That Worked in My Online Class

July 6, 2020 [Lisa Lawmaster Hess](#)



Last spring, my college, like so many other schools, made a dramatic mid-semester pivot from face-to-face instruction to online classes. It was trial by fire for instructors and students alike. Fortunately, I embarked on this journey with a fire extinguisher in the form of a course in designing online instruction, which I'd taken between semesters from one of our instructional designers. As a result, my mistakes had more to do with overestimating the number of hours in a day than compromising the integrity of my course. Still, I wasn't an expert. I made plenty of mistakes, but I also figured out some things I'd definitely do again, which I offer here in case they work for you.

Opt for an asynchronous design. I immediately gravitated toward this design, because when I took online courses as a student, one of things I loved was being able to work at my own pace and on my own timeline. This design acknowledged my students' need to have some control over their own schedules in an otherwise unpredictable time. It also made it possible for them to fit my course around their other responsibilities, which had shifted with the move off-campus. To help them plan, I posted the week's assignments every Sunday night and kept the same deadlines for portfolio work every week, except those surrounding semester breaks.

Schedule Zoom office hours. My lack of facility with Zoom was another contributing factor to my asynchronous design, but since it was important that I familiarize myself with this tool, as well as make

myself available to my students, office hours were a good place to start. As an adjunct, I hold only one scheduled office hour each week when on campus but, once we went online, I held four: one during my regularly scheduled office hour and one during the scheduled class time for each of my classes. This had the added benefit of keeping me on a schedule. I showed up every day and, if no one else did, I worked on planning or grading, just as I would have on campus.

Narrate my slides. This was time consuming, but, based on student feedback, greatly appreciated. While narrated slides were hardly a replacement for face-to-face instruction, they allowed me to add detail to the content, offer advice for remembering concepts, and even crack a few bad jokes. I was amazed by how much this meant to students craving a classroom connection.

Create weekly video greetings. Like the narrated slides, weekly videos allowed me to connect with my students (even though I hated doing videos at first). They also allowed me to draw my students' attention to an assignment for the week, or a long-term assignment they should be starting to consider. I kept the videos short and light, saving the heavy lifting for the accompanying PDF, which listed all the resources and assignments for the week.

Utilize a variety of resources. Before going online, I'd begun the process of moving away from a required textbook, which meant locating articles, TED Talks, and videos that supplemented and further clarified each week's concepts. This process was time-consuming but, in the end, enhanced the course by offering my students multiple perspectives on the material.

Mix in low-stakes responses. As I got acclimated, I moved beyond familiar tools and assignments, trying platforms like Flipgrid (at the suggestion of a student) and Padlet. These were great for sparking discussion, as the questions I posted were the same ones I'd have lobbed to the class if we were meeting in person. As with the narrated slides and video greetings, I underestimated how much this virtual presence would mean to my students — and me. We all loved being able to see one another. One caveat: some students dislike being on video, so opting for a platform that allows other options and/or mixing it up so it's not all video all the time is important.

Rethink exams. I replaced exams with an online portfolio. At first, this was because I had no idea how to manage online exams, let alone meet the needs of my students who required accommodations. Flipping the exam, in a way, by crafting essay questions (200-400 word responses) and focusing on the short answer portion of the exam instead allowed me to assess students' ability to apply the material; I quickly discovered I didn't miss multiple choice at all. In future semesters, I might add in low-stakes quizzes, but I don't see myself going back to a full exam on the online platform — and maybe not in a face-to-face class, either.

In the end, offering a variety of assessments, being flexible, and soliciting feedback from my students informally (Zoom office hours visitors) and formally (surveys) allowed me to create a class that kept things interesting and met my students' needs in a challenging time. I went from dreading a switch from

the familiar to brainstorming how I'll do things differently next time, hopefully without a pandemic as my reason.

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