

Teaching in Strange Times

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So I attended a workshop to try to get us very quickly prepared to teach at a distance until the end of the month. There are a few things I've learned that I think are important to share:

1. Be kind to yourself and your students. Everyone is stressed, even if they're playing cool. That includes faculty. And that's okay.

>> Don't aim too high! Keep things simple! It won't be the "same" as your regular class and that's okay.

2. Many universities have a considerable number of pedagogical experts that, quite frankly, I have only been dimly aware of until yesterday. Be kind to these people. They are suddenly very slammed.

>> Our campus has Instructional Designers in ATI (Academic Technologies & Innovations). Here's a link to the form you can use to request assistance:

<https://www.csusb.edu/academic-technology-innovation/designer-request-form>

You can also find a list of the upcoming workshops on the ATI site:

<https://www.csusb.edu/academic-technology-innovation>

Your college may also have people who can help with a lot of things but be kind, make an appointment (and remember that they have many responsibilities).

Attend workshops where you can-- but be focused in your approach. You won't be able to do everything! (Remember: Keep it simple!) I'd suggest:

- **Blackboard** workshops if you don't use BB much or if you want to focus on a specific aspect of BB. At the minimum, you need to know how to use BB for posting content, accepting assignments, perhaps conducting quizzes and keeping a grade book.
- **Zoom** workshops if you want to have synchronous activities (people doing things at the same time). Zoom is a video-conferencing tool that is like FaceTime or Skype but for groups.
- **PlayPosit** workshops (or online tutorial). Don't think you can just record your 100 minute PowerPoint and post it. This is not good teaching. Students will zone out in about 5 minutes. Instead, "chunk" your video into smaller segments and, if possible,

use PlayPosit to add interactivity. With PlayPosit, you can link to any YouTube video and annotate it with text, drawings/images and questions!

- **YouTube** workshops or tutorials. Your employee ID@csusb.edu gives you access to a YouTube account. Learn how to upload your videos to YouTube so that you can post the URL to Blackboard, emails, etc. Set your video to "unlisted" if you want to keep information about the video from showing up in searches. *Google is your friend here! Use it to figure out how to upload a video, choose the YouTube settings, etc.*
- With just these four things (and email), you can have an effective online course.

3. There are a much larger number of faculty on university campuses that desperately need to retool. We have faculty who do not know how to use even the course management software that we've been on since I've been here (12 years). It is moments like this when that disparity becomes really fraught. It is also unacceptable.

>> This is true but biased. If you teach primarily face-to-face, then moving online will feel intimidating and confining. But instead of focusing on the negatives (and there will be a lot of them), try to look for the positive. Online learning & teaching has taught me a lot about how to focus on what is essential.

>> Keep things simple! Your class won't be as rich and varied as in the past-- nor should you even strive for this. Students are going to be completely overwhelmed by online classes. Many of the classes will not be well organized. Students will feel lost. But if you keep your class goals clear, they will be very appreciate. Here are some things to consider:

- **Organize Blackboard by weeks.** You can have a content for each week that lists what students need to read, do, discuss, etc. It's possible to link from one area of Blackboard to another. This will help students understand **what** they need to do and **when** they need to do it.
- For redundancy, send out a weekly email with a list of things that need to be done that week.
- Look carefully over your syllabus. What do you absolutely need to do and what can (albeit reluctantly) be let go for Spring 2020? Focus on the essentials. Discard the extras.
- **Add complexity over time.** In the first few weeks, it will be all students can manage to get simple things done. If you have more complex assignments or tools, add them in slowly over the quarter. Think about breaking complex tasks into smaller assignments so that they build up their expertise and confidence over time.

4. You will not recreate your classroom, and you cannot hold yourself to that standard. Moving a class to a distance learning model in a day's time excludes the possibility of excellence. Give yourself a break.

>> And keep track of what you've done, as well as what you'd change the next time around (if there is a next time).

- You want to keep track of things so that when you are evaluated, you can explain what you've done. This means keeping track of workshops you attended, approaches you took when organizing your classes and what worked/didn't. Evaluation committees are often reassured by seeing that a faculty member has paid attention to what changes need to happen in subsequent iterations.
- I like to keep a Google doc with "Thoughts for the next iteration" where I mark down ideas as the quarter progresses. Otherwise, I tend to forget.
- Remember to keep everything simple & well-organized! If you really would like to do something but you don't have time to learn it right now, then change to something easier. If it's hard for you right now, it will be hard for students, too.

5. Prioritize. What do students REALLY NEED TO KNOW for two weeks. This one is hard for me. But we have to strip it all the way down--in my campaigns class, that means I need them to post infographics on their research and now post narrative context and slides. But I'm going to punt on presentations because we just don't have time. Which sucks. But these are not normal circumstances.

>> Amy teaches in a semester system. You'll be teaching in a 9 week quarter. Look at each week in terms of the overall course goals. If students only learn one thing per week, what do you want them to focus on?

6. If you're making videos, **student viewership drops off precipitously at 5 minutes**. Make them capsule videos if you make them. And UPLOAD to YOUTUBE because it TRANSCRIBES for you. Do not assume your audio is good enough or that students can understand without transcription. This is like using a microphone at meetings--I don't care if you don't need it, someone else does and they don't want to ask.

>> You can ask Google how to edit transcriptions. If you speaking in multiple languages, then you'll definitely want to edit (this is important for WLL faculty). If you want students to watch the video without transcriptions, look at Playposit (see above). I've used Playposit very effectively in French language classes by glossing the video with images and text to teach new vocabulary.

7. Make assignments lower or no stakes if you're using a new platform. Get students used to just using the platform. Then you can do something higher stakes. Do not ask students to do a high stakes exam or assignment on a new platform.

>> See above about building complexity over time.

8. Stay in contact with students, and stay transparent. Talk to them about WHY you're prioritizing certain things or asking them to read or do certain things. I've moved to doing that in all of my face-to-face teaching anyway, and it improves student buy-in because they know content and delivery are purposeful.

>> Stay as positive as you can with students in this very challenging situation. They are trying to manage four or five different classes with different organizations, etc. (that will likely include some very dis-organized courses). Let your class be the space where they feel in control of their work and where they know what to do.

9. Do not read on best practices for distance learning. That's not the situation we're in. We're in triage. Distance learning, when planned, can be really excellent. That's not what this is. Do what you absolutely have to and ditch what you can. Thinking you can manage best practices in a day or a week will lead to feeling like you've failed.

>> This is true up to a point. Some best practices are worth knowing:

- Make sure that participants know what to do and where to click. Try inviting a colleague to give you an honest appraisal, for example. This is where organization by week may help.
- Wherever possible, provide a link to the Blackboard tutorials for students. These tutorials usually include short videos.
 - Student help on Blackboard: https://help.blackboard.com/Filter/Student/College_or_University
 - Faculty help on Blackboard: <https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor>

10. Be particularly kind to your graduating seniors. They're already panicking, and this isn't going to help. If you teach a class where they need to have completed something for certification, to apply to grad school, or whatever, figure out plan B. But talk to them. Radio silence, even if you're working, is not okay.

>> I'd add that one of the major issues with online courses is that students don't know how to organize their time and underestimate the amount of time needed to complete their work. Wherever you can help them, I'm sure it will be appreciated. Some things to consider:

- Students (and faculty) will do best if they are working in a quiet space where they are not disturbed by things going on around them.
- Everyone works better if they chunk their time into manageable blocks. Try 10-15 minutes at the beginning then stand up and stretch before going back to it. (Keep this in mind when planning assignments.)
- Having a weekly schedule where students map out exactly when they will work on each class will be very important to a successful term. If they just wait for deadlines and try to catch up, they will be overwhelmed in a few weeks and we will end up with a high DFWI rate.
- Watch for signs that students are struggling and intervene before it becomes too late. Send them an email, call them, invite them to visit with an advisor-- in other words, pay attention. You have a lot on your plate, but not graduating, not making degree progress, ruining your GPA-- these are all things that might be avoided if someone is kind enough

to offer a helping hand. You don't have to coddle your students but remember that they are learners. Your gesture might help point them in the right direction.

And this is not something I learned in the workshop (some of these other things aren't either, they just make good sense), but for those in positions where they have to report on their year's activities, including teaching and service--REPORT ON THIS. We are, in real time, doing very significant labor for the university at no additional compensation and with little training. Report on that in your activities for the year. Frame your work as both teaching AND service. You are helping put your university on more solid ground by doing this and doing this on the fly--that is LABOR. Frame it as such. I told every junior faculty person in my department to do this, especially, and told them I would highlight that in my reports on them so it's repeatedly on record.

Here's to a good, even if strange, quarter for all (faculty & students)!

Terri