

# How to Transition to Online Teaching during these Difficult Times

Proposals from CUNY faculty

## 1. Give up on normal.

These are not normal days and shouldn't be treated as such. The road is going to be bumpy. We must expect hiccups, false starts, outages.

Transition to online teaching isn't easy. It takes considerable resources and experience to develop meaningful and engaging online courses. At a time when we are under stress because we or our loved ones have fragile immune systems, no health insurance, or precarious legal status, it is not realistic to expect that faculty with no prior training will develop fully functional online courses in one week. In the transition to online instruction, we must allow for flexibility and mistakes.

In our interactions with students, each other, and especially CUNY's most vulnerable and lowest paid staff, we must act with compassion and empathy, encouraging everyone to prioritize their physical and mental health and that of their loved ones, along with their overall quality of life.

## 2. Embrace "A for All."

There are good reasons to consider giving every student an A... and letting them know it now:

- Some faculty will find this difficult. We have been socialized to believe that grades are real markers of students' work. Yet students are unequal when it comes to access to resources, books at home, household members who can help, technology, time. Grades reflect social inequalities, and uphold ideologies of colorblind meritocracy.
- Letting go of grades by announcing an "A for All" policy now rearranges power dynamics in the virtual classroom, allowing conversations to move to exciting terrain: what do we want to learn? What can we teach one another?
- With students under extreme stress during a major global pandemic, worried about friends, family, work, and their own survival, grades are an unnecessary

source of anxiety, especially for students who must maintain a certain GPA for scholarships, financial aid eligibility, or visa status. We can't assume anything about their circumstances and they shouldn't have to expose information about their personal challenges to get accommodation.

- Students did not sign up to take online classes in a major public health crisis. With libraries closed, they may be stuck at home in an unsuitable environment for studying. If they don't adapt well, it's not their fault, and their grades shouldn't be depressed by the crisis.
- Some may worry that "A for All" could affect the value of the degree, or even accreditation. But how does anyone know what a grade means, considering the wide range of grading practices among faculty? As this crisis deepens, it will become clear that the imagined sanctity of grades is the last thing any of us should try to salvage.
- Even if you still have doubts about "A for All," talk to your students about the idea and listen to their perspectives. (Best to keep this between you and your students to avoid problems.)

### 3. Reassess learning objectives collectively.

We began this semester with learning objectives for each of our courses and programs, but now we need to take some time to rethink everything. After this recess, try collaborating with students to reimagine meaningful new learning objectives. Ask students: "what do you want to get out of this class?" and "what do you have the capacity to contribute?"

What can we still realistically pursue and what must we give up? There is no escaping the pandemic, but we can ease anxieties by discussing it openly in class and integrating it into lesson plans and learning objectives.

Examples of learning objectives:

- Develop a sense of community and mutual support among students
- Educate ourselves and others on the spread of the coronavirus, the risks, the best practices to slow down the outbreak
- Understand the politics, psychology, sociology, or history of pandemics
- Understand the labor and economic implications of the current global pandemic
- Come up with an urban plan or public health program to address the crisis
- Explore the science behind coronavirus and its spread

## 4. Consider asynchronous instruction.

**Synchronous:** classes follow the original schedule. Instructors ask students to connect at the scheduled class time to attend real-time lectures or participate in live discussions over an online platform.

**Asynchronous:** students and instructors agree on a time window during which they can participate in discussion forums, download a lecture, or submit an assignment, with no required real-time interaction.

### **Requiring connection at a certain time may exclude vulnerable students:**

- Many CUNY students (and faculty!) do not have reliable and fast wifi access at home. They may purchase data and use their phone as a hotspot. Some students do not have access to a computer at home.
- As the crisis worsens in New York, many students have to juggle additional challenges with their own health, their jobs, and their family obligations, especially those with children now that schools are closing.
- Students may have been able to get to campus on time, but their commute may not work the same way for getting home to attend the online lecture.
- At home under quarantine, even if they have good internet access, they may not have a quiet or appropriate space for joining an online real-time class.

### **Give students options:**

- In some cases, online real-time interaction may make sense, especially to confront a heightened sense of isolation.
- If you hold real-time lectures or discussions, make sure you provide an alternative way for students to participate, and make clear that no one will be penalized or rewarded for choosing one option over another.
- Be flexible and accommodating. Don't require students to complete any readings or assignments in less than a week, and extend deadlines without penalty.

## 5. Make your class accessible.

Many students who take *in person* classes made this choice because they do not learn or focus well in online interactions. This is not just about having access to the technology. Students have many different kinds of learning abilities and disabilities. For

some, regardless of the best practices you adopt, the transition to online instruction will not work for them.

### **Give options. Always. For everything.**

- Nothing should be compulsory.
- Make class material available in several formats (e.g. students can read a transcript of real-time lectures afterwards).
- Let students contribute to discussion boards on their own time if they can't participate in class discussion in real time.
- Allow different channels for submitting work (e.g. emails, Blackboard).
- Provide opportunities for make-up assignments and extra credit.
- Keep deadlines flexible and make sure students know that.
- Above all, do not add extra work on top of what students already do. We need to reduce the overall burden on students.

### **Check in regularly with students**

- Make sure you get students' preferred email addresses and reach out to them directly, not only through Blackboard announcements. Some students may have difficulties accessing their CUNY email off campus, and Blackboard won't deliver messages to non-CUNY emails.
- Keep up with student activities on the course site, Blackboard, discussion boards, real-time chats (save them before closing!), and email communications.
- If a student does not participate or hand in assignments, reach out to ask if there is anything you can do to support them.

### **Open up space for judgment-free discussion**

- Create spaces for students to engage using discussion forums built into Blackboard or other platforms.
- Student participation is not judged, graded, counted, or evaluated.
- Don't police language on these forums; encourage students to express themselves freely through jokes, memes, emojis, etc.

## **6. Choose tech platforms thoughtfully.**

We are about to participate in the mass dissemination of course material online. We should be wary of depositing lecture notes, visual presentations, and assignments in the hands of private companies or university administrations. No department should require

instructors to record online lectures if they are not comfortable doing so. The safety of students' personal data is also at stake.

- It's wise to stick to whatever infrastructure you have already in place or are comfortable using. Don't transition to something new overnight, students will legitimately be confused. However, consider carefully what to upload.
- If you currently do not have an online platform for communicating with students and you are planning to learn something from scratch, consider non corporate, nonprofit, or open source platforms (like the CUNY Academic Commons).
- Many web-based or app-based platforms present serious privacy concerns. Think and ask questions before choosing what seems to be the easiest or most familiar platform. CUNY Blackboard Collaborate Ultra is built into your Blackboard course already, conforms to student privacy policies, and works well for real-time discussions.
- On 3/13/2020 CUNY [announced](#) that it has teamed up with WebEx to offer CUNY-sponsored access to the platform of distance communication. WebEx belongs to Cisco Systems, a multinational technology conglomerate known for controversies regarding the tracking of its users' internet history. Read UCSC professor Nick Mitchell's thread about risks associated with using university-licensed accounts "[why i stopped using my university-licensed zoom account.](#)" (Full unrolled thread here: <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1238946433434173440.html>)

## 7. Access resources.

CUNY Guidance on Academic Continuity:

<https://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/guidance-on-academic-continuity-to-campuses/>

CUNY Graduate Center Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) - Considerations for Instructional Continuity: <https://continuity.commons.gc.cuny.edu/>

Join the TLC workspace on Slack for all CUNY faculty who need assistance transitioning face-to-face courses to online. Sign in with your CUNY email address here:

[https://cuny-co.slack.com/join/shared\\_invite/zt-coo9d8j9-NnoDaJTqrf0sblUDtbfM7Q](https://cuny-co.slack.com/join/shared_invite/zt-coo9d8j9-NnoDaJTqrf0sblUDtbfM7Q)

Rebecca Barrett Fox, "Please do a bad job of putting your courses online":

<https://anygoodthing.com/2020/03/12/please-do-a-bad-job-of-putting-your-courses-online/>

Coronavirus Syllabus: an open-access crowdsourced cross-disciplinary resource:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1orm696AhnaPDJ7IJailwki2vQrqDG9zgGBFADr-vBaM/>

Disability Justice Framework COVID-19 Resources - Mutual Aid, Disability Justice, and Community Care:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TKXdQ-SPpxyQSpT4dZs\\_ndOeiNzVEVhLOnyIWYJ7U1o](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1TKXdQ-SPpxyQSpT4dZs_ndOeiNzVEVhLOnyIWYJ7U1o)

Humanities Coronavirus Syllabus:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UeAN5jhSib-CsP17keNC6c3iMF7PgE3KDDDBY24w0xY/>

Teaching Coronavirus—Sociological Syllabus Project:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1orm696AhnaPDJ7IJailwki2vQrqDG9zgGBFADr-vBaM/>

Teaching COVID-19: A Collaborative Anthropology Syllabus Project, *Teaching and Learning Anthropology Journal*:

<http://teachinglearninganthro.com/teaching-covid-19-an-anthropology-syllabus-project/>

## Contact

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