Helpful Suggestions, Resources and Tools for Online Teaching
June 2020

Based on faculty discussions, emails, and polls, on Darby's *Small Teaching Online* book and reviews of the book, and on the online learning site managed on Brightspace by Esther and the online teaching site managed by the Dean's office, one of many ways to distill the "best practices" of online teaching/learning is presented in more detail below as: be available for your students, use intentional design for your course, build community in your course, motivate your students, be flexible, and keep things simple.

1. ***Be available for your students***

   a. Flower Darby: "Your students want *you*. Great content and a well-organized class help. But mostly they want you. Online classes are not slow-cookers…. Online classes are not set-and-forget. Get in there. Work with your students. Have fun with your students. They want *you*. No amount of sophisticated bells and whistles can replace an authentic, present and engaged instructor." The ability to do online classes (especially synchronously) is a privilege that not all of our students have; but even with asynchronous learning, the instructor can be less present or more present.

2. ***Use intentional design for your course***

   a. Liz Evans: "Tried and true pedagogical approaches such as [Universal Design](#) and [Backwards Design](#) can be tweaked to meet online needs…. Establishing presence and social learning through multi-modal engagements and reflective meta-cognition are effective techniques for *any* class, both face-to-face and through the internet. Communicating the underlying **what**, **why** and **how** of learning is especially important for online learning success."

   b. Stan Skrabut: "When designing learning in an online environment, it is important to manage cognitive load. You can do this by chunking content, releasing content strategically, and scaffolding learning. Students should master previous content before learning new content." NYTimes: "The instructional ingredients of success…include short videos of six minutes or less, interspersed with interactive drills and tests; online forums where students share problems and suggestions; and online mentoring and tutoring."

3. ***Build community in your course***

   a. Erin Heinz: "For example, at the beginning of the course, the instructor might embed a quick introductory video clip, becoming more visible to the students. Posting announcements (either video or written) on the

[Brightspace] homepage, participating in student discussions, providing access to instructor-moderated discussion board, and giving timely feedback for assignments can make an instructor more visible, appear more empathetic, and motivate students…focus on the importance of instructor feedback in maintaining students' engagement. Focused and timely feedback can reduce the grading burden and offer structure and guidance for student success. [Use] online rubrics and summative feedback. Other types of outreach for students include personalized emails, class-wide announcements, short videos, a video conference call, or phone conversation."

b. Seven strategies designed to engage students in synchronous online discussions: https://catlintucker.com/2020/05/7-strategies-to-engage-students-in-synchronous-online-discussions/ (thanks, Susan!)

4. *Motivate your students*

a. Targeted emails: reach out and provide encouragement to students and also provide reassurance to students who are doing well.

b. Scaffold the release of new content after students demonstrate mastery of previous content.

c. Erin Heinz: "instructors should seek the optimal balance between course structure and student agency. Students who feel a sense of control in the course are more likely to engage in autonomous learning…[let] students annotate or co-create the syllabus and have flexibility in selecting topics for assignments, projects, and discussion groups. When students take ownership of their learning, they add their own intrinsic motivation to learn."

d. Erin Heinz: "Increasing student agency does not mean diminishing academic standards. [See] a tactic called "SPECs grading," a model of grading that puts the onus of performance on the students and lessens the grading burden on the instructor…. In applying this SPECs model to assignments, students must meet a defined base standard (minimum specifications) to receive full credit. It's an "all or nothing" approach, and if students do not meet the minimum standard, they receive a zero. SPECs grading could be useful when used selectively to maintain a base level of student performance. For instructors, SPECs grading can reduce cognitive burden of attempting to decipher between A– and B+ grade for routine student contributions, such as weekly discussion posts." Here are two links that further discuss SPECs grading: Yes, Virginia, There's a Better Way to Grade and What is Specifications Grading and Why Should You Consider Using It?

e. Erin Heinz: "[create] value of content for students by making the content relevant to their own experiences. Linking of course material to big questions can help all students fit in the relevance of new information… concept maps can help students fit in new content to the overall scope of the course and into interests and goals in their own lives." Our students are spread around the world; assignments linked to their particular locales could be quite valuable.

5. *Be flexible*

   a. Allow students agency in co-creating one of the learning outcomes.

   b. Offer students a menu of assignments (and means of communicating their work) to choose from according to what works best with their circumstances.

   c. Deliver materials in multiple formats to better fit differing student circumstances.

   d. Mail course packets, kits, reading materials to students so that they have an alternative to a screen.

   e. Flexibility doesn't mean no structure nor diminished academic standards. Erin Heinz: "Instructors can make clear the expectations of the course and the level of commitment needed from students. Once students are clear in the steps to success, perhaps even co-creating goals in the course, they can decide if they are willing to put forth the effort from the course outset. Designing courses with scaffolding can build confidence through small successes and maintain forward momentum for students…students must do the work to achieve the learning outcomes in classes, but good structure can benefit all students, particularly those students who have high risk of attrition." See also SPECs grading in 4d above.

6. *Keep things simple*

   a. Try not to clutter courses and overburden students with the stress/confusion of new software/technology tools unless the tool solves a problem and advances a learning goal; remember that students may be taking as many as 4-5 classes during the fall semester and those classes may each require a different new tool or tools for the student to learn; ensure alternatives for the new tool so that no one is left out. The search for a tool that does everything you want it to do may come at the cost of increasing complexity or expense; settling for a less than perfect tool may have the virtue of simplicity and lower cost.

b. If you don't have strong preferences, stick to the few tools supported by IT, and use tools native to Brightspace (such as Discussion, Activity Feed, audio/visual capture, Dropbox, rubrics, Calendar, Quizzes, etc.) or tools integrated with Brightspace (such as Zoom, Perusall, etc.). Phat is working with Barbara to develop a master course Brightspace template that incorporates the "best practices" discussed in this document and demonstrates the range of things that you can do in Brightspace. Faculty can then adapt/modify that template for their particular courses.

c. In some cases, a tool will allow you to transfer what you normally do in person to an online format and in other cases, not. An example of the latter is not finding a satisfactory solution for preventing cheating during an exam which then becomes an opportunity to look for alternatives such as oral exams, open-book exams, other kinds of assessments, etc.

The following are links to additional resources and SUA support info.

To look at some further software/technology resources/tools, you can click on: Digital Media Choice Board; advice for screencast lecture; custom animation; simple interactives; social learning; Microsoft Teams; Brightspace; secure online exams with lock-down browser.

Click on content resources to see such from our library, Open University, University Business, the National Academies, and Coursera for Campus.

Some notable websites are: Chronicle's "Moving Online Now"; teaching remotely in times of need (thanks, Esther!); ACUE's excellent online teaching toolkit (thanks, Gesa!); Yale's "Moving from On-Campus to Online" (thanks, Bryan and Janna!); five easy steps for creating an engaging online course (thanks, Susan!); Chronicle's article on trauma-informed teaching (thanks, Gesa!); online resources and tools for SUA faculty on Brightspace (managed by Esther); online teaching site (managed by the Dean's office).

SUA IT is eager to meet with faculty to consult on your needs, to learn more about your ideas for your online course, and to recommend options for software and hardware. Here's the contact information: Barbara McGrath (bmcgrath@soka.edu, 949-480-4195); Sophia Kawada (skawada@soka.edu, 949-480-4229).