

ADVICE

5 Takeaways From My Covid-19 Remote Teaching

By *Michelle D. Miller* | MAY 06, 2020



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Perhaps the most important lesson from academe's rapid shift to remote teaching is that there is no wrong way to salvage your courses during a global emergency.

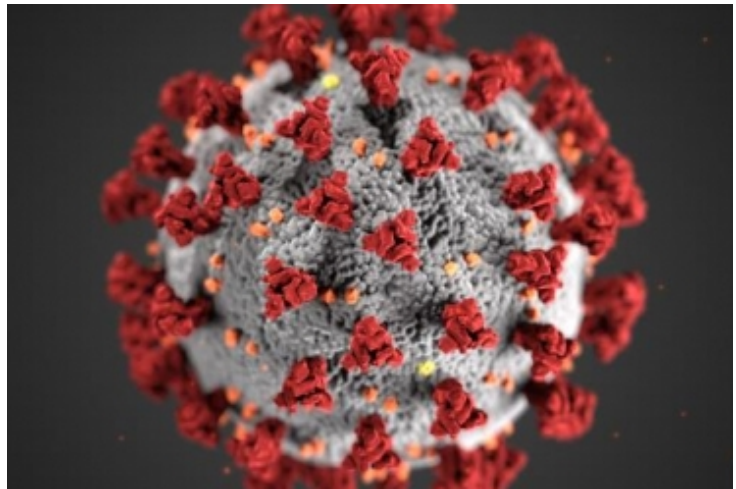
This semester, if you (a) made a good-faith effort to identify what was essential for your students and (b) set up ways for them to keep moving forward, you did great. From what I've seen and read, faculty members

around the world have been doing far more than just putting in a good-faith effort during the Covid-19 crisis. Most of us have moved heaven and earth to ensure some kind of continuity in our students' education, even as we have spent our own days coping with emotional and personal strains we could hardly have imagined mere months ago.

Coronavirus Hits Campus

As colleges and universities have struggled to devise policies to respond to the quickly evolving situation, here are links to *The Chronicle's* key coverage of how this worldwide health crisis is affecting campuses.

- Here's a List of Colleges' Plans for Reopening in the Fall
- As Covid-19 Pummels Budgets, Colleges Are Resorting to Layoffs and Furloughs. Here's the Latest.
- A Ph.D. Student Simulated a Day in the Life of a Covid 19-Era Campus. It Went Viral, but It Wasn't Pretty.



We've spent hours videoconferencing with students. I don't mean robotically delivering preplanned lectures — I mean meeting with students in small groups or one-on-one to talk through problems. We've served as tech support for students (and sometimes for colleagues) on technology that we've just barely learned ourselves. And we've been rolling with the punches as campus policies and plans changed, then changed again.

In short, we did the job we signed up to do — under conditions that none of us signed up for. And, unfortunately, it looks like many of us will be in the same predicament come September.

Nothing about how we will teach in the fall semester looks certain. And that means faculty members must be ready to teach fully or partially online — either from the start of the semester, or as a sudden pivot if in-person teaching resumes and Covid-19 cases spike again. This time, however, you won't be going in blind. You have time, as the 2019-20 academic year comes to a close, to think about lessons learned and what you're going to do differently in September if your classroom shifts once again to the virtual realm.

For myself, I'm beginning this process by reflecting on what went well in my own courses during the spring semester, what didn't, and what has surprised even me, a veteran of the educational-technology and online-learning scene.

Lesson No. 1: They've gotten a bad rap, but Zoom classes can be rewarding. Well before Covid-19, online education had identified one of the most important design choices in constructing our courses: the balance of synchronous (holding class at preset times that students attend together) *and* asynchronous techniques (organizing activities such as lectures, quizzes, and discussions that students can complete at a time of their choosing).

Perhaps the biggest surprise for me was how often institutions favored one approach over the other this spring, steering their faculty members toward either synchronous *or* asynchronous instruction.

There's not really a right or wrong answer to which is better. Each has major upsides and downsides. Some institutions went for one extreme, strongly recommending or requiring that instructors teach "live," while others heavily discouraged real-time courses via Zoom and other such video tools in favor of asynchronous techniques.

Equally surprising were the outcomes this spring from my own synchronous and asynchronous choices as I shifted my courses to remote instruction. Wary of falling into the trap of long, boring Zoom presentations, and worried about students who wouldn't be able to attend required classwide meetings (for all kinds of reasons), I set up only a few Zoom sessions and didn't require attendance. Instead, I organized lots of asynchronous discussion boards and put out a standing offer to help students with any problems, in whatever modalities worked best for them.

But then, my optional sessions were not only well-attended but also unexpectedly rewarding for me and for the students.

Especially given that most of my teaching at this moment happens to be focused on graduate students, the opportunity for social support and maintenance of our group dynamic was a welcome one. I ended up scheduling a few more optional sessions than I

had originally planned, and even brought in a guest speaker to help ring out our semester together.

So, yes, synchronous teaching via videoconference can be tiring and occasionally glitchy, and is no panacea. But my live classes turned out much better than I thought they would, which is a lesson I will take into future semesters.

Lesson No. 2: Have a pivot plan. This summer I will put together all the usual materials — syllabi, readings, quizzes — for my fall in-person courses. But I am also planning to prepare a list of alternatives in case I have to move my courses online or, conversely, if we start online but move back to a physical classroom later in the fall semester.

I don't plan to build a whole backup course. But I do want to think about all the major elements and how they could be reconstructed or reconceptualized in a virtual classroom, if that proves necessary again.

Lesson No. 3: Student goals will take center stage. I've always prided myself on being a student-focused teacher. But the process of stripping down a course to its core purpose, in order to adapt it quickly to a virtual classroom, revealed how much further I could go with envisioning students as active creators of their own learning. This experience drove home a point I already knew but maybe needed to be reminded of again: What students want to get out of a course ought to be at the center of everything I do.

The contrast between me in regular-teaching mode and me in remote-teaching mode this semester reminded me of how easy it is to lose sight of that aim amid the nitty-gritty of grading policies, assessments, standards, rubrics, and so on. In the future, regardless of modality, I will explicitly invite students in every course I teach to reflect on what they want to achieve and tell me how I can help make that happen. I plan to rework my syllabi to convey that philosophy upfront, and I'll start the fall semester with an assignment in which students articulate what they want from the course and what kind of support from me would be most helpful.

Lesson No. 4: High-stakes assessments are overrated. And they're going to recede even further into the background of my teaching, whether in person or online. The details will shake out as I get into the planning process for each course. But one way or the other, I'm going to avoid anything that puts students in the position of cramming a lot of work in on a test or a project within a short time frame, just to satisfy a grade requirement. Such heavily weighted assignments turned out to be the worst ones to try to run with integrity in a virtual environment. (They also tend to conflict with Lesson No. 3, where I am trying to shift emphasis off of my own goals for the course and onto students' goals.)

For a while now, teaching experts have advised that students learn best from frequent low-stakes quizzes and other assignments — either in addition to, or in place of, traditional midterms, final exams, and term papers. These experts have also pointed out that high-stakes tests and papers are a breeding ground for academic dishonesty, and that online exams raise concerns about high-tech remote-proctoring options.

Summer is a good time to re-examine what I'm really trying to accomplish with those big midterms, finals, and projects, and to consider alternative ways to reach the same learning goals, while giving students more control and choice, and reducing the need for intense proctoring.

The alternatives could include assignments that are linked to students' actual interests and engage their attention over a longer period of time — things like creating a series of blog posts, doing a project on real-world problems, or discussing examples of course concepts that show up in the news media. On my end, it could also mean trying out different ways to evaluate their work, such as ungrading or specifications grading.

Lesson No. 5: Student mental health will be on my mind. The importance of teaching with compassion and care has become a more and more prominent theme in discussions about college pedagogy, and there has never been a better time to listen to what those voices have to say. While it's impossible to predict what will happen this fall, we can safely say that our classes will be filled with students who are struggling to cope.

Campus systems for dealing with student anxiety and depression were already under strain before the Covid-19 crisis, and so I think we will all need to pitch in, just as we did this spring, in ways that we haven't before.

At the same time, we need to respect appropriate professional limitations and boundaries — something that Karen Costa, in her podcast on the subject, terms "scope of practice." I don't know exactly how my teaching will change to accommodate these mental-health issues, but I know that it will have to. So I'll go into fall with a much higher awareness of trauma-informed pedagogy.

What institutions must do. In the Covid-19 crisis, as in any stressful situation, it's helpful to focus on the things that are within our power to control. But at the same time, I think it is important to avoid framing the goal of a successful fall semester as merely a matter of individual initiative.

Our institutions and our leadership also need to step up, with the same kind of intensive reflection and commitment to adaptability that faculty have demonstrated. And just as we teachers now need, more than ever, to see our students as whole people, our institutions need to recognize that faculty members are not just course-delivering machines, but human beings who are struggling to make sense of, and cope with, all that has happened.

It's also an excellent time for academic leaders to beef up their engagement with all the great research and thinking that's been going on in the field of higher-education pedagogy. That doesn't just refer to research on online teaching (although that's probably the most critical place to start). It also means getting up to speed on the learning sciences, inclusive pedagogy, and other important frameworks such as universal design for learning.

There are only going to be more critical decisions that come down the pike as we get through this. Grounding campus policies in research will make for better-quality decisions as well as better buy-in for those decisions.

If the Covid-19 crisis ends up making me a better-prepared, more supportive, and more agile teacher, so much the better. And if it spurs our institutions to put more priority on serious collaboration between administrators and faculty members, backed up by the best evidence and research out there — well, we couldn't ask for more. I'm not one to say that this tragedy is full of silver linings. However, I intend to come through it stronger, and I hope our whole profession will, too.

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