

TO: Faculty, Department Heads, and Deans

FROM: Gail Burd and Lisa Elfring

RE: Small Changes with a Big Impact on Teaching and Learning Online

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To say that this year has been challenging for higher education (and everything else about our lives) would be a vast understatement. In this communication, we discuss small changes that can be made this spring to teaching in live online and flex-in person classes that can improve student motivation, learning, and success.

We want you to hear what one graduating senior told us about this year. After classes ended this fall, Eduardo (not his real name) contacted us by email and one of us talked to him by phone. Eduardo was very respectful and understood instructors were also challenged by a fast transition to online instruction, but he wanted us to know his difficulties with online learning during the fall were exacerbated because resources for learning that he had in the past (in-person instruction, classmates, and study sessions) were not available in his live-online classes this fall.

The most common problem Eduardo mentioned was the near-absence of student-to-student engagement in all his courses. Eduardo had taken several courses in the past that were taught in collaborative classrooms and required group assignments, and he valued this type of learning. He deeply missed student interaction in his fall 2020 courses. Also, Eduardo did not know the students in the three large, live-online classes he took and was not able to develop study groups.

Eduardo had a few recommendations he asked us to share:

- 1) Build more student-to-student engagement and collaboration, primarily utilizing Zoom breakouts. (He did not take a course with discussion boards, but this might be helpful in asynchronous classes if participation was required for a few points). He also suggested small group projects and noted that this practice should begin early in the course to help students meet each other.
- 2) Include more low-stakes assessments in the grading; do not use just one or a few mid-terms and a final exam or project.
- 3) Offer discussion sessions and require attendance for a small number of points. One of his courses had a discussion section that was optional, but it seems less than 25% of the students attended; it seems he also did not attend regularly.
- 4) One faculty member offered an adaptive learning set of slides that were optional, but most students (apparently including Eduardo) did not use them (probably since it did not figure into the grade). Giving a small number of points can encourage students to use such learning tools.

We know from research projects on student learning that student engagement with course material and student-to-student collaboration strongly enhance learning. Many books on learning, including *Small Teaching* by James Lang and *Small Teaching Online* by Darby and Lang, summarize and provide examples of practices that promote these types of engagement.

We have learned a great deal about student challenges with online learning from surveys and conversations with students, instructors, and student-success this year:

- Motivation to complete work is a challenge, and many students rely on incremental credit to prioritize their work.
- Many students reported not understanding what to expect in terms of assessments (projects, quizzes, assignments, exams, etc.).
- The reduction or absence of student-to-student interactions resulted in challenges with learning, and many students felt alone and isolated.
- Reduced engagement with peers and instructors created challenges for learning.
- Without knowing the other students in the class, it was difficult to form study groups.
- Family, financial, and personal health problems negatively impacted engagement with course content, motivation, and meeting course deadlines.

**What can instructors do to support students in the face of these challenges to improve motivation, engagement, learning, and completion?**

- Be flexible about due dates and missed assignments, but require communication around late assignments to ensure students continue to prioritize work for the course.
- Utilize flexible attendance policies, but provide a small incentive to help students prioritize course attendance.
- Utilize a range of learning activities into the course to enhance opportunities to engage with the material, each other, and the instructor.
- Instructors can increase their engagement with students via discussion boards, office hours, and course discussions in live-online courses.
- Rely more on multiple, low-stakes assessments and less on large midterm and final projects or exams to give students more opportunities to demonstrate learning
- Give low-stakes assessments (quizzes, short in-class writing assignments) often and before larger assessments to enable students to practice demonstrating their learning
- Use collaborative-learning approaches and collaborative assignments during class time to increase student-to-student engagement by using Zoom breakouts in live-online courses or discussion boards if course is asynchronous; assign small groups of students to work together on in-class work to enhance student-to-student engagement.
- Collaborative work during Zoom breakout sessions can be improved by assigning roles and providing norms and discussion prompts, and requiring short written responses to prompts in collaborative documents. Many tools, including the free

Google Suite, can be used for collaborative work. Instructors and learning assistants can monitor and provide assistance in the breakout rooms.

- Encourage students to contact instructors when they are having problems; TAs and undergraduate learning assistants can be incredibly helpful, but instructors must be engaged with the students beyond delivering content
- Instructors should contact students with supportive “nudges” when they are not engaged with course content (not opening D2L site or using learning materials); not turning in assignments; low grades on assessments (quizzes, exams, papers, etc.); or not attending live-online sessions (if appropriate).
- Make course recordings in live-online courses and use short videos for content delivery in asynchronous courses; this allows students who are having trouble with the material to go back and review it. However, for live-online courses, remind students that the videos and course recordings cannot substitute for engagement during class meetings with students and the instructor.

For more suggestions about using course structure to provide flexible opportunities for learning, see the [Office of Instruction and Assessment’s Balancing Structure and Flexibility document](#) at the [Teaching Models page](#), or [contact the OIA for a consult](#) with one of the professional-development team members.