

Remote Teaching @USM

New to remote teaching and need to move quickly?

Don't worry, it doesn't have to be that complicated. There is a big difference between temporarily teaching remotely versus completely redesigning a course to move it online. In fact, you probably already have access to the tools you need through your institution. But figuring out how best to deploy them will take a little planning. Let's focus on a few basics...

#1: Synchronous or asynchronous?

Among the advantages of face-to-face courses are the learning benefits that derive from instruction that takes place in a social context. These advantages can be difficult to replicate from a distance, but not impossible.

Synchronous learning, made possible through tools like audio- or videoconferencing, allows students to engage with content at the same time and develop a sense of community. The downside to the use of synchronous tools, however, is that they require students to be in the same (virtual) place at the same time, which might become difficult for students who have limited technology resources, become ill themselves, or are caring for others.

Things to consider...

- Schedule sessions during the already-scheduled class time to minimize conflicts.
- Replace office hours and class discussions with conference calls or videoconferencing.
- Use a videoconferencing tool if the class or class group that needs to meet is below 20, consider breaking larger groups into subgroups to increase interaction.
- Use a tool that allows you to record sessions for absent students.
- Include links to recorded sessions in your communications to all students.

Asynchronous learning, made possible through tools like the learning management system (LMS) or pre-recorded lectures, can allow students more flexibility as to when and how they access the content. Pre-recording lectures can also save you time in the long run. However, the downside to the use of asynchronous tools is, of course, the lack of human interaction—the consequences of which will potentially be made worse under the circumstances for already anxious students.

Things to consider...

- Use the LMS to post all content in one location and keep it organized for students.
- Create a clear “content map” that lists all material (text, video, audio) that you want students to review.
- Break up pre-recorded lectures into short segments interspersed with knowledge checks.
- Communicate via email or your LMS messaging tool regularly to answer questions and help keep students on track.

Given the pros and cons of each approach, we recommend using a mix of both synchronous and asynchronous tools. Your academic technology unit and/or teaching and learning center can direct you to the tools you have available at your institution. Additionally, many of these tools are free, inexpensive, or available for a 30-day trial.

#2: What are the core course objectives?

Not everything has a direct, transferable online equivalent. You're going to need to be flexible. The key goal during this crisis is to help students get the support they need to meet your core course objectives. That may involve thinking creatively about how to build up students' knowledge and skills in different formats to complete the same assignment.

Go back over your syllabus and ask yourself a few questions. What do you think you can realistically accomplish during the disruption? Do you think you can maintain your original syllabus and schedule? Do you need to focus on having students keep up with the reading, with some assignments to add structure and accountability? Are there particular skill-building or applied learning goals you want to advance? How will you ensure students stay engaged?

In rethinking key assignments, learning activities, and assessments that align with course objectives, how can you introduce options for your students that will mitigate anxiety by allowing flexibility when they have technical hurdles or experience other unforeseen disruptive events? For example...

Student Presentations

If oral communication is a core course objective, ask students to record their presentation using simple technology (such as a cell phone or their computer) and post it for you or the class. Many campuses have video solutions like Panopto or MediaSite. If you need an alternative, YouTube privacy settings allow your students to post presentations that only you see. If the point of the assignment is really about content knowledge and/or other skills like persuasive thinking, consider skipping the technology and ask students to submit a script of their presentation instead. Similarly, you might have students write a pro/con issue comparison memo, in lieu of participating in a classroom debate.

Labs

While certainly not all laboratory experiences can be replicated online, there are virtual tools that can help replicate the experience of some labs, such as virtual dissection, night sky apps, video demonstrations of labs, and simulations.

For example, your BIO102 course could use the Virus Explorer from MERLOT Virtual Labs that incorporates engaging 3D-models of viruses that students can click on to rotate and view from different angles.

Over 100 online virtual labs for college level Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Earth and Environmental Science, Engineering, and Math are available. You could also try the National Science Digital Library.

As you think through course changes, keep in mind the impact this situation may have on students' ability to meet those expectations, including illness, lacking power or internet connections, or needing to care for family members. Be ready to handle requests for extensions or accommodations equitably.

#3: How will you stay in touch with students?

The shift from face-to-face to remote teaching will be particularly anxiety producing for students, who may have extra concerns how to succeed in your course under the circumstances. Being intentional, proactive, and consistent about how you communicate with them will make a big difference.

Things to consider...

- Use campus email and your LMS for communication. Introducing new approaches to messaging may complicate outreach or reduce effectiveness.
- Inform students, more than once, about what communication methods you expect them to check and how frequently.
- Indicate how promptly/often you will respond to their messages. Communicate weekly expectations of student engagement (more than once a week is preferable).
- Be very clear about your expectations for activities and assignments. Thoroughly explain each step of assignments so there is no confusion about what to do, where to post, and the like. Explain how you will handle due dates and assignment deadlines (including the time zone you're using when you set the due date and time).

Final Checks

- √ Find out what campus services (writing center, tutoring, counseling) will be available during this time and communicate that information to your students, as appropriate.
- √ Keep accessibility in mind as you consider technical tools to bridge the gap. Captioning video content for accessibility is always a good practice, look to your Teaching and Learning Center, IT Department, or Disability Services Office for more information. Short of that, at least consider posting your lecture notes along with a recorded lecture.
- √ Test out your home office equipment with colleagues and solicit their feedback on your setup.
- √ Expect technical issues; things can go wrong on the student's end too. Ask your students for patience and feedback and offer the same.
- √ Generally, put yourselves in your students' shoes and think about what information they will need to do the work you hope they will do in your course.
- √ Teaching remotely under these circumstances has the potential to be isolating and anxiety-producing for faculty, as well. Stay in touch with your colleagues about what's working and not working. Bounce ideas off of one another. Consider weekly teaching check-ins to find and give support.

Visit <https://www.usmd.edu/cai/remote-teaching-usm> for more ideas about remote teaching from across the USM.