



Expert Offers Tips for Teaching Online

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Cynthia Golden is an associate vice provost and the executive director of Pitt's Center for Teaching and Learning with a long background in IT and online higher education. Her staff of 60-plus learning professionals has been working tirelessly to update the center's resources as Pitt transitions to remote learning for the remainder of the spring term. (Aimee Obidzinski/University of Pittsburgh)

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Robyn K. Coggins, senior editor of Pittwire and former instructor in the Writing Program at Pitt, spoke with her about expectation setting, learning management systems and other questions faculty members are concerned about as they adjust to a new way of teaching.

Among Golden's top pieces of advice: "Try to keep focused on the most important and basic things you need to deliver to finish your course and assess your students. Don't get overwhelmed by the plethora of tools or options."

There's certainly a difference between designing an online course and speed planning one in this unprecedented circumstance. What grace should instructors offer themselves and their students as they work to get their classes online this week? How is the student experience going to change?

It is helpful to think of what we are doing as *temporary* remote teaching and learning. Our goal is not to design a perfect online course. Our goal is to ensure instructional continuity as much as possible, and deliver learning experiences from a distance.

This may entail moving course material online or it may entail using other tools, like phone conferencing. The key is to effectively communicate with students and engage them with the content of the course. The experience won't be the same, and everyone will be challenged. Flexibility on everyone's part will be important. Setting realistic expectations, and being patient and kind will help, too.

Important resources

- [Center for Teaching and Learning](#)
- [Faculty Knowledge Base](#)
- [Accessibility Advice for Content Builders](#)
- [Software Downloads](#)
- [Disability Resources and Services](#)
- [Emergency Management updates for faculty](#)

There are also [upcoming remote office hours and virtual workshops](#) from the teaching center.

What adaptations are you seeing and/or recommending for lab and studio classes?

Adapting these types of courses will probably be one of the biggest challenges. While not everything can easily be taught remotely, we expect that faculty will work to think a little differently about these classes. Our instructors can be very creative. We expect to see some studio or performance classes use synchronous web conferencing; others may use video to demonstrate a technique and have students use video to show they have mastered it. And we expect to soon have access to some of the new lab simulation tools—keep an eye on the [center's website for updated information](#).

What are your tips for recording audio and video lectures?

The primary tool for recording video and audio lectures at Pitt is Panopto. There's a lot of detail about this and available tools on our website. There are also [best practices and guidelines for faculty](#) to use as they record video or audio lectures. The one called Recording Lectures for Online Viewing should be helpful.

What's your advice for classes with students who now span multiple time zones?

Instructors should know where their students are, and that's one of the first things a faculty member should try to determine. If a faculty member wants to hold a synchronous course (that is, a class that happens in real time) at the same time they normally hold the course on campus, this is where the time zone issue comes in—maybe most students will be in Eastern Daylight Time, but depending on where "home" is, some may be far away and have that challenge to deal with.

One of my team members suggests that faculty can ask students to list their times zones in a simple discussion board thread so that the entire class can get a feel for who is where—an easy ice breaker and immediately creates community.

Synchronous activities are still doable despite the geographic distance, but faculty should be mindful of when they schedule them. Remember that students are dealing with multiple classes and may have conflicts. We have many asynchronous capabilities, such as discussion boards, that allow students across time zones to interact with and participate in the course. Depending on the time gap, faculty can schedule synchronous activities at optimal times and offer recordings for those who are not able to attend. Faculty will need to have flexibility in assignment deadlines and grade extensions at a time like this as well.

What can instructors do to help students without reliable access to the internet? Do you expect many students will primarily be accessing content through their phones?

We expect that many students will use mobile devices, and much of the technology we are now using is designed to function well on mobile devices, too. Using learning management systems like Canvas and Blackboard helps to ensure lower bandwidth demands. Canvas is very good on mobile, Blackboard can be accessed on mobile, and many other tools are available on mobile.

But we know not every student will have reliable access to technology or the network. We can also adjust expectations, due dates, time frames and provide other accommodations to those with limited access.

Are there common accessibility pitfalls to watch for with online learning and communication?

There are always accessibility pitfalls. Accessibility has been and will continue to be an area of attention, even in the context of this emergency situation. We recognize those who are most vulnerable in this situation may be those with accessibility challenges.

Many of our standard instructional design practices have been developed with accessibility in mind, and the teaching center's instructional designers have expertise in this area and can provide advice.

Advice on accessibility

- Avoid using PDFs or other documents that screen readers cannot read. Stick to creating material in the learning management system that uses standard heading tags and standard text.
- In slides and documents, avoid using mixed fonts and lots of colors. Use plain, bold fonts on a white background if you are inexperienced. If using colors, use high-contrast colors.
- Embed links in the text rather than just posting a link or indicating "click here."
- Provide transcripts for video or PowerPoints.
- All faculty have access to SensusAccess, a file converter that makes inaccessible documents (such as Word or PDF files) into more accessible media (such as searchable PDFs, audio MP3 files, Braille or e-text). SensusAccess is available to all Pitt faculty, staff and students.
- Instructors can consult the Center for Teaching and Learning's [instructional accessibility pages](#).

If a student is having a really hard time with the technology and the instructor feels out of their depth to help, where can the student go?

First of all, general technology support for students is always available 24/7 at the [Pitt Help Desk](#). Students struggling to use Canvas can also get help 24/7 directly from the vendor from within the application.

Now is the time to reach out to students individually and ask how they are doing. There could be any number of circumstances that the student is dealing with, and learning a new technology is just one more thing.

There's a lot to be said about an old-fashioned, one-on-one phone call from a faculty member to check on a student's welfare. Remember, the goal in this emergency situation is to keep things simple, usable and accessible for all students. Now is not the time build something complicated or difficult to learn or use.

Final thoughts for faculty?

We are navigating these uncharted waters together, so first of all, try to have patience. Everyone is trying to do their best in difficult circumstances.

Reach out to other faculty you know who have taught online—they may be one of your best resources.

Watch for regular remote teaching tips on the [teaching center's website](#)—we're updating it every day.

Connect with the designated support contact in your academic unit. Many schools and campuses have one or more people who are charged with providing assistance to faculty for educational technology or teaching support.

I'd also say people should remember that with every challenge comes opportunity: Opportunity for innovation. Opportunity for growth and development (and building new skills). Opportunity for self-reflection. Opportunity for building unanticipated capacity. Opportunity to establish new relationships and collaborations in the face of a shared challenge. We want to not only face this challenge, but take advantage of the opportunities it provides.

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