Effective Online Teaching

In preparation for the challenges of Fall 2020, faculty members and pedagogy experts shared success stories, technology hacks, assessment strategies, creative tips for student engagement and some awkward online moments (that student who wasn’t wearing pants).

Rutgers Office for Faculty Development, in collaboration with the Center for Teaching Advancement and Assessment Research (CTAAR), offered a number of strategy sessions for faculty members in July.

Core challenges this fall center around Assessments, Student Engagement and Technology.

Assessments

New challenges arise when exams are administered online. Students have the ability to research answers online during an exam, and some faculty report that students have even offered payment for answers. Faculty also worry that students have access to Chegg, the online tutoring service, to search for answers. For online assessments, CTAAR recommends that faculty re-think the approach to assessments and accountability. Some advice:

- Administer an open-notebook, open-book exam, and design questions accordingly
• Create a “test bank” wherein each student, on exam day, receives a unique set of questions (creating an obstacle to cheating because it’s less likely that a friend in the class has the same set of questions)
• Set a time limit on exams (an exam may be available over a 48-hour period, for example, but once a student initiates the exam, he/she has 1.5 hours to complete it, limiting the student’s ability to research the answers)
• Use Proctortrack, if necessary (proctortrack.com) to monitor exams (CTAAR recommends this platform)
• Evaluate student progress more frequently (lower-stakes assessments help relieve student anxieties and reduce the temptation to cheat)

Classroom Accountability

• If you plan an activity for a 200-student class but fear that only 20 students will attend your synchronous session, introduce accountability. Require students to turn in an assignment at the end of a session. (Require a different, more difficult assignment for those who can’t or don’t attend – a one-page paper, for example.) In other words, create an incentive for class attendance.

Engagement

Student engagement will be key to classroom success. Breakout Sessions encourage active learning, and faculty also should be mindful of First Impressions and Classroom Etiquette. Peer reviews were one of our Faculty Tips.

Breakout Sessions

Online breakout sessions are an effective tool to encourage active learning, say experts and faculty alike. Breakout sessions offer students a chance to connect (also critical during this remote campus experience) and alleviate the pressure on faculty to "perform" for 90 minutes.

Synchronous teaching sessions are best limited to 40 minutes, say experts. Otherwise, students (and faculty) suffer online fatigue, and engagement wanes.

If you’re teaching a 90-minute synchronous class online, your most effective approach might look like this:

• Deliver concentrated content via short asynchronous videos, five- to 10-minutes each, which students can review (and return to) at their convenience
• Supplement that concentrated content during synchronous discussions
• Use breakout sessions to put students in smaller groups, encouraging reflection, analysis and new work based on the discussions
• End class with an exit quiz to encourage participation

Online breakout groups, notes Bernadette Gailliard, assistant director of the Office for Faculty Development, can be used in the same way they are used in the physical classroom – as a way to research a topic, to discuss a topic, to work together to create a presentation, etc.

Students appreciate small group discussions. In her class, Gailliard changes the makeup of the groups each week. Students also appreciate that; this tactic allows them to connect and build a rapport.

First Impressions
First-day introductions are key, as faculty members noted. Ideas shared for successful introductions include:

• Send students a short biographical video, a welcome even before the class begins
• Meet one-on-one (briefly) via Facetime or Zoom in advance of the class; interview each student and take notes, so that you can follow-up during the semester (students appreciate when you remember something about them)
• Ask each student for a short bio, which you can use as reference throughout the semester
• As an ice-breaker/introduction, ask students to react to a provocative statement. For example, “A famous person in your field has said XX. How do you react to that?”
• Be creative, using the Whiteboard function to scribble notes about yourself
• Ask students to tell a story. One faculty member, who teaches environmental history, asks her students to share a personal history related to the environment (that trip to a national park, for example). She then asks students to swap stories, so that students are telling the stories of others. (This exercise also leads to a discussion on what is lost when someone who didn’t experience the event is telling the story.)

Online Etiquette
Several faculty members noted the importance of online etiquette and shared some hard-learned tips from the spring semester. In other words, tips like these just might be necessary:

• Don’t stand up and stretch if you’re not wearing pants.
• Don’t take the computer into the bathroom.

Faculty members recommended that etiquette language be included in the syllabus. Zoom, for example, allows the host to turn off the video feed of a specific participant.
Faculty Tips on Engagement

- Peer reviews (asking students to review the work of their peers relieves some of the assessment pressure from faculty members and also presents a unique opportunity for students to participate, develop critical skills, evaluate work, etc.)
- Use the “Fishbowl” strategy for conducting group discussions. (“Fishbowl” puts a small group together to conduct a discussion, while a larger group listens and takes notes.)
- Exam questions – ask students to pose exam questions (not necessarily as a way to build an exam, but to understand what students think is critical in the course)
- Extend presentations and reviews to a larger audience (other students and faculty, friends, family, etc.) as a way to generate enthusiasm and accountability beyond the classroom

Technology

Rutgers offers a number of tech options for faculty, to accommodate the varieties of teaching methods and approaches to instruction. (CTAAR has slides available for classroom use, which explain how to use various platforms, such as Zoom, Webex and Big Blue Button.)

Many questions arose about technology specifics. CTAAR representatives gave advice, directed faculty to specific workshops, and offered links university-wide.

CTAAR has virtual office hours every weekday from 10:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. for anyone seeking individual teaching advice. More information is available here. CTAAR offers a continuing roster of practical workshops for faculty, including workshops on Managing Large Online Classes and Grading Schemes for Student Success.

Workshops also are offered by the Division of Continuing Studies, including workshops on course basics, such as Intro to Canvas and Intro to Teaching Online.

Faculty Tips on Tech

- Form a tech support group in your department to discusses challenges and solutions
- Sandbox, a Canvas tool that allows faculty to practice building a course
- Playposit, an interactive video platform, go.playposit.com
- Hypothesis, as an annotation platform, which allows students to make comments as they read, web.hypothes.is
About the Sessions

Our summer strategy sessions were led by Bernadette Gailliard, Assistant Director of the Office for Faculty Development, and were held in collaboration with CTAAR, including Chris Drue, Associate Director, Monica Devanas, Director of Faculty Development and Assessment Programs, and Christina Bifulco, Associate Director of Teaching & Learning Analytics. The Office for Faculty Development supports full-time and part-time faculty university-wide.