Designing a Syllabus in a Global Mental Health Epidemic

As fall 2020 nears, members of our university community are working hard on adapting to remote and socially-distanced teaching, but we face another challenge: unprecedented levels of exhaustion, fear, and anxiety which many global health organizations have recognized as a World Mental Health Epidemic. Many studies confirm the trauma effects such chronic stresses have on sleep, memory, reading, social skills, and many other functions essential to academic life. No one on Earth is operating at full capacity right now, and faculty, staff, and students alike are near breaking point, and losing productivity to relocations, technological challenges, caregiving obligations, and other disruptions.

This guide describes ways to adjust courses to be easier on students and instructors alike during crisis, not by lowering academic standards, but through small changes that increase flexibility, avoid the kinds of assignments which are hardest to complete in a crisis, and reduce the risk that a brief breakdown will be impossible to recover from. Not all methods work with every type of class, but incorporating those which fit your courses may greatly reduce the strain on students, and yourself.

> See also our [Social Sciences Teaching Resources for Fall 2020 Instructors for](#) separate guides to Teaching Remotely, Teaching with Zoom, Practicing Self-Care, and more.

Don't Stake Too Much On One Day

No one can predict which day a student's ability to work might be hindered by a new terrible development in local, national, or international news, or among family or friends. If COVID does have another wave in fall, many students will experience the deaths of loved ones, and political tensions are sure to peak around the November US election.

- **Scheduling several smaller, equally-weighted tests,** instead of one large final accounting for most of the course grade, ensures that one bad day cannot cause a student to fail.
- **Providing the option of dropping the lowest of several grades** provides a safety net.
- **Makeup assignments or extra-credit options** can give students who have a rough patch a chance to catch up. These can be rigorous, and don't need to receive detailed feedback.
- **Offering a multi-day window in which students may opt to take an exam or submit an assignment** can offer flexibility, when possible within your course's needs.

Advantages of Plural Shorter Assignments

One cognitive function that weakens substantially under chronic stress is the concentration necessary for long-form writing spanning many pages. Some pedagogy requires long-form writing, especially senior theses, but if those courses which can do so offer several shorter written assignments instead of one long one, students can to reserve their long-form writing capacity for courses which truly need it. Short papers also offer other benefits:

- **Completing a task boosts morale,** helping students feel ready for the next task.
- **Short papers teach different skills,** such as concision, and writing for a specific audience.
- **Short assignments are easier on students with limited computer or web access.**

- **Placing less weight on each paper lessens the chances of disaster** if something disrupts the day or week of a major assignment.
- **Students consume a lot of short media**, such as op-eds, news articles, and blogs, and are often more motivated when an assignment resembles material from outside of class, making it easy to see how the skills involved apply to other parts of life. You can assign practice writing an op-ed, news article, etc. In some classes, it may be appropriate to have students draft op-eds or mock news articles, and even to submit assignments for publication.
- **Be careful not to assign too many different tasks:** short assignments should be *instead of,* not *in addition to* longer ones, and tracking too many small tasks can be stressful for students (and yourself). Short assignments doesn't need to be daily tasks, they can be weekly, or bi-weekly. Try not to have multiple recurring deadlines (critique due Sunday, reflection due Monday, Evaluation every third Wednesday) since tracking many deadlines can confuse even highly organized students. It may be useful to organize weekly work as a packet of several items all due one day, rather than many granular deadlines (which are hard for instructors too).

Instructor Self-Care Is a Vital Teaching Duty

Coming to class well-rested can improve your teaching more than anything. Often the final steps of class preparation—such as polishing a PowerPoint, or deep review of a reading—can double the preparation time for a class while only improving the student experience by 10%. If that extra work makes you stay up late, or skimp on self-care, the resulting fatigue can reduce the quality of your teaching more than the preparation improves it. Whatever your self-care methods (sleep routines, exercise, calling friends, walks, baking), think of these as teaching duties too. If there is not time for all the preparation you wish you could do, self-care should *not* be cut first. This is also a good time to look over your syllabus for any changes which could reduce the load on yourself. Don't think of this as cutting corners—few things improve the student experience as much as the teacher arriving fresh and ready. Time-savers include:

- **Dividing up readings** into those you do need to reread carefully, and those you don't
- **Having students provide peer feedback** to each other to supplement yours
- **Using e-mail exchanges** in lieu of one-on-one meetings with students when possible
- **"Town Hall" style office hours and small group meetings (3-12 students)** save time for you compared to one-on-one, and give students a chance to interact with each other and have a positive social opportunity; you also offer one-on-one options as well
- **Typing and reusing frequent comments**, or arranging them into a grading rubric, supplementing them with brief personalized comments.

Communicate With Students About the Crisis and Self-Care

Teachers are also role-models. It can make a great difference to students if you begin your course by acknowledging the crisis, saying that you too, like them, are not at your best, and encouraging students to prioritize self-care. Periodically mentioning what you yourself are doing for self-care can provide examples, and remind students that feeling stressed and fragile is normal, not a mark of something wrong with them. Revealing your human side in the classroom is an invaluable antidote to impostor syndrome, which students are feeling more acutely than ever.

It is also useful to talk to students about the university's self-care resources. Many students, for example, don't know that, in addition to Student Disability Services, which helps students who have a formal disability diagnosis, there is a separate Student Wellness Program open to anyone, which offers a huge range of programs, from yoga and meditation, to study methods workshops, to sleep coaching, therapy dogs, and a map of sunny spots on campus. They also offer an eight-hour Mental Health First Aid training program designed to teach students the skills to help friends who are experiencing a mental health crisis, and an Academic Skills Assessment Program (ASAP), which offers training in study skills, time management, reading, notetaking, exam preparation, memorization skills, and test anxiety:

- Student Wellness: https://wellness.uchicago.edu/healthy-living/wellness-programming/
- ASAP: https://wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health/academic-skills-assessment-program/

Don't Accidentally Increase the Workload

New course elements added for the crisis should *replace* old ones, not add new work on top of them. For example, flipping a course (i.e. assigning a pre-recorded lecture while reserving class time for discussion) can be great, but if you add an hour-long video, you should reduce other requirements equivalently. Similarly, having students meet for group discussions adds time to a course, as does the time spent writing emails scheduling such meetings. Many students this spring reported that workload spiked when courses went remote, especially in well-established lecture courses, since when a syllabus is tried and true the instructor's instinct is to add new elements without changing old ones. It can also be difficult estimating how much time a new kind of assignment will take, especially a creative or collaborative one. Communicate about this directly, telling students "I'm trying something new," and asking "Please tell me if this load is too much." Polling students about what is and isn't working can help you adjust your syllabus as the course continues. Our students are generally enthusiastic about their studies, and will only say it's too much when it really is too much. The risk of overload applies to instructors too, so if new syllabus elements take a long time to grade or prepare, look for ways to reduce the load, or consider changing the assignments.

Offer Extra Leeway With Second Languages

Second languages also weaken under stress, and during recent months many of us have shared the experience of opening an article or source in another language and finding it more difficult than usual. Warn students about this phenomenon, that if their language is "suddenly gone" the problem is not unique to them, and that the best approach is to rest, do some self-care, then try again. When assigning second-language reading or composition, try to provide a multi-day window, urging students to try the assignment the first day, but if they struggle to stop try again the day after.

Students Are Hungry For Collaboration and Community

With dorms and social lives disrupted, students are hungry for interaction, and many will find group assignments and collaborations welcome opportunities to experience positive social interaction (which can be healing in itself). In a classroom setting, this can take the form of group projects or presentations, having students respond to one another's writing, or in creative ways, such as having students write a letter in the voice of a figure you are studying, and then replying to another student's letter. Gamification and role-playing can also foster interaction and form strong friendships. Offering

two options for an assignment—one collaborative, one solo—can help each student engage the material in whatever way that student finds easiest. When assigning a collaboration, remember that the time students spend communicating with each other and scheduling meetings *does* add to the total time you are asking them spend on the course. Even small things like suggesting that students self-schedule a time for optional group viewing of asynchronous prerecorded material so they can text chat about it as they watch in parallel can help reduce the sense of isolation.

Students are especially hungry for interaction with instructors, and anticipated, regular facetime with teachers is a motivating factor for many students to invest in the class. One-on-one meetings or office hours experiences can be valuable, but also exhausting (especially on Zoom), so smaller groups where 3 to 6 students all have a chance to talk and be heard can be ideal. This can be done in required or optional small group meetings, in "town hall" office hours, or by dividing up class time. In larger classes, many students have liked dividing into small groups *within class time* (not just outside of it); this provides a chance to speak and be heard, and cultivates the feeling of being a valued participant in class, not a passive, anonymous audience. Dividing a large discussion class in half and having half the students participate each day (say half Tuesday, half Thursday), works well. Another option is enabling Zoom's text chat feature so students can comment in the chat sidebar during class separate from speaking; many students like this kind of multitasking (and would be on chat with friends during the Zoom call anyway), so this centralizes the conversation and makes it part of the class. Creating a class chat discussion board can also create community. The university's Remote Teaching page and our page of Social Sciences Teaching Resources for Fall 2020 Instructors have more ideas.

Students Want to Create and Accomplish Something Permanent

The catharsis of creation can be a big morale booster. This is a great moment for assignments that produce something for others: an online resource, a community service project, a blog post, or Wiki-ed whose portal lets students improve Wikipedia, sharing their research with the world. Creative assignments are also cathartic, such as personal writing, artwork, or a performance, supplemented by a short paper explaining the piece and methods. Students tend to become most invested in projects which are either very personal (introspective writing, creating objects they can keep), or very public-facing (contributing to something *external* to the university, such as a public archive, crowdsourced database, or neighborhood initiative); these two poles—**very personal vs. very public**—are useful to remember when designing creative assignments. It can be difficult estimating how much time a new creative assignment will take, so checking in with students is invaluable, asking directly "How much time is this taking? Is the work load good? Too much?" Offering two options for each assignment—one creative or collaborative, one standard—lets every student keep to their comfort zone.

Students Will Be Discovering New Access Needs

This year, many students will discover new access needs. For some challenges are technological or spatial: some do not own computers, live in areas where internet access is slow or limited, are commuting to reach the web, or are quarantining with family, balancing studies with caregiving. Other students will discover new personal challenges: some people struggle processing the slight mismatch of sound and image in videoconferences, or with processing text discussions without tone of voice. Some students who already have disability accommodations may discover new needs not previously documented, while other students who have never worked with access services may need accommodations for the first time. In addition, the crisis is causing a worldwide spike in depression

and anxiety, affecting both people with current diagnoses and many without. Unfortunately the process of formally requesting accommodations can be slow, and while new requests are processed weekly, if students need time to see doctors and get documentation it can take weeks to secure the formal paperwork. *Universal Design* offers an alternative.

Universal Design is the design of plans, buildings, products, environments, etc. to make them accessible to all people, regardless of age, disability or other factors. For teaching, it means planning flexibility in advance into things like formats and syllabus design. The students who need extra flexibility are often the students least able to make special requests, since a student struggling to complete assignments without computer access, or using text-to-speech conversion, is already losing extra hours to wrangling a cumbersome interface, leaving less time for communicating special requests, while a student with an anxiety disorder may find requesting a meeting difficult in itself. Universal Design makes teaching easier for instructors, since you don't need to improvise as many changes. This flexibility helps students with a wide variety of technological and situational challenges as well as those with disabilities.

Some examples of Universal Design applied to course curricula include:

- **Untimed tests and exams,** when practical, are less stressful than timed ones, and avoid the need to administer separate time-and-a-half or 2x-time exams to those with accommodations.
- **Offering multiple communications options** lets a student choose whichever works best for them: for example, you might offer both small group Zoom video discussion sessions and asynchronous text discussion on a discussion forum, so students can communicate more via whichever works better for them.
- **If you grade class participation,** you can include in the syllabus the option that, if students didn't speak in a certain class, they can email you a single paragraph before the next class saying what they would have said, and receive full credit as if they had spoken in class. This helps students with anxiety and communications challenges, as well as students who had a rough time that day, were talked over by more assertive students, etc.
- **If some of your assignments depend on audio, visual, complex digital,** or other material which some students may struggle to work with (especially if computer access is limited), offering a choice of assignments (write an analysis of a painting *or* a poem; create a blog post *or* write a traditional paper) offers a built-in solution, without the need to improvise.
- **Making sure readings are machine-readable** lets students listen to readings like an audiobook. Many think this mainly necessary for blind students, but many fully-sighted people find information easier to process when heard, and when juggling deadlines it can be great time-saver if one can listen to readings while doing secondary tasks, such as exercise or chores. Machine-readable text includes most e-books, most websites, and some PDFs, but PDFs made by just scanning a page often do not have machine-readable text. Student Disability Services has a web page which can confirm for you whether a reading is machine-readable.

The university offers a digital conversion tool called SensusAccess which can convert many file types including .TIFF, .GIF, .JPG, .BMP, .PPT and non-machine-readable .PDFs into machine-readable files such as accessible PDF., .DOC, .TXT, .EPUB, .MOBI, even .MP3 audiobooks. The text is run through Optical Character Recognition (OCR), which attempts to recognize each letter of text, so its accuracy is dependent on the clarity of the document. Texts may not convert well if they are blurry, have underlining, are in archaic fonts, contain many ligatures or unusual characters, or contain many images, charts, graphs, tables, etc. If your file does not convert cleanly, contact text.sds@uchicago.edu

Further Resources:

Social Sciences Teaching Resources for Fall 2020 Instructors

Universal Design and Disability:
- Principles of Universal Design
- Machine-Readable Text Conversion Guide
- Zoom Considerations for Teaching Students with Disabilities
- Planning Accessible Courses
- Guide to Assessing Accommodation Requests for Attendance Flexibility and Deadline Extensions (PDF)
- Best Practices for Teaching Students with Disabilities
- Attendance Flexibility and Deadline Extensions Agreement (PDF)

General Teaching Resources:
- Chicago Studies Support (using Chicago)
- Academic Technology Specialists
- Confidential Course Consulting Services

Remote Teaching Resources:
- Course Set-up for Teaching Remotely
- Online Course Facilitation Checklist
- Ten "Best Practices" for Online Teaching
- Pedagogical Guidance for Remote Teaching & Learning
- Remote Teaching Techniques by Preferred Teaching Method
- Active Learning Techniques for the Virtual and Face-to-Face Classrooms
- High Impact Educational Practices
- Liberating Structures for Online Conversations
- Zoom Training
- More Zoom Resources
- Canvas training
- More Canvas Resources
- Panopto Training (videos)
- More Panopto Resources
- Syllabus Rubric for Online Communities of Inquiry
- Experiential Learning for Remote, Individualized, Collaborative, and Face-to-Face Classes
- Remote Testing Helpful Hints
- Course Flexibility Considerations

Support Resources:
- Be Well and Stay Connected: Resources and Support
- Staff and Faculty Assistance Program
- Campus Spiritual Life Resources
- Student Wellness
- Center for College Student Success
- Center for Identity and Inclusion