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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Planning for Online Teaching in the Fall: Remember the Context and Prioritize

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Planning for fall teaching frightens me much more than the spring switch to online teaching did. Going online in the spring was a mad, last-minute scramble, and it felt like an adventure. My students and I had already bonded so I had goodwill built up and I used it shamelessly. It also helped that we were in a crisis. My students didn't expect me to do things perfectly and I lowered my expectations of them as well. I interacted with them as a fellow human being, providing structure, a sense of normalcy, and a little philosophy. I knew how to do all that, and my students helped me out whenever the technology confused me.

But what about the fall? I just went through a few packed training days about teaching online. I left terrified, feeling that I had to spend the summer acquiring technical mastery in online teaching, learning to create snazzy videos and other exciting content.

But *am* I teaching online? I don't know yet. The situation is too fluid. I need to be prepared to teach online, in person, or in a hybrid format. And I'm tired.

I can guarantee that my students will be underwhelmed by any videos that I create over the summer. I won't have enough time to acquire the technical expertise required to create even decent videos. And because my classes are discussion heavy and lecture light, I'm not sure what I would put into those videos in the first place. Still, I felt pressured to switch to a lecture format, learn to lecture, and then to create videos of those lectures. All in one summer.

Wait. Stop. Is that really what I should be working on this summer?

No. The online teaching experts who conducted the training forgot that this year is extraordinary. In preparing to teach in the fall, we must start by considering our situation:

1. Our students didn't choose to take online classes. My students are at a small college, and they came here because of our small in-person classes. If I'm teaching online in the fall, it's because we were forced into it.
2. Our students are living through a pandemic and political upheaval, so they are distracted and stressed. If they have mental health issues, and many do, those are exacerbated. They are shaken and they feel less safe than they used to. They may have lost loved ones and they are worried about those who remain.
3. We too are living through a pandemic and political upheaval, and it affects us in the same ways that it affects our students.

My experts didn't take any of this into account; they focused on how to create an online course under normal circumstances. And then, I freaked out instead of asking what portion of the advice was applicable to our current situation. Don't make that mistake. Before spending precious time and energy on your online teaching this summer, ask two questions:

1. What do your students need most from you and your courses under these circumstances?
2. What is your energy level and mental health status, and what are the competing demands on your time and energy?

Here is my list of what my students need:

1. A sense of normalcy.
2. A clearly structured course, website, and a set of assignments where expectations and directions are spelled out in simple language.
3. Compassion and flexibility
4. Discussions about meaning and purpose, including some that help them make sense of the current moment.
5. Community and connection.

My work this summer will be about doing these five well in any of the possible formats: in-person, online, and hybrid. I'll work on lectures and videos only if that helps me with the five. I'll work on technology because I need a better handle on Zoom and our learning management software.

But my most important task won't be about technology. It will be figuring out how to foster community in my classes if we are forced to start the semester online. It's the most important task for me because I have at least some experience in doing all the others. But how do I build community online? How do we get to know each other? How do we learn to trust each other enough to have a real conversation? I'll be thinking a lot about that in the next few weeks. Molleen Dupree-Dominguez offers some great places to start.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/06/planning-for-online-teaching-in-the-fall-remember-the-context-and-prioritize/>