

## **Teaching in a Time of COVID-19: Small Changes that Make a Big Difference for Students**

Several of the colleges at NDSU have been collecting student feedback on the transition to online-only classes, with the goal of identifying small changes that could make a big difference for our students.

Unsurprisingly, students report being quite overwhelmed. But they also provided excellent suggestions for how we can help, without asking too much more of instructors right now.

I sent the following suggestions to AHSS instructors in a once-a-day format, so feel free to try a new one each day (or just take what works for you and leave the rest).

I'm starting with the most frequent suggestion we received...

### **Suggestion #1:**

#### **Email a "To-Do" List of Tasks - everything students need to do that week - on Mondays**

Students reported that they are struggling to keep track of all of the individual things they need to do for all of their classes, as well as when those tasks need to be done. It doesn't seem like too much when you think about the one class you have them in, but multiplying that amount by 4 to 6 classes - and adding the stress of a pandemic on top - you can see how easy it is to forget things right now.

Sending students a list of learning tasks at the start of the week accomplishes a few different things -

- Helps them keep track of what needs to be done when
- Helps you feel more confident that you've posted everything needed for the week
- Reduces the number of missing assignments (boosting grades and decreasing your need to follow-up individually)
- Reduces overwhelm by modeling how we can take things one week at a time

Below you'll find an example of what this "To-Do" list could look like, shared by a Veterinary Sciences GTA that I work with on teaching. Note: She teaches a lab section, so there are no readings in the list. I will be adding readings to the list I send my class.

*Here is the "to-do" list for VETS 455 this week:*

- 1.) Finish & Submit Solutions/Dilutions Homework via Blackboard Link*
- 2.) Watch Yuja recording on April 8th*
- 3.) Complete and submit the practice problems via Discussion Board by April 8th at 11:59 PM*
- 4.) Complete Reconstitutions Homework - submit via Blackboard by April 15 @ 11 AM*

*\*All of these deadlines are also found on your updated schedule (on Blackboard)\**

*Have a great week!*

*- Kelsey*

**Suggestion #2:****Remind students of the best way to contact you + when they can expect a response.**

When I see someone saying, "I'm panicking and my instructor doesn't respond to my emails," I think there could be two things happening. One is that the instructor has overlooked the student's email. But it's more often the case that the student and instructor have different expectations for a timely response. Letting your students know *how* to reach you and *when* they can expect to hear back from you helps to lower both their anxiety and the pressure you feel to respond quickly.

**Template:**

*Communication is really important during times of high uncertainty. The best way to reach me is by email ([carrieanne.platt@ndsu](mailto:carrieanne.platt@ndsu)). I'll get back to you within 24 hours during the week, or 48 hours on the weekend. For quicker responses, I recommend emailing me right before my virtual office hours (4-5 pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays), or dropping by during that time.*

**Other strategies for dealing with email overload -**

1. Set aside specific times during the day for responding to student email. This strategy helps me feel like I'm not continually answering emails. Batching the task also helps it go faster and take less brainpower than switching between email and other work.
2. Create a FAQ discussion board on Blackboard where students can post questions and you can respond. This strategy saves you time spent responding to the same question from different students and gives other students the chance to help their peers. You can set the discussion board up to let students post anonymously. Directions for doing so can be found [here](#).
3. If a student email requires a lengthy response, ask students if you could "meet" instead. You can often save time (and several emails back-and-forth) by moving to videoconference (or audio-only if the student has limited technology access). This strategy also gives you a chance to check in with students who seem to be struggling.

---

**Suggestion #3:****Acknowledge the fear, uncertainty, and stress that we are all experiencing right now. Share strategies that can help people cope with these feelings.**

This tip may be particularly relevant to those who have reported that they are worried about students' mental health and/or experiencing a lost sense of connection to their classes.

Our students are reporting a variety of mental health challenges that are making it difficult for them to maintain their pre-pandemic levels of academic performance. Anxiety makes it hard to focus. Diminished connection to instructors and peers contributes to a lack of motivation.

The mental burden of our current situation is weighing heavily on many students, who are struggling to do everything they need to do for their classes in the face of extreme worry about family, friends, and their broader communities. When asked "What problems have you experienced with the transition to remote learning?," students said:

*"Maintaining focus & handling stress and anxiety while still trying to get my work done."*

*"i don't have any motivation to do class anymore. i miss having actual lecture, not just hour long videos. that and grades now slipping due to my mental health issues."*

*"When I say this I am speaking for many people that I have talked to about distance learning. It sucks. The world is burning around us and teachers are assigning more work than when we were in school. And although we have time, that doesn't make it easier for us to do the work. So many students are mentally ill. So many students that are normally very good at keeping track of their school work, just can't. and can you blame us. We are watching our state, our country, our communities struggle and we are stuck inside doing almost nothing and its driving us absolutely crazy. This is no way meant to make the school or faculty or instructors feel bad. Everyone is just trying to keep on going and are doing their best, they are trying so hard to teach and be leaders, but I just want to be completely raw and honest. Students are struggling very hard. I know its hard for teachers as well, but students with 4,5,6 classes are trying their best, and that isn't good enough."*

If we think about our own experiences - needing to put significantly more time into remote-teaching, while feeling disconnected from our communities *and* anxious about the future - we may be better equipped to empathize with how our students are feeling.

### **So what can we do?**

1. Acknowledge that staying focused and getting work done is a challenge for everyone right now, including instructors. If you've made changes to your course to reduce students' workload, mention those.
2. If you are comfortable doing so, share the self-care strategies you've found to be most helpful. In addition to sharing the wisdom you've gained from your additional life experience, this strategy can help restore a sense of connection with your students. You could even ask students to share their best self-care strategies with peers.

3. If strategy #2 feels way too personal for your teaching style, you can still acknowledge that many people are struggling and direct students to resources that will help them cope. The [Dean of Student's website](#) provides many helpful links. The [NDSU Counseling Center](#) is still offering counseling sessions (now via video-conferencing). You could also share [these science-based strategies to cope with coronavirus anxiety](#).
  4. Consider creating a space in your online course for nonacademic content (participation optional). I know some instructors are using a few minutes of synchronous meetings for students to introduce a pet or prized possession to the rest of the class. You could create a similar forum on Blackboard with a new prompt each week (e.g., post a picture from your last walk). Feel free to reach out if you're interested in this last idea. I'm happy to share prompts I use for this purpose.
- 

#### **Suggestion #4: Offer flexibility where you can**

In addition to their academic workloads, many students are still working (often with different tasks or hours), assisting with the caretaking of younger siblings while their parents work, or taking care of their own children. These additional responsibilities can make it difficult for students to work during the hours they previously would have been in class.

#### **Strategies for increasing flexibility (suggested by students in survey):**

1. Try to post all content for the week by Monday if possible. When videos/readings/weekly assignments are available right away, students can work at their own pace. If there is a major project due in the next few weeks, having the assignment sheet up and the deadline(s) posted on Blackboard can help students plan ahead.
2. Allow students to request extensions on due dates. I've recently moved toward offering all students a certain number of "no questions asked" extensions, to save them the time spent justifying the extension and save me the mental effort of deciding whether their reason is "valid." They decide when they want to use their extensions.
3. Hold an optional office hour via Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom, Skype, etc. Students mentioned that they sometimes have difficulty formulating questions to ask via email ("I personally have a hard time talking to my instructor(s) about things I'd normally go to office hours for in a timely manner over email"). Knowing they have the option to connect with you in real-time can make a big difference. With childcare responsibilities, I can't do my regular office hours, so I've switched from an "office hour" to two "office half-hours" on different days of the week. If you're not comfortable with video-conferencing, you could opt for synchronous messaging instead.

Because this suggestion focuses on increasing the number of options, I should note that some students reported confusion regarding whether certain elements of their courses (like Zoom meetings) were required or not. Including that information in your Monday “To-Do” list email can help students better understand your expectations. I’ve included a sample from my graduate methods course below.

### **COMM 704 Learning Tasks for April 13-17**

- Read Saldaña chapter 4
- Read Saldaña chapter 5
- Update reading notes with content from both chapters
  - Remember to include questions for discussion
- Start coding new transcript (recommended to reduce end of term stress, **not required**)
- Schedule individual meeting with CAP to discuss coding / learning goals (**optional**)
- Meet via Zoom from 5 to 6 pm on Thursday, April 16
  - What I will ask you to do during class: Apply transitional and second-cycle coding methods to what you have already coded. You can maximize what you’ll get out of class by thinking in advance about how you would do that.

---

We’ve reached the last suggestion! After four days of outlining things you could add, I’m now going to encourage you to subtract (for your own well-being).

### **Suggestion #5:**

#### **Delete or reduce one thing each week**

Before I provide more detail on what it means to delete or reduce, I want to clarify one thing. I developed these suggestions in response to what students told us about the challenges they are facing, the things we could do to help them, and the most helpful things their instructors have done thus far. The survey responses are not a litany of complaints; many students base their suggestions on what is working well and what they have really appreciated.

So it’s clear that many of you were doing these things well before we surveyed students. Others have gone above and beyond these suggestions. *Everyone* has put untold amounts of time and effort into making the best of what often felt like an impossible transition. I thought of you when I read this article on [How \(Not\) to Evaluate Teaching During a Pandemic](#):

*“That nearly all instructors managed to make this shift – to learn new technologies, redesign courses, write new assessments, procure equipment (like home-document cameras and tablets), connect with colleagues with similar instructional challenges, and just plain finish the term (and at universities, like mine, on the quarter system, start another one), while also dealing with the stresses of their own life, health, and family under Covid-19 – is nothing short of miraculous.”*

In other words, you are miracle-workers! Even if your students can't see all the things you're doing behind the scenes, we know how much you have contributed to making this transition possible. There's a reason that teaching has been identified as one of the biggest challenges in our faculty survey, tied with "worry about friends/family." It's requiring so much of us.

**My last suggestion is given in the spirit of recognizing and reducing that labor.** By deleting or reducing one thing each week, you are focusing on the essentials and helping everyone - students *and* instructors - avoid (further) burnout as we move toward finals.

The scope of this reduction is entirely up to you. You could make discussion board posts optional the week a major assignment is due, or you could opt to award points for posts on a credit/no-credit basis. You could remove some questions from a homework assignment, reduce the number of readings you expect students to complete, or shorten a lecture you are recording. In my graduate research methods course, I've dropped one part of an exam that was supposed to have a written and oral component. I decided it was more important to give them a week to get their own classes online.

Look at your course objectives and then look at your learning and grading tasks for next week. **What is one thing you could take out or scale back while still achieving your goals for this unit?** Remove or reduce it, using next Monday's "To-Do" list email as an opportunity to tell your students you want to help them focus on their major assignments. If it reduces the amount of time you would be spending on prep or grading, consider this essential self-care.

Thank you for everything you continue to do for our students. Please keep reaching out as you think of new ways I can support you as an instructor.

I'm always happy to talk about teaching,  
Carrie Anne  
carrieanne.platt@ndsu.edu

--

Carrie Anne Platt  
*Pronouns: she/her/hers*  
Associate Professor, Department of Communication  
Associate Dean, College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences  
North Dakota State University