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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Preparing for your First Day of Remote Teaching

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When your course unexpectedly pivots to an online format, students will likely feel a lot of uncertainty, and it's hard to know how best to approach such an abrupt transition with them. Whether conducted synchronously or asynchronously, the first remote meeting is a chance for you to help students process these changes while maintaining transparency and empathy. Consider incorporating some of the following ideas:

Communicate and acknowledge the difficulty of the situation.

By the time your course meets, students will likely have experienced upheaval, distress, and disappointment over the past couple weeks. Additionally, you may have been scrambling to adjust to teaching remotely, and your personal life may now be intersecting with your professional life in complex and challenging ways. Acknowledge to students that this is a time when anxiety is running high for a number of reasons, understandably so, as these circumstances are *not* normal. Recognize that, yes, the transition to a remotely taught course will be bumpy, but you and the students will be navigating it together. Emphasize that this process will require empathy and patience with one another, and it can be a true partnership.

Conduct a mindfulness exercise.

Given the circumstances, it may be hard for students to make an immediate mental shift and be able to focus on your course. Give students a few minutes to become present in the moment. A short interval of stillness, a breathing exercise, or a moment for students to “empty their minds” are all ways to ground students and prepare them for the work of learning. For more guidance, see this resource on Mindfulness in the Classroom.

Clearly communicate any new expectations.

If you have already made decisions about adjustments to the syllabus, such as revised learning objectives, assessments, schedule, or course policies, explain them and provide them in writing. Explain how students can expect the course to be run on a day-to-day basis. It can also be helpful to establish netiquette expectations around appropriate self-presentation, guidelines for engagement, sharing airtime, etc. If you plan to involve students in making any of these decisions, communicate that as well, and make time for that process.

Give students a chance to reconnect with you and one another.

Though it might be more difficult, it is possible to maintain social connection in a remote learning environment, and that social connection is especially critical in a time such as this. You might ask:

- How are you feeling right now about the course/semester/this transition online?
- What do you think you will need to have a successful rest of the semester?
- What do you remember struggling with the most where we left off?

If you intend to hold your course synchronously over Zoom, you could have students respond over the chat, using the whiteboard tool, or in pairs/small groups using breakout sessions. If you are conducting your course mostly asynchronously, students could share their thoughts using the discussion board in the LMS.

Try conducting a small portion of class as you plan to conduct it day-to-day.

Particularly if you plan to hold synchronous sessions, you could allot some time to try a bit of “normal” instruction, including testing some of the technology you plan to use to ensure that everyone is comfortable with it. Since you and the students may be using certain tools for the first time, the first meeting can be a good time to do a trial run and iron out any issues that immediately arise.

Have students complete a pre-rest-of-semester survey.

Because this may be a major transition, it can be valuable to check in with each student about their individual needs or concerns. Have students complete a survey, which can be set up in the LMS. Questions might include:

- Are there barriers or challenges to your participation in synchronous (in real time)

meetings that you would like me to know about?

- How proficient do you feel with the online learning environment/educational technology tools we'll be using?
- Please provide your input/opinion on revising [insert course policy/assessment/course expectation here].
- Where do you feel you need support at this juncture, academically or otherwise?
- Is there anything else you want me to know?

Remember that this is an extraordinary situation. You are not developing online courses, which involves a careful and deliberate process of choosing pedagogies and appropriate tools—rather, you are keeping the trains running.

<https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/04/preparing-for-your-first-day-of-remote-teaching/>