Faculty share online teaching challenges and successes in a new FLC

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When the decision was made in March to take all classes online, University leaders knew that many faculty members were going to have to learn a lot about online instruction in a very short amount of time. Out of this challenge, one of the University's most popular faculty learning communities [1] was born.

Jane Hunter, vice president for strategic initiatives, says the idea came from a conversation she had with Lisa Elfring, associate vice provost for instruction and assessment, who suggested faculty members would appreciate the opportunity to learn and share about their online instruction experiences.

The Teaching Continuity FLC was launched in March, and Hunter says the response has been "tremendous," with more than 130 faculty members taking part. She says a typical FLC has 10-12 members, but because this FLC is virtual, it can accommodate a much larger group using breakout rooms. (To learn more about FLCs, read this UA@Work story [2].)

"It’s a bit like a support group," Hunter said. "It’s an opportunity to get together with colleagues and talk about some of the common challenges you’re experiencing, as well as a chance to celebrate some of your successes."

Hunter says the weekly meetings began by discussing how to communicate with students in a fully online environment and outlining tools used for online instruction, like Desire2Learn, Panopto and Zoom. From there, the conversation has evolved to include topics such as grading, academic integrity and maintaining meaningful learning experiences for students.

"I went from having no experience with ? and truly being terrified of the prospect of ? online teaching, to being surrounded by experts who wanted to share their knowledge with me," said Jean McLain, assistant dean for faculty advancement in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences [3] and a professor in the Department of Environmental Science [4]. "If you pose a question to the group, no matter how arcane, someone has been there. The group approach made me immediately feel like I was part of a team, and less of a ‘newbie.’"

Hunter facilitates the sessions, along with Christopher Johnson and Ryan Straight, both assistant professors of educational technology in the College of Applied Science and Technology [5]. The meetings are designed to allow faculty members to use many of the same tools they use in online classes, including screen-sharing, breakout rooms and polls.

The FLC also invites guest speakers. Past speakers include Andrea Romero, vice provost for faculty affairs, Melody Buckner, associate vice provost for digital learning initiatives and online education, and Greg Heileman, associate vice provost for academic administration.
"One of the things that has been incredibly heartwarming for me is the number of faculty members and University leaders who have immediately jumped in to offer their assistance," Hunter said. "People who are experienced online instructors immediately stepped up and said, 'How can I help?'"

The Teaching Continuity FLC meets from 9-10 a.m. on Wednesdays via Zoom. If interest remains strong, Hunter says sessions could continue through the summer and fall. Interested faculty members can register online.

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