Frequent check-ins, tech tools and humor help Writing Program instructors put students first

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
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The award-winning University of Arizona Writing Program [1] teaches foundational writing to almost every student who attends the University, which translates to around 6,000 students each semester. Clear and effective writing can help students excel in college and beyond, regardless of their major.

When classes went online a few weeks ago, the career-track lecturers and graduate teaching associates in the Writing Program employed flexibility and creativity to maintain quality instruction while adapting to the variety of academic and personal challenges that have befallen students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Writing Program is housed in the Department of English [2] in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Not all of the instructors took the same approach. Some made use of sophisticated tools such as Adobe Creative Cloud and VoiceThread while others created simple YouTube videos.

How did they decide how to move forward? The students led the way.

Assessing student needs

"When the online transition was first announced, the first thing I did was create an anonymous Mentimeter [3] poll to assess how my students were feeling about the transition and ask about their requests for moving forward," said lecturer Kristen Gregory. "One of the main comments I received was their worry that they would lose out on some of our in-class dynamics from the online transition, and that they would like to see multimedia announcements/updates rather than just D2L notifications or schedules for each week."

In response, Gregory began recording weekly Screencast-O-Matic [4] videos, which she posts in an announcement each Monday at 8 a.m. In these 15-minute videos, she breaks down the larger unit goal for the week and the accompanying tasks.

"Having weekly announcement videos from Dr. Gregory helps to ease my anxiety and ensures me that I am doing everything that I need to be doing for the course," wrote one student.

Lecturer Nick Halsey also reached out to students after the remote instruction decision was made.
"I distributed a survey among my students, asking about their online connectivity and their degree of experience with online study," Halsey said. "Around one-fifth of them reported having connections that were less than fully reliable, so I decided to convey my initial few weeks of instruction through prerecorded videos."

He checks in with his students to make sure the teaching format is working.

"We have been able to effectively communicate with each other in the midst of this disruption," Halsey said. "Further, we had done this without diminishing the quantity or variety of our originally planned class work."

**Starting simple**

Senior lecturer Kindall Gray has taught writing at the University of Arizona for the past decade. But she'd never taught online.

"The abrupt switch to online was a rough, swift awakening for me and for my students," Gray said. "I immediately knew my students needed to see me, hear me, without the pressure of learning a new technology. That could come later."

In the first week of online classes, Gray made YouTube videos for her students, in which she talked about the course material, but also about life after COVID-19.

"I asked students to comment and ask questions and share ideas on the YouTube videos and, boy, they did!" Gray said, adding that the technology was something they were very comfortable with. "They grew up on YouTube."

Gray said that as the course progresses, she's integrating VoiceThread and other technology via D2L, but that "YouTube videos provided a wonderful transition from in-person to online instruction."

"I want to thank you for making me comfortable finishing the rest of the semester online with your detailed, friendly updates, and fun videos," one student wrote.

"I know for a fact that the YouTube videos, while simple and seemingly mundane, are a big reason students felt comfortable continuing in an online-only course," Gray said. "I am not the only Writing Program instructor reaching out to students, meeting them where they are, and ideally helping them finish the course and semester successfully."

**Exploring technology**

"Adjustments as a teacher in the Writing Program have been tricky, of course. This was never designed to be an online class," graduate teaching associate Analeigh Horton said.

"The transition, however, has been somewhat mitigated by the fact that my formerly in-person English 102 sections already implemented a lot of technology in our class, like D2L, G Suite and an e-portfolio tool," Horton said. "Because students began to develop digital literacies earlier on in the semester, they seem to have felt less overwhelmed by having to use technology now."

Lecturer Nataly Reed is a fan of VoiceThread, which allows her to upload short audio or video recordings with captions. The students can respond to individual slides within the lecture with
audio, video or text comments. Students can also reply to each other, which creates a time-lapse class discussion.

"VoiceThread has been very helpful in the stressful transition online because it allows me to stay connected with the class and the instructor, which is something that I was worried about losing," one student wrote.

**Making it entertaining**

Lecturer **Dave Mondy** creates short instructional videos combining graphics, music, memes and various recordings he makes around his house and yard. Mondy credits a summer workshop offered at the University that trained him on using Adobe Creative Cloud for classroom instruction.

Students say they find the videos helpful and entertaining. "This has caused great buy-in and participation from the students," Mondy said.

"The videos made me laugh, which is definitely needed during a time like this," wrote a student.

Another student wrote, "Watching your videos definitely gets me through the day. I'll be sad when the semester is over and I won't be graced by your digital presence."

Bringing humor into the class has also created some writing converts. "I have never been into ENGL courses throughout school but being in your class has given me a different perspective and a newfound enjoyment for writing," wrote a student.

**Caring for students**

Several students have reached out to faculty to let them know they appreciate the attention being paid to their mental health during this time.

Lecturer **Kristen Hoggatt-Abader** shows care and empathy," one student wrote. "She is more than just a teacher, she is a light for all of us."

Many students are struggling in more ways than just academically right now, Horton said, a reality that she keeps in mind.

"I feel like Ms. Horton has understood how stressful this has been so she has made adjustments for us, having our best interest at heart," one student wrote.

"SBS moved more than 950 classes to remote teaching, and I am proud of all of our instructors who made this shift, especially with such care for the students," said **Amy Kimme Hea**, associate dean for academic affairs and student success in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Kimme Hea says she is equally impressed with the resiliency of the students who "have made this move with us" as well as those who have had to pause their education to do the important work of dealing with health issues, job responsibilities, or child and elder care.

"All our teachers and students are working harder than ever to weather the academic changes and to support one another through this crisis," Kimme Hea said.
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[1] https://sbs.arizona.edu/news/ua-writing-program-awarded-excellence
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