

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Teaching

Our teaching-and-learning experts give you insights on what works in the classroom. Delivered on Thursdays. Teaching is written by Beth McMurtrie and Beckie Supiano. We love hearing from readers, so please don't hesitate to reach out to us directly. You can also read more articles about teaching and learning.

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From: Beth McMurtrie

Subject: Teaching: What Students Want Their Professors to Know

This week:

- I share some insights into what students want from online learning during the pandemic.
- I point you to some articles, news, and surveys on teaching you may have missed.
- I encourage you to share your fall teaching stories with us.

What Students Want

In recent months there's been no shortage of surveys in which students describe the challenges they faced during the pivot to remote education in the spring and summer. Many struggled to secure consistent Wi-Fi access and a quiet place to learn. They felt overwhelmed, not just by the pandemic, but in trying to keep track of assignments, deadlines, and communication with their professors. They missed the routines and relationships of campus life. Motivation was a real challenge.

So what do they want their professors to know, in order to make the experience better this fall? I put that question to a panel of experts — students and faculty members — this week in a *Chronicle* webinar. I encourage you to watch it [here](#) because they had many great ideas and insights. But if you're short on time, here are a few key takeaways.

Connections are crucial to learning. To prime students to learn, ensure that they feel connected to you and to the class. That's not easy to do online, but consistent outreach, regular office hours, and a wise use of synchronous class time will help.

One panelist in the webinar, Vikki Katz, an associate professor in Rutgers

University's School of Communication and Information, surveyed 3,000 undergraduates across the country about their remote-learning experiences last spring. A crucial factor in students' developing a sense of confidence and competence in a remote-learning environment, she and her co-author found, was whether they felt faculty members were accessible to them.

"Faculty are key," she said. "Whatever you can do to reduce that sense of distance while we are physically distanced, and keep the connection strong between you and them, is going to pay dividends."

Consistency matters. Many students are juggling four or more courses, each with its own structure when it comes to methods of communication, where assignments are posted, deadlines, and grading. That can lead to cognitive overload. What students want from their professors is not necessarily uniformity across courses, which is probably impossible, but consistency within them.

In general, said panelists, check in regularly with students to see how the class is going, post material at the same time and in the same place each week, and set consistent deadlines. Faculty members can also check with their teaching and learning centers for ideas on useful syllabus templates and transparent course structures that are designed to reduce that cognitive load.

Ditch group projects. Asking a group of students to work together on a significant project over the course of a semester can be a recipe for misery, panelists said. If a project is well designed and carefully thought out, giving students clear roles and responsibilities, it could work. But in general such projects require a level of logistical and technical sophistication — not to mention focus — that many students would have trouble managing right now.

Group projects “aren’t that effective online,” said Luna Laliberte, a panelist and a senior at Rutgers who has worked with Katz on writing takeaways from the student survey. “It’s harder to keep everyone motivated. With the pandemic someone could have a health emergency. There could be scheduling or bandwidth issues or learning issues. People learn differently and can’t stay on the same page.”

Encourage group work. This may seem to contradict the last point, but we’re talking here about something different than a semesterlong project. Short, clearly defined group assignments — say, 20 minutes in a synchronous class — can accomplish a lot. They will get students talking to one another, engage them with the material, and encourage peer learning.

“Most students do want to have a discussion, rather than just listening to a professor speak,” said Taylor Trigo-Edwards, a panelist and president of the Student Government Association at the University of Texas at San Antonio, who helped with training programs over the summer to prepare faculty members to teach online this fall.

Don’t spend synchronous time lecturing. All panelists agreed that it’s better to tape short lectures (try to keep them to 10 minutes each), and ask students to watch them in advance. Live time with your students is valuable, so spend it in fostering discussion or on office hours, when you can talk one-on-one with your students. In live classes, run polls to get students talking. Give them an assignment, put them in breakout rooms, and ask them to report back to the group at the end of class. Or break students into two groups, have each do a reading, and respond to it. Then have each group respond to the other’s posts.

Ask students what’s working and what’s not. Checking in with students about

how the course is going is part of the process of making an online course more transparent and adaptable, panelists said. Laura Carruth, a panelist and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Georgia State University, said she encourages faculty members to maintain flexibility and to see students as “partners in learning.” If students aren’t responding to emails, for example, talk with them about coming up with a better way to communicate.

Trigo-Edwards echoed that thought: “If you ask students, What can I do to be a better professor? What would you like to see from me?, they will have answers, and they will be constructive answers.”

What teaching strategies have you used this fall that have fostered engagement and connection in your courses? We’re collecting professors’ stories — see below.

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- The Teagle Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities are [offering \\$7 million in grants](#) to help colleges build a stronger and more coherent exposure to the humanities in general education. The program is modeled on one at Purdue University, the Cornerstone Integrated Liberal Arts certificate, which I [wrote about](#) last year.
- Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit focused on student success at community colleges, has released a [teaching and learning toolkit](#) to help colleges bring evidence-based, effective teaching practices to their campuses.
- Educause’s latest [QuickPoll](#) focuses on fall readiness for teaching and learning. Among the findings: Most colleges’ summer planning focused

on helping faculty members improve their comfort with online tools and online teaching, with good results. But internet connectivity, long-term support, and widespread faculty buy-in remain challenges.

- We may think distraction is a problem unique to modern life, but it has always been with us, writes James M. Lang, a professor of English and director of the Center for Teaching Excellence at Assumption College. Lang, a regular *Chronicle* columnist, has a new book on the topic due out next month: *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It.*

Tell Us What It's Like Teaching During the Pandemic

The fall semester is underway on most campuses. So, how is it going? Whether you are teaching in person, in hybrid form, or fully online, we would like to hear your stories. Were you prepared for what you're handling now? If not, what has been unexpected? Are you trying new strategies in your courses? Do you need advice on an ongoing problem? Use this form to tell us about it. We may share your stories, insights, and requests for advice in a coming newsletter.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us, at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com or beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.

—Beth

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