Taking Your Classes Online in a Flash

Most higher education institutions have put their classes online for the remainder of the term. Higher education is well-positioned to take classes online because so much of teaching in higher education is lecture driven rather than reliant on one-on-one interactions as in the K–12 realm. Additionally, nearly all schools already have a learning management system (LMS) on hand. Here are some tips for moving classes online in a flash.

Use video conferencing to lecture, but mix up your delivery

Most institutions will use the LMS they already have to move classes online. Instructional designers will work with you to move the assessments, quizzes,

and other resources into the courses. Your biggest job will be creating the lectures.

The easiest method of putting lectures online is with live video conferencing. Nearly all LMSs have built-in video conferencing ability, and if it is not available on your school's particular LMS, you can use Zoom, WebEx, or Google Hangouts. The free version of Zoom has some limitations that make it less than ideal for faculty, such as a 40-minute limit on meeting length, so I would use it only if your institution provides a premium version. Cisco is making WebEx [free to any school](#) and even provides guides for faculty and students on how to use it. Hangouts is another excellent free alternative that is entirely browser-based and rarely has compatibility issues with student or faculty computers. Students merely need a URL and can log on at the same time as the faculty member.

It is important to keep in mind that online teaching is generally not live, and broadcasting yourself by webcam or your notes by PowerPoint is not the best means of delivering content online. The format is used here only due to the time constraints of a rapid transition. Real online teaching involves content developed for a web format, such as the digital storytelling model of narration combined with imagery and videos, much like a documentary or the better YouTube educational content.

But given a lack of time to create real online content, broadcasting yourself speaking is your best option. What should these lectures contain? You may be tempted to simply speak to a webcam the entire time. If you use PowerPoint in your regular lectures, you may want to broadcast your slides while you speak. Either will work in a pinch, but neither is ideal. Nobody wants to watch a talking head for more than a few minutes, and "death by bullet point" limits an audience's attention to about five minutes at most.

Instead, consider interspersing outside resources such as YouTube videos or TED Talks into your lectures every five to 10 minutes. My motto: "If someone can say it better than you, then let them." Faculty teaching face-to-face assume that they need to create all of the educational content themselves, but online faculty know that there is a world of exceptional content out there waiting to be used. This is an opportunity to expose traditional faculty to that content, which they might end up using in their face-to-face classes next term.

Putting lectures online is trickier in quantitative fields that require instructors to work through equations. For these courses, one option is set up a camera in a classroom and record yourself speaking in front of the blackboard if your school is still open, though it might be hard to find an audiovisual person with the time to record you. A better option, if available, is to ask your institution for a tablet or touchscreen laptop that you can draw on and screencast during your lectures using Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Screencast-O-Matic or borrow one from somebody else.

Try Google Classroom

If your institution is one of the few that lacks an LMS or for some reason cannot support all the classes moving online, consider using Google Classroom. Google Classroom is a simple yet powerful and free LMS that allows instructors to set up a class in less than a minute. Additionally, it integrates with Google's wide array of programs, platforms, and services, including Gmail, YouTube, Drive, Hangouts, Stream, and Docs. Not only are these excellent apps in themselves, but most people are already familiar with them. Google has even set up a page with a variety of resources on how to put up a class on Google Classroom.
Find out more [here](#).

Make sure to interact

Online learning presents the option of a live or recorded lecture. While online courses are often asynchronous, the time required to make asynchronous content makes that option prohibitive. But there is also an opportunity here for live interaction with online students who, unlike in traditional online courses, signed up for the course knowing that they needed to be available during a given time slot. Plus, you can record your live broadcasts for anyone who misses them or for future use.

Interactivity will be critical as content alone is rarely rich enough to keep an audience's attention. Thus, it is a good idea to pause every five to 10 minutes for an interaction. Breaking up a lecture is also critical for retention because people sporadically need pauses to engage new information to move it from their working memory to their long-term memory. You can also intersperse these interactions with videos. Thus, try talking for five minutes, showing a video, talking for another five minutes, doing an interaction, and so on.

A simple interaction is to ask the class a question and solicit answers either

via the chat function in video conferencing software or by audio. Just make sure to tell students to mute themselves when they are not speaking to avoid a cacophony of noises. A better option, however, is to use an audience response system to prime the pump with questions that invite responses from all students at the same time. Poll Everywhere allows you to incorporate polls into PowerPoint slides so that you do not need to change systems to run it. Kahoot! is a more feature-rich system, but if you are using a PowerPoint you will need to switch back and forth between applications to run it. This is where having dual monitors or running two computers at once is helpful as the audience response system will be running outside of the video conferencing system. Have the audience response system running on the other computer or monitor and set up the questions ahead of time. Then swing over to activate a question and have students answer on their smartphones.

Real or hypothetical scenarios are ideal for opinion questions. Here is one I use in my medical ethics class:

An elderly man needs a kidney transplant, and his daughter is tested for a match. As his care provider, you find out that she is not a match because she is not actually his daughter. Do you tell the man that she is not his daughter? Do you tell the daughter?

After presenting your prompt, you might start by asking students to submit a simple yes or no to gauge where they stand. Make sure to screencast the results. People love watching the graph columns move around as responses come in, and this will get students interested in defending their positions. Then you can open the question up to discussion, either verbally or in the chat.

For factual topics, you might ask a multiple-choice question and, after the responses are recorded, give the correct answer. That will not only indicate how well students understood the material and whether you need to go over it again but also get students who submit the wrong answer vested in finding out why they got it wrong.

Another option is to give the students a question and ask who can get the right answer first. Students are generally more willing to venture a guess in an online chat than live because of the embarrassment of getting something

wrong in front of others. This may come as a surprise for faculty who feel like getting students to talk live can be like pulling teeth.

Looking ahead

I have long argued that online education allows for continuity in higher education, but it requires preparation. Ideally, institutions would create an LMS companion to every course, face-to-face or otherwise. The companion would at the very least host all course resources and assessments. But putting lecture content online as well would not only make the companion a complete plug-and-play backup but also allow students who miss class to get course content.

Remember that real online teaching is not simply recording yourself lectures. Doing so doesn't take advantage of the web as its own communication medium. If you are new to online teaching, take this opportunity to learn more about how real online courses are created and consider how your lectures might be converted into rich, educational online content as part of a course companion in the future.

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John Orlando writes, consults, and teaches faculty how to use technology to improve learning. He helped build and direct distance learning programs at the University of Vermont and Norwich University, and has written more than 50 articles and delivered more than 60 workshops on teaching with technology. John is the associate director of Training at Northcentral University, serves on the Online Classroom editorial advisory board and is a regular contributor to Online Classroom and Faculty Focus.

Call us: +92 42 111 300 200 Ext: 3469/3412
Email us: zarnab.shakeel@umt.edu.pk | ctl.info@umt.edu.pk
Visit us: ctl.umt.edu.pk