What Students Want from Remote Learning

By Kelly Hogan

Many higher education instructors are returning to in-person teaching this fall. Educators and students alike do not necessarily want everything to be exactly like fall 2019. We have an opportunity to reflect before we begin—perhaps on ways to bring more inclusive practices to our teaching. I collected data from over 700 students on my campus and share with you a few tangible ideas that students expressed they wanted to see continued with the return to in-person teaching. I was thrilled to see that many of these ideas align with inclusive teaching strategies. Students would like to see a continuation of:

Weekly emails from instructors that include required tasks, encouragements, and personal updates/reflections

"Weekly emails made clear what we had to accomplish that week while also encouraging us."

With so many remote and asynchronous courses thrust upon them in the last year, many students were feeling overwhelmed and disconnected. In response, some instructors implemented weekly emails to keep students on-task and motivated. This kind of structure is inclusive because it helps more students stay organized without harm to those that do not need reminders.[1] But we all appreciate reminders, right?

With in-person teaching, many educators use the beginning or end of class to make announcements about upcoming assignments. Even if all students are present, some will miss the oral messaging and will appreciate having the weekly run-down in a written form. Having both oral messaging and a weekly email message aligns with Universal Design in Learning, a framework for inclusion that provides diverse learners multiple ways to access materials.[2]

A "live chat" feature with in-person classes

"I enjoy the chat feature [in Zoom] and think it would be nice to have some kind of in-person version."

I had always done a great deal of polling of my students with their phones or laptops in my in-person classes, but the backchannel nature of live chat in

Zoom opened up new possibilities for communication in my course with hundreds of students. Some students who don't feel comfortable speaking aloud in class are eager to participate in written form, and I'm now left wondering how to implement this always-open back channel in my classroom where students can answer each other's questions and make free-flowing comments about the material being discussed. Some options to explore are Google Docs, GroupMe, Polleverywhere's pinned activities, Twitter, and Zoom chat. More options are discussed in this guide from the University of Guelph: https://bit.ly/3hOuLHe.

Virtual office hours and review sessions

"I think Zoom should be continued to be used for some activities. It helps save time for students and makes showing up to office hours more possible for me, as I can easily access Zoom from wherever I am."

A summary of students' quotes demonstrates the value of virtual office hours and review sessions. Virtual sessions are more convenient, safer (without needing to walk in the dark for late sessions), don't require office space/classrooms, and open up more times of the day. It is clear that some students still want in-person options, so we need to find the right balance with our students.

Asynchronous days

"I hope professors still include asynchronous days, every once in a while, just to give students a reprieve during the semester."

While many of us are excited to be together in classrooms, students hope to see some asynchronous learning activities that they became familiar with during the pandemic. These may or may not replace an in-person session. What parts of our courses would benefit from asynchronous learning? Content that is lecture-based is useful in a prerecorded video or reading so students can go at their own pace. Similarly, some kinds of problem-solving and individual work are more inclusive in a self-paced format before collaboration can be successful. For many educators, the pandemic has made even clearer the value of using

class time for discussions, problem-solving, and other collaborative activities.

Flexibility with assignment due dates

"I hope instructors remain flexible. I hope they continue to understand that even if there is not a pandemic, students are dealing with things behind the scenes that they don't see."

Many comments from students suggested a compassion from their instructors they had never known before. Students appreciated a focus on mental wellness. How can we continue to be flexible yet provide the structure needed for learning? To provide equitable flexibility, consider setting deadlines with grace periods for all students—not just the ones who ask. Many students are intimidated about asking for an extension, even when they are really suffering. There is no one-size-fits-all advice here. You'll know best how you can implement grace periods for students in your class with the number of students you have. Surveying your students early and throughout the semester can inform you about what helps the most students.

Recorded classes available for review later

"One thing I liked about remote instruction is that lectures are recorded often times and I can go back to review the material as many times as I want."

- A multilingual learner wants to re-watch an explanation.
- A student with chronic illness missed part of class due to a doctor's visit running late and wants to see what they missed.
- A student with a concussion is advised to take a week off from all their classes and wants to watch classes later—not only rely on a classmate's notes.

In all of these situations and more, recording the in-person component of class (often called lecture-capture) is an inclusive teaching practice. Classroom technology to record audio and video may already exist in many instructors' classrooms, but most of us already have the individual tools and experience with apps like Zoom. If you plan to record in-person classes, it is best to begin by learning what is available on your own campus.

Educational research highlights that lecture-capture can be a contested space between students and educators. Instructors tend to worry about negative impacts around attendance, learning, and pedagogical choice.[3] Yet, the context of each classroom, such as class size, available technology, and pedagogical strategies used, matter in these outcomes. As scientists, we can appreciate nuances within complex issues. This fall, keep an open mind and listen to why a diverse set of students want recordings. Then, determine the best way to help all students thrive whether that be through classroom recordings, prerecorded videos, or other resources.

Open note exams

"I've gotten used to a lot of open-note exams (allowed by the professor, of course), and I hope they stay that way, since exams are becoming more application based rather than strict memorization, which makes me feel as though I am learning more. I am concerned about my performance if we were to go back to memorization-based learning."

Prior to the pandemic, open-note testing was not common in a lot of biology courses. Many instructors implemented this strategy as a necessity with emergency remote teaching. It is useful to consider the advantages and disadvantages of adopting this assessment strategy long term. The research about open-note exams in biological sciences is not clear-cut, but one point of consensus is that students are more at ease having their notes. Reducing anxiety during exams is a definite benefit. Another benefit is the emphasis on higher-order thinking over recall, such as interpreting data vs. defining terms. Teaching students to think critically is seen as essential to transform biology education, especially in introductory courses.[4] Educational research shows that short-term learning and performance may improve, but one disadvantage may be decreases in long-term retention. Because many students prepare

differently when they know an exam is open vs. closed notes, it is probably advisable to help students learn how to best prepare and to stay consistent within a course.[5]

As we head into the fall, let's not only consider what we have felt and learned through this pandemic as educators. We can listen to the voices of students. I encourage you to collect data from your own students. Implementing quick surveys and assessments early in the fall semester can help you gauge student emotions, gather ideas for teaching strategies, and estimate knowledge and skills. Students can be valuable partners in the teaching and learning process.

References

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About the Author

Kelly A. Hogan is STEM Teaching Professor and Associate Dean of Instructional Innovation in the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.