Fall 2020 Faculty Discussion Groups

Final Report

Prepared by the Office of Assessment and Decision Support (OADS) and the Center for New Designs in Learning and Scholarship (CNDLS)
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Executive Summary

- Faculty reported five effective practices implemented in Fall 2020 that represent practices to continue in on-campus, in-person classes. These are:
  - Holding virtual office hours via multiple platforms and at flexible times
  - Soliciting frequent student feedback about student needs, their learning environments, and creating connections with students
  - Using synchronous time for group work using Zoom breakout rooms and collaborative document tools such as Google Docs and Google Jamboard
  - Improving course organization and use of asynchronous discussion boards via Canvas
  - Recording and facilitating virtual class using Zoom when students, instructors, or guest speakers are remote.
- With effective practices come common challenges. Faculty identified the following challenges of virtual teaching:
  - Everything about teaching takes longer in the virtual environment, contributing to a sense of greater faculty workload and less balance with research activities
  - Gauging and creating student engagement in Zoom is a struggle
  - Teaching during a pandemic is emotionally taxing for faculty
  - Time zone management has no great synchronous solution
- Faculty appreciated the support and training for their teaching to date, and wish for CNDLS to continue the following support:
  - Drop-in office hours for questions and technical assistance
  - Opportunities for informal conversation and community about teaching
  - Workshops, resources, and consultations on their own teaching practices
- Faculty recommendations on what to ask of students on a large, university scale ranged widely, including:
  - Questions focused on cura personalis or how students are doing as whole people
  - What has worked from the student perspective
  - What factors affect students’ engagement
  - Connection, community, and students’ sense of belonging
  - What impact the COVID-19 virus is having on students
Context

In order to complement the Pulse survey data from faculty during Fall 2020, CNDLS and OADS conducted 11 small discussion groups and 2 individual interviews with faculty to discuss their experience teaching virtually. 62 faculty from 51 departments participated; participants taught 143 courses in fall 2020.

Participants:

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Questions

The following four key questions were asked during the discussion groups:

1. Which practices, if any, will you continue when we return to in-person learning?
2. What is the biggest challenge you face in your teaching at this point in the semester?
3. What do you anticipate needing for the upcoming semester in terms of teaching support?
4. If you were surveying students, what do you most want to know from them?

Methods:

The focus groups were conducted over Zoom, from which a written transcript was generated. After data cleaning and anonymizing, these transcripts were coded and analyzed by two CNDLS staff (who were also facilitators), resulting in the following findings.
Thematic Findings for Each Question

Question 1: Effective and Enduring Practices

Faculty were asked to view the following graph of survey findings from the Fall faculty survey data leading to a discussion about practices they implemented either for the first time or in an adapted way online. The discussion extended to which practices will be kept when returning to in-person teaching.

Faculty reported five effective practices implemented in Fall 2020 that represent practices to continue in on-campus, in-person classes.

1. **Virtual Office Hours.** Faculty reported virtual office hours as an effective practice for connecting with students. Many plan to continue to offer flexible office hours over Zoom and/or phone when returning to on-campus teaching and learning. Faculty reported that this practice:
   a. Honors flexible schedules of both faculty and students
   b. Helps to ease Zoom fatigue
   c. Normalizes what office hours are for and adds a personal extension of class
   d. Encourages more students to attend office hours because it lowers the bar
   e. Provides adjuncts, who didn’t previously have a good on-campus space to host in-person office hours, a now-normalized office hours practice that they will continue post-pandemic.

2. **Frequent Feedback & Connection.** Faculty sought student feedback more frequently throughout the semester. While not new to some faculty, many reported implementing continuous feedback and noted its importance especially during this challenging time. Practices included:
   a. Pre-semester surveys to find out student needs and challenges
   b. Requesting 10-15 min meetings with each student
   c. Mid-term check-ins via polls, surveys, or at the start of class
   d. Following up with students, e.g. when they miss class.

3. **Google Docs & Jamboard.** Faculty reported relying on Google Docs and Google Jamboard to make student work visible during zoom breakout rooms, rather than dropping in on breakout rooms which felt awkward in Zoom. These tools will continue to be used by many faculty as collaborative spaces for student work that are visible to the
faculty member in real time, as well as providing a record or notes for students to return to.

a. [On using Google Jamboards during Zoom breakout rooms] “I get 40 readouts of students getting stuck or asking interesting questions. And so I’m pretty sure that when we go back to being all together, we’re still going to keep a Jamboard version with us. Anything we didn’t get to, or even stuff I think we did get to, I go back and I answer and I convert every Jamboard to a PDF and then at the end of every day we upload 40 pages of PDF onto Canvas. So also their own questions and their ideas aren’t as ephemeral; they’re actually captured. And I think that that has real value.”

4. **Canvas LMS.** Fewer, but still multiple, faculty reported that they will retain some practices in Canvas that they have put into place for virtual learning, such as organizing material for students and using the discussion board. Others reported having already used these features for many years to supplement their in-person classes.

   a. “I really revamped the way that I use Canvas and the way that I explain what’s due and what’s happening in class every day beforehand that I plan on continuing to do when we’re back in person.”

5. **Zoom.** Faculty mentioned a few practices using Zoom that they plan to retain once in-person instruction has resumed. These include:

   a. Recording live lectures or class discussion for students who aren’t able to attend or to enable a flipped-class model where in-class time is reserved for discussion or problem-solving
   
   b. Bringing in guest speakers more frequently and easily
   
   c. Delivering or pre-recording lectures when attending conferences and away from campus.

**Question 2: Challenges with Virtual Teaching**

Faculty were presented with a summary of responses from the fall faculty survey about why teaching remotely feels like it has gotten harder over time. They were asked what resonated with them, and what challenges they were currently experiencing this fall.

1. **Everything takes longer, contributing to a sense of higher faculty workload.** This sentiment covered the following activities: class prep time, synchronous class time, supporting students, and managing assessments. Although they wanted to do these activities well and were spending the time, faculty reported that this added time detracted from their suspended research activities. Some examples from the data include:

   a. **Preparation and Organization**

      i. “I probably spend two or three times more preparing lectures.”

      ii. “I see that I really need to slow down with the pace. I cannot teach so much materials that I kind of expected as in a normal classroom.”

   b. **Synchronous class time:**
i. Taking time during class for community-building takes away from academic objectives.

ii. “I feel like getting through material is a challenge, like there’s less stuff that we can talk about and dive into. I feel like time in class is somehow going by really quickly.”

iii. Managing breakout rooms

   c. Assessing students takes longer
      i. Retooling assessments has taken time, e.g., creating quizzes in Canvas
      ii. Addressing individual student accommodations, or grading flexible assessments takes more time
      iii. More time spent on corresponding individually with students or meeting them via office hours.

2. Gauging and creating student engagement in Zoom is a struggle. Faculty reported difficulty in gauging student engagement in Zoom, despite experimentation with breakout rooms and chat. Faculty recognized the difficulty in requiring cameras to be on and are sensitive to students’ varying learning environments, yet yearned for the visual cues and interactions with their students.

   a. “The students, for the most part, are engaged, but they’re super quiet and their normal mode of participation is to at least have their cameras on but usually their audio is off. And so it’s very quiet most of the time.”

3. Emotional labor of teaching during a pandemic. Faculty described the need to be more empathetic, to listen to students more, and to be sensitive to their environments. Caring for students in their classes has carried additional emotional aspects.

   a. Faculty felt they were not well-equipped to support students or to connect them to campus support personnel.
   b. Faculty noticed students’ stress and anxiety may be debilitating for students academically.
   c. Many faculty wanted to address societal upheaval, especially racial injustices, into their courses.

      i. “I think it’s very important that you relate economic concepts to the current pandemic. I think that’s also something that helps students and I think you need to be way more empathetic.”
   d. Faculty discussed balancing their own new teaching/working spaces at home with caregiving responsibilities.
   e. “I just want to say that this has been the hardest semester of teaching in 24 years at Georgetown. From every single possible metric you can apply. It’s been the hardest.”

4. Managing time zone differences is challenging. Fewer, but still multiple, faculty reported creatively adjusting their classes to provide flexibility for students in other time zones, but still felt there was no good solution for the synchronous portion of their classes. Some adjustments have included holding multiple sections of the course, recording class, and meeting independently with students in remote time zones.
a. “My students who are in Asia, I set up a different meeting time with them. They watch the recorded lectures. I meet with them at a different day and time. So they're not up in the middle of [the] night.”
b. “We've expanded windows for students to take exams so that they're taking it in a time zone that is more optimal for them.”
c. “My class meets at 12:30pm which means that [students in other time zones] are up past midnight and you know I've repeatedly told them that they don't need to do that, that I'm happy to engage outside, but because of the community feeling that a course offers, they don't want to go one-on-one.”

Question 3: How has CNDLS programming fit into faculty’s preparation and skill development for virtual teaching in the fall?

Faculty were asked to reflect on what CNDLS programming they had taken advantage of, what was most useful to them, and what CNDLS should continue to offer. CNDLS Office hours were most often mentioned as useful for targeted, individualized support, followed by small group conversations where faculty could share best practices and talk with colleagues about pedagogy and course design choices. Workshops, resources, and CDIs were also mentioned as useful.

1. Office Hours - targeted, individualized, ad hoc support
   a. Very helpful for getting specific question answered quickly
   b. “Please don’t stop those. They're very, very important.”
   c. “I love the instructional continuity office hours at CNDLS. I’ve shown up probably 10 times.”

2. Conversations & Community
   a. Teaching circles or small, informal networks to talk to regularly and to have faculty share best practices
   b. Grouped by disciplinary specific issues or by kinds of courses
   c. What is most helpful is hearing about other faculty’s individual assignments, what they have done in class
   d. From one adjunct: “I have not talked about pedagogy ever as much as I have in the past three months, you know, like it’s just really neat to have people finally turning to this after all these years.”

3. Workshops, resources, and consultations on their own teaching practices
   a. Compilation of ‘tips’ for asynchronous learning
   b. Help with editing recorded lectures
   c. Suggestions wanted for / training on alternative methods for grading, commenting on and returning papers in this environment

4. CDIs for new / incoming / adjuncts
a. Bigger/longer courses (e.g. CDI) might be beneficial for folks new to teaching this spring, adjuncts etc. esp. If offered in the next month before next semester begins.

Question 4: What do faculty want to know from students, or think would be useful for the university to be asking of students?

Faculty appreciate receiving the survey summaries about student feedback through OADS, CNDSLs and the Provost Office, but they said they find it hard to know what to do with the data because it is not disaggregated and they don’t know if and how it applies to their own class(es). Some faculty struggled to answer this question because they perceived a disconnect between what they would ask or want to know at the course level for themselves and asking questions at the large, anonymous university level. Faculty most appreciated the results that translated into specific actions for them, such as “don’t run over on class time” which they report putting into practice. Lastly, faculty struggled with the vagueness of the term “engagement” in the existing questions and wished it was better defined. They wanted to know about factors that affected student engagement.

Faculty did generate some new questions for OADS surveys, falling into the following categories. The specific question list has been shared with OADS.

- Caring about students, or *cura personalis*-type questions that ask how students are doing as whole people
- Focusing on their class experiences and their learning
- What is working from the student perspective
- What factors are affecting student levels of engagement
- Feelings of connection, community, and students’ sense of belonging