How to move your teaching online – fast

Suggestions from the University of London Centre for Distance Education (CDE)

Prepared by Stephen Brown and David Baume, CDE Fellows, with cooperation from other CDE Fellows.

Background

Many teaching institutions have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by announcing that they are moving their teaching and assessment online, immediately and wholesale.

If you need to move your teaching online, and are new to distance or online learning, then there are some important things you need to think about and do, over the rest of the 2019-2020 academic year. Starting, we suggest, now.

Good enough is good enough

Don't let perfection stand in the way of getting the job done quickly and well enough.

There is plenty you can do that will be good enough for now.

You can refine it later; when you have more time, and when you know how your students are responding to your first attempts.

Your students are scared, too. They will value what you do for them

Students are in the late stages of completing dissertations, and are preparing for whatever form of assessment your University decides to use in summer 2020. They know that things won't be as they expected. They will feel even more dependent on you at this stage of their studies.

Acknowledge that these are difficult and uncertain times. Then tell them clearly and concisely what you and the University will be doing to support them. And encourage them to support each other.

Four good ways to help your students now

1   Give your students useful appropriate activities to do

If you don't, they may simply get into a revision panic cycle which they read and re-read their notes. This is rarely the best use of her time. Give them activities, learning activities, assessment-relevant learning activities, to do. These activities will help them to achieve, and to see that they've achieved, the learning outcomes of the programme / module.

2   Point them at the most appropriate learning resources

This complements the previous suggestion. If they are undertaking appropriate learning activities, and making use of the key course resources, then they will be preparing well for their assessment.

3   Encourage them to collaborate

By now they will be familiar with the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate forms of collaboration. The more you can encourage them to share answers, give each other feedback on their answers, share information and resources, the better they will all do.

4   Join in

For students being assessed in Summer 2020, it's a little late to be teaching them very much. If you follow the three suggestions above, you will be helping them to prepare for assessment, and helping them to help each other to prepare for assessment. If they are sharing ideas and answers in some kind of an online forum – your learning technology team can help you set one up very quickly – then your most productive role is probably to join in this forum, doing much the same things you do in the class; giving feedback, answering their questions, asking further probing questions, perhaps suggesting additional resources, and so on. Join in. Support them. Notice who is quiet, and encourage them to join in, either within the forum or by private email.

Remember and use what we know about learning

We know, from vast amounts of research over more than half a century, a few things about the conditions under which learning happens. It is quite straightforward to implement some of his knowledge in online education, just as it is in face-to-face education.

Here is a summary of what we know. (You'll recognise some of these from the previous four suggestions.)

With each, we provide a few immediate implications for distance education. Applying these ideas will be much more productive than simply uploading all your lecture notes as PDFs to Moodle or Blackboard, or hastily videoing all your lectures:

1   A clear structure, framework, scaffolding surrounds, supports and informs learning

In distance learning, this can be achieved through:

- Clear learning outcomes
- Clear weekly student timetables
- Clarity about what students should be doing each week, and why

2   High standards are expected of learners, and are made explicit

In distance learning, this can be achieved through:

- Clear, high-level learning outcomes (again)

- Examples and discussions of good and less good work, and of what makes good work good (and less good work less good)

3 Learners acknowledge and use their prior learning & approaches to learning

In distance learning, at this stage of the academic year, this can be achieved through:

- Asking students what they already know about the subject, what kind of tasks and activities they can do in the subject. Students will find it valuable and encouraging as they see what they already know, what they can already do.

4 Learning is an active process

In distance learning, this can be achieved through:

- Above all, designing the course, what remains of it, as a sequence of student learning activities.
- Whenever you ask them to read anything, start by giving them questions to answer as they read.
- Use webinars, e-tutorials, Tweetchat – any online forum which you are comfortable, or which you are prepared rapidly to learn. You don't have to be an expert, merely competent. Support is available.

5 Learners spend lots of time on task, i.e., doing relevant things and practising

In distance learning, this can be achieved through:

- Ensuring that the assessment is such that, if they've done the work, as specified, they will probably pass.
- Emphasizing – "doing the work really matters".
- Making the learning activities attractive, exciting, challenging, appropriate, rewarding …

6 Learning is at least in part a collaborative activity, among students and between students and staff

In distance learning, this can be achieved through:

- Setting tasks that require student collaboration.
- Helping students to differentiate between collaboration and cheating.
- Tutors working with, supporting, students.

7 Learners receive and use feedback on their work

In distance learning, this can be achieved through:

- At this stage of the academic year, making a major part of the tutor's role giving feedback to students on assignments.
- Ensuring feedback is helpful and usable.
- Students can learn to give feedback on each other's work, and also on their own work. Encourage and support this.

Licence

London

April 2020