

UChicago Humanities Division

Spring 2020 Online Teaching and Learning Report: Teaching Takeaways

(This is a linked PDF, click on the topic below to move to it. This document was prepared by Bonnie Tucker at btucker@uchicago.edu)

Overview and Survey Response Rates	1
The Transition to Remote Teaching in Spring 2020: Successes	2
Training Worked: “Quality of Learning” Correlated with “How Well the Instructor Understood the Online Teaching Portals”	2
Spring Training Emphasized Technological Tools More Than “Pedagogical Ends”	3
Online Teaching Takeaways from HD Surveys and Evaluations	3
Learn the Ins and Outs of Canvas and Zoom.	3
Be More Explicit About Expectations and Instructions in the Online Space.	4
Deliberately Rebuild the ‘Social’ Online.	4
Adapt the Class Format to the New Online Context.	4
Mix Synchronous with Asynchronous Instruction.	5
Use Asynchronous Activities to “Warm-Up” Students and Focus Synchronous Discussions.	5
Stay Flexible.	6

Overview and Survey Response Rates

All of the University of Chicago community achieved a remarkable undertaking in the Spring Quarter of 2020 in shifting with less than a month of notice to entirely remote instruction in response to COVID-19. To learn what this rapid transition to a digital learning environment was like for instructors and students, the Humanities Division conducted two surveys in June and July 2020. The Division surveyed the 539 instructors and the 475 graduate students spanning across the 14 PhD programs, 4 MA programs, and the MFA program who taught and took online courses. 306 instructors responded to the instructor survey or 57% of those who taught, for a 4% margin of error or 96% confidence interval (i.e., if 60% of faculty respond to a question that they strongly agree, between 56% and 64% would strongly agree from the entire instructor group). 159 graduate students responded to the graduate student survey or 33.5% of those enrolled in courses, for a 6% margin of error or 94% confidence interval (i.e., if 60% of graduate students respond to a question that they strongly agree, between 54% and 66% would strongly

agree from the entire graduate student group). In short, thanks to high response rates, these surveys accurately reflect the views and opinions of both graduate students and instructors about their experiences teaching and learning online in Spring 2020. In addition to the instructor and graduate student surveys conducted by the Division themselves, the University Registrar provided access to 3,041 undergraduate student course evaluations within all Humanities courses administered to undergraduates enrolled in online courses in Spring 2020. These standard undergraduate student course evaluations were modified in the Spring 2020 Quarter to incorporate questions on remote learning. Combined these three data sources—humanities instructors, humanities graduate students and undergraduate students in humanities courses triangulate to provide various perspectives on how well the Division adapted to remote teaching and learning in the Spring and what can be done to improve online teaching and learning moving forward.

The Transition to Remote Teaching in Spring 2020: Successes

Across the broader landscape of higher education, the National Center for Education Statistics suggests that in fall 2018 over 35% of all college students enrolled in any postsecondary courses reported taking at least one distance education course. However, many of these courses were offered at for-profit colleges and public institutions, whereas online education at the University of Chicago prior to Spring 2020 was largely confined to the Graham School and focused on continuing professional education. Yet even without a strong institutional foundation for remote education and with a tightly condensed timeline for moving online, survey responses suggest that online courses in the Spring 2020 in the Humanities Division were successful. The majority of humanities instructors reported that they had the tools and resources to complete their work in the Spring (66.9% agree or strongly agree), and most graduate students reported that faculty expressed care and concern for them in shifting online (75.16% agree or strongly agree). Perhaps even more telling, the vast majority of humanities instructors felt that students were able to successfully fulfil their course learning goals in the Spring (86% agree or strongly agree). From the undergraduate students, in response to the question, “How effective were the different modes of remote teaching in this course?” most undergraduates responded that they were effective or highly effective (86.76%).

Training Worked: “Quality of Learning” Correlated with “How Well the Instructor Understood the Online Teaching Portals”

Humanities instructors successfully overcame a sharp learning curve in shifting to teach online in the Spring as 88.3% reported never having taught remotely before this experience, but while 40% reported feeling not at all or not too prepared to teach online before the Spring, by the end of the Spring Quarter less than 4% felt not at all or not too prepared to teach online in the future. In making the shift to teach remotely, the three most helpful resources that instructors reported

relying on included Zoom and Canvas training (16.84%), Instructor colleagues at UChicago (14%) and their academic departments (13%). The overwhelming majority of humanities instructors participated in formal training through Academic Technology Solutions (ATS) (84.29%). Overall, instructors reported positive experiences with this training. Several instructors pointed out in their open-ended feedback that it would be useful to have separate but very simple training for instructors who have never used Canvas before and who are less comfortable with technology. Several instructors also expressed their desire for more similar training focused on specific technological tools.

Spring Training Emphasized Technological Tools More Than “Pedagogical Ends”

In evaluating their experiences with training, humanities instructors and graduate students reported greater satisfaction with the technical support received from the University to transition to use digital tools (i.e., Zoom, Canvas, etc.) than for the pedagogical support from the University to help them adopt effective online teaching and learning practices. Indeed, perhaps in part this was because the formal training offered to instructors before and early in the Quarter focused on Zoom, Canvas and other specific tools and was offered through ATS. Humanities instructors identified in their short-answer responses to the open-ended question “Please provide feedback on the ATS Training. Which additional topics or digital tools would you like training on moving forward?” an emphasis on technological tools in the training already offered. At the same time, instructors requested more training directly from other instructors and focused on pedagogy.

Online Teaching Takeaways from HD Surveys and Evaluations

Graduate students and undergraduate students offered strong and reflective advice in the surveys and evaluations on what worked for them in the Spring 2020 Quarter when it came to remote learning. Likewise Division faculty and instructors reported their clear sense of teaching successes and areas for improvement when it came to online teaching methods. The following are “teaching takeaways” based on these sources of feedback.

Learn the Ins and Outs of Canvas and Zoom.

Graduate students reported that instructors with strong command of the online teaching tools (primarily Canvas and Zoom) who “used them to their fullest extent” in the Spring were able to productively foster learning online. By contrast, they also reported that instructors who struggled with the basic tools had “disruptions” in the class that resulted in disruptions in learning.

Be More Explicit About Expectations and Instructions in the Online Space.

Whereas in the F2F class space students are familiar with raising their hand, and asking questions in class, the online learning space is likely less familiar, and graduate students and undergraduate students alike reported that they benefited from clear expectation-setting in online classes, including Zoom etiquette in the syllabus, and instructions on how to set up individual equipment for a clear, well-lit Zoom background. Even further, instructors described the benefits of explicit course instructions in Canvas sites for how to move through the class material itself, what to do when, and how.

Deliberately Rebuild the ‘Social’ Online.

When surveyed Humanities Division instructors were asked which problems arose in the Spring for which they were unable to find solutions, one of the most common concerns was a lack of student engagement and the lack of community online. Graduate students expressed that what they missed most about their in-person classes was the sense of community.

At the same time, instructors and faculty described myriad creative methods for building learning communities online, including:

- Asking students to post brief video introductions of themselves to the class in Canvas discussion,
- Asking students periodically to share “fun facts about themselves” at the start of class throughout different points in the quarter,
- Setting up Zoom sessions for students to simply connect and talk to one another outside of regular class times focused on content,
- Dividing students up into “study groups” and asking them to meet or simply email once a week outside of class to check in on one another,
- Consistently starting the Zoom synchronous classes fifteen minutes early so students can arrive early and chat before class starts.

Adapt the Class Format to the New Online Context.

While a few outliers in the graduate student survey reported satisfaction with those courses that exactly mimicked face-to-face courses in their feedback, the majority of graduate students suggested that those courses in which instructors sought to adapt their teaching methods to fit the online space worked best. One of the most common comments among graduate student

survey respondents was that three-hour full-group Zoom discussions did not work. Effective teaching adaptations from traditional F2F methods to new online classes reported by students took the form of:

- Shorter synchronous class meetings,
- Breakout room discussions in synchronous class meetings to mimic think-pair-share activities,
- Small-group synchronous sessions and/or tutorial style one-on-one meetings,
- Asynchronous lectures,
- Canvas discussion board use and blog postings,
- Incorporating smaller assignments,
- Incorporating group or team-based assignments,
- Creative assignments encouraging student media creation and projects, or taking advantage of the online learning space through class activities such as Twitter debates or creating websites.

Mix Synchronous with Asynchronous Instruction.

Undergraduates wrote about well-planned combinations of short class-preparation lecture videos and synchronous class discussions using breakout rooms in their evaluations. Graduate students lauded the benefits of class blogging combined with synchronous discussions. Like graduate students and undergraduate students, many instructors also pointed to the great benefits of blending a wide variety of synchronous and asynchronous online teaching activities, including encouraging student engagement, building class community through multiple modes, focusing time spent together synchronously and overcoming the learning limitations of one online course mode alone. Several instructors pointed to accessibility as an important consequence of mixing online teaching modes as asynchronous activities accommodate students in different time zones, with different learning needs, or without stable internet at home.

Use Asynchronous Activities to “Warm-Up” Students and Focus Synchronous Discussions.

Instructors described using students' questions and themes in readings on Canvas discussion boards or blog posts to “warm call” on students in synchronous Zoom discussions. Instructors described setting up ground rules for discussion boards to ensure that students would engage in productive debate with one another rather than with only the instructor. Instructors also strategically used group annotations of difficult or canonical texts as spaces to find themes and questions for creating exciting, focused synchronous discussions.

Stay Flexible.

When graduate students responded to the question, “Was there anything that your instructor said or did that made a large difference in the online class?” graduate students repeatedly brought up flexibility on the part of instructors, including changing assignments or deadlines, and understanding that we are all adapting to this new situation. Students appreciated the ways in which instructors acknowledged that the online learning space as new territory and a learning experience for everyone, including instructors themselves.