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Keep Teaching: 7 Tips for Converting to Online Instruction

J. B. Clark

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Keep Teaching: 7 Tips for Converting to Online Instruction

As UM faculty move to virtual classrooms, e-learning veterans share their best tips and tricks

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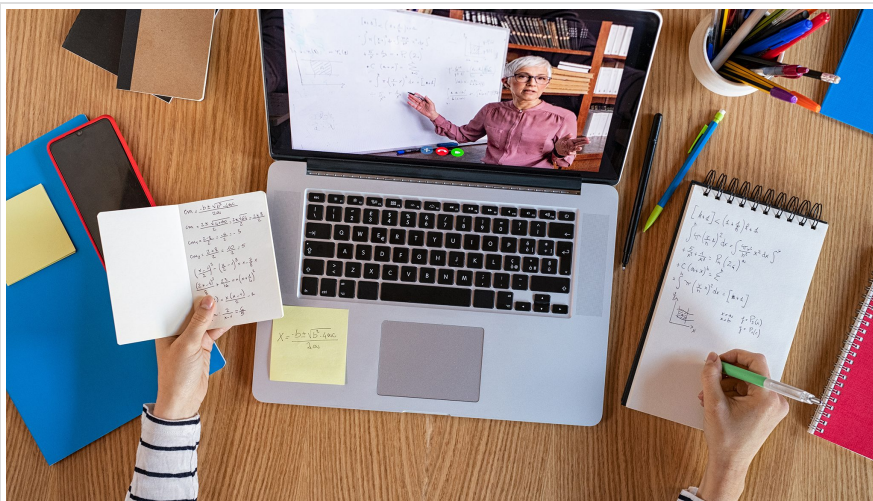
As University of Mississippi faculty convert their courses to online learning platforms, two of the university's most experienced online professors say their best advice is for educators to take a breath, think about their students and take things one piece of technology at a time. Adobe Stock photo

OXFORD, Miss. – As everyone adjusts to a new normal while trying to stay safe in the midst of COVID-19, **University of Mississippi** faculty are going above and beyond to provide uninterrupted coursework, but in an online format to keep students engaged and, above all, safe.

"I am pleased that our semester is back underway in this new format of instruction and learning," said Noel Wilkin, UM provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs. "We got to this point because of the hard work and dedication of our faculty and staff, amidst a shifting landscape of operations and changing dynamics in their own lives.

"This is a tremendous shift for our students as well. Our faculty and staff have developed a Keep Learning website to help provide resources that students may need. I am confident that our community of scholars will continue to support each other during this difficult time."

Two of the university's most experienced online professors say their best advice is for educators to take a breath, think about their students and then take it one piece of technology at a time. Here's what else they had to say:

1. **Don't Forget Why We're Here**

"My advice is to be community-focused in this," said Patricia O'Sullivan, instructor in **pharmacy administration**. "If you can keep the class together as a unit – if you can keep the students engaged with you and talking to each other – that is the best way through this."

O'Sullivan has been teaching online since 2004. Her current course, PHAD 395: Pharmacy Ethics, is one she incorporates online instruction into, even in sections previously taught face-to-face.

O'Sullivan said she was reminded how important this community is when a student who faced challenges in attending class in person began to engage extensively once it moved online this week.

"She's been texting with me how this situation is affecting her personally, and we're talking about the ethics of it all," she said. "I'm thinking this is a kid who might have withdrawn, but now she's really engaged."

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Campus Briefs

Civil Engineering Professor Receives Most-Cited Paper Award

OXFORD, Miss. – Peer recognition is a rewarding experience for anyone, but University of Mississippi researcher Amir Mehrara Molan was elated when an article he co-authored recently received the Most Cited Paper Award at the 102nd Transportation Research Board meeting in the nation's capital. The International Journal of Transportation Science and Technology presented the civil engineering

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Young Alumna Gives Back to School of Accountancy

OXFORD, Miss. – Stephanie Jennings Teague, of Chicago, sees her commitment of $100,000 to the Patterson School of Accountancy's new building at the University of Mississippi as a means of saying "thank you." "It is a way to show a small token of my appreciation to Ole Miss, the faculty and staff, and the accounting

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Ole Miss In the News

Reuters: Keep an Eye on the Money Supply

U.S. inflation roller coaster prompts fresh look at long-ignored money supply By Michael S. Derby NEW YORK – The amount of money sloshing around the U.S. economy shrank last year for the first time on record, a development that some economists believe bolsters the case for U.S. inflation pressures continuing to

That student isn't the only one who is engaging. The university reported 14,500 unique Blackboard logins on Monday (March 23), well over half the campus's population. Since some classes aren't even listed on Blackboard, the numbers suggest students may be engaging as much, if not more, as they seek out normalcy in uncertain times.

2. Start with What You and Your Students Know

"I like to read about different tools and experiment so that I understand them better, but that doesn't mean I add all the technology to my course," said Katerina Berezina, assistant professor of **nutrition and hospitality management**. "I think about the student and what technology they already have so that I'm not asking them to learn a new tool just because it's available or fancy."

Berezina has been teaching online since 2014 and offers her hospitality technology course online. She advised that professors should start with technology that students have means to access, such as Blackboard and Google.

Patricia O'Sullivan

"Blackboard gives you lots of tools for communications and for distributing your video lectures and files," she said. "In addition to that, students have university email accounts through Google. That comes with G Suite, which gives you lots of tools for collaboration that are helpful for remote and online learning."

O'Sullivan agrees.

"I've been asking my students where they want to have our discussions, and they're all coming back and asking to please stay in Blackboard," she said. "It's the familiar thing and they're already logged in. This isn't the time to learn a new tool. Our bandwidth is already full."

While most people use Google for email services, few realize there are secure chat, video conferencing, cloud storage, spreadsheet, word processor, form creation, presentation and digital whiteboard tools baked in.

"Don't use technology for the sake of technology," Berezina said. "Think about what you want to do, and use the technology that facilitates learning for your students in that way."

3. Shorter Is Better

Berezina said she has to update information in her lectures regularly, and after the first few years of teaching grew tired of re-recording an entire hourlong video. She switched from one video lecture per segment to recording lots of shorter lectures.

"I decided I would mimic the environment of my classroom but adapt for online," she said. "I open class with a question, so the online tool for that is a discussion board.

"Then, I give a lecture, but a mini-lecture. Then I give them an exercise so the students can practice the calculations I just taught them."

She sequences her blackboard assignments just like she would in the classroom so that students don't have to sit through an hourlong lecture before interacting with the material. And it's much easier for her to update a five-minute video than a one-hour video.

"Later, I learned it was also good for minimizing cognitive loads so the students can process info in smaller pieces," she said. "Overall, I think teaching online helped me develop better instructions, even in my face-to-face classes, and I think develop good pedagogically sound practices."

Katerina Berezina

4. Embrace Multimedia

O'Sullivan started her online courses using mostly text-based resources, but said she saw better engagement as she began incorporate pictures, videos, audio and other interactive resources from around the internet.

"We don't talk about learning styles anymore because it's a debunked theory, but it's still true that we have preferences," O'Sullivan said. "I love listening to things, especially podcasts."

Students who have engaged a topic in multiple ways are more likely to grasp it, especially if they are required to turn around and discuss it with the rest of the class through tools such as Zoom or Blackboard message boards. It also gives students an opportunity to engage material in ways they prefer.

"I think it's OK to overlap material," she said. "If they read a chapter about Buddhism, it's OK to have a podcast interview of a Buddhist and a video of a religious ceremony. It's good to reinforce with multimodal delivery."

5. **Meet the Moment**

Finding ways to continue instructing students is an effort to bring normalcy back into their lives, but that doesn't mean professors have to avoid the elephant in the room. This is an opportunity to bring real-world examples into instruction.

"I teach Pharmacy Ethics, so my class is tailor-made for this crisis, but everyone can meet the moment," O'Sullivan said. "If I was teaching early 20th century literature, I would be reading letters and literature from the 1918 flu (pandemic) right now.

"Every class on campus could adjust their syllabus to talk about this – biology, chemistry, philosophy, history."

Berezina echoed the sentiment, saying employees in the hotel and restaurant industries are all trying to figure out how to keep serving customers and keep their businesses afloat in the midst of the crisis, and most of them are doing it online, too.

6. **Practice for the Real World**

Self-motivation and online collaboration aren't just skills to use in this crisis, but skills students need to learn for the ever-changing, worldwide landscape of the hospitality industry, Berezina said.

As students and educators learn to use technology to continue classes online during the COVID-19 pandemic, students also are picking up valuable electronic collaboration skills that may enhance their resumes later. Adobe Stock photo

"Even when we are in normal conditions, these are valuable skills because many industries are becoming distributed," she said. "Think about all international hotel chains or international restaurant chains – even smaller chains that operate in one state, like Mississippi.

"You can't drive from Oxford to Jackson every day, but you can check in using Zoom."

Berezina said she requires the same level of group participation from her online courses and her in-person courses for that very reason. Her students need to learn these online skills whether there is a disease outbreak or not.

When online students finish her course, Berezina sends them a list of the additional skills they may not have realized they can include on their resume, such as online collaboration and video recording.

7. **Be Gracious**

Both teachers agree that finding a way to meet students technologically and academically where they are is the most helpful thing faculty can do as students grapple with fear and anxiety in an uncertain time.

Berezina said she has learned to spend extra time making sure her instructions and expectations are clear, since it's not as easy for students to raise their hands and ask questions.

Besides clear communication, it's important to give students a little more autonomy in these times, O'Sullivan said.

"Being gracious means being sensitive to the students' new circumstances," he said. "Some students have children at home with them. Some are in a different time zone that makes your scheduled Zoom meeting difficult for them. And likely all of them are experiencing some kind of stress."

Keep Learning
The university is working to ensure students and faculty alike have every possible resource to complete the semester strong and maintain continuity in learning and a level of academic rigor. Those tips and resources can be found at the **Keep Learning** webpage, as well as the **Keep Teaching** site.