Business as Unusual–Navigating the Transition Back to In-Person Instruction

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As we continue the transition back to full-time face-to-face instruction, one of the few things we know for sure is this is not a return to how things were pre-pandemic. Instead, two years of online education and uncertainty around in-person instruction have shaped students' expectations, anxieties, and attitudes towards education. Thus, the goals of this white paper are twofold: 1) to discuss expectations and realities of teaching in-person based on survey data collected from University of California, Riverside (UCR) instructors (N = 39),[1] and 2) to offer steps that instructors[2] can take **now**, **next**, and **later** to address these concerns when transitioning to the "new normal."

Challenges Anticipated & Experienced in Transitioning to In-Person Teaching

As we head into Spring quarter 2022, some instructors have already transitioned to in-person, while others have stayed online. We asked our survey respondents to indicate their biggest challenges *experienced* (if they taught in-person in Winter 2022) and *anticipated* (if they were still online).

The most prevalent theme for instructors already teaching in-person was the challenge of dealing with students' new requests for flexibility and accommodations–mentioned by 33% of these instructors ($N_{in-person} = 21$). Understandably, teaching in multiple modes presents several challenges, including creating community across the different audiences of students and keeping both groups in sync to meet course milestones (e.g., midterm exams). Instructors have concerns that these demands have increased their workload and that this problem will persist.

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[1] The consent form to participate in this survey was sent to the most recent instructor of record for all courses currently offered at UCR. The respondents are from those who consented to participate in research about teaching.

[2] The information presented in this white paper will be most useful for instructors of record, who have full control over making changes to their courses. Some suggestions are also provided for Teaching Assistants (TAs), but we want to acknowledge that TAs do not always have full decision-making privileges when it comes to their discussion sections.

The most prevalent theme for instructors preparing to transition back to in-person instruction highlights worries about student engagement with (and conversely, resistance to) learning–either in the classroom or when completing assignments at home (71% of $N_{online} = 17$). Given that students are worried about their own health and safety, there is concern that students will not attend in-person classes to the same degree they did pre-pandemic, and that classroom energy will be low. Indeed, some experts predict that the typical student attendance drop-off after the first few classes may be steeper than usual (The Attendance Conundrum, 2022). Though students may have available online options should they choose to forego in-person instruction, there is concern that they will not engage with the material in ways that will help them be the most successful. These concerns also complicate effective implementation of student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction that is crucial for learning (Tharayil et al., 2018).

While UCR instructors have concerns about the new challenges of transitioning back to in-person teaching, there is good news too! Teaching online has inspired instructors to embrace the spirit of change in their teaching; indeed, 95% of survey respondents indicated that they were somewhat or totally open to trying new teaching techniques in their in-person classes. Specific examples include...

- Using active learning strategies such as in-class polling and collaborative group work to increase engagement and create community among students
- Continuing to record lectures to offer flexibility in accessing course content
- Creating asynchronous recordings with embedded quiz questions to encourage engagement with the content
- Offering online submission of assignments and online exams to promote flexibility and reduce the grading workload

What to know and how to prepare your course for transition: Now, Next, and Later

Whether you have already taught in person this academic year or are preparing to teach in person for the first time (maybe ever!), it is essential to remember that higher education will never be the same post-pandemic. Here are some quick tips for lectures, assessments, and discussion sections to effectively address some of the challenges described above. We organized in order of immediacy: suggestions you can implement **now**, after some preparation **next**, and after considerable preparation **later**. Figure 1 displays these recommendations at-a-glance.

	Now	Next	Later

Lecture
- Leverage hybrid resources
- Provide access to recorded lectures
- Encourage synch. engagement

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- Make recorded content interactive
- Get course approved for online

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- Intentionally design your course for hybrid access

Assessment
- Low stakes assessments

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- Authentic assessments

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- Alternative grading approaches
- Mobile compatibility

Discussion Sections
- Supplement with online message boards

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- Leverage hybrid resources
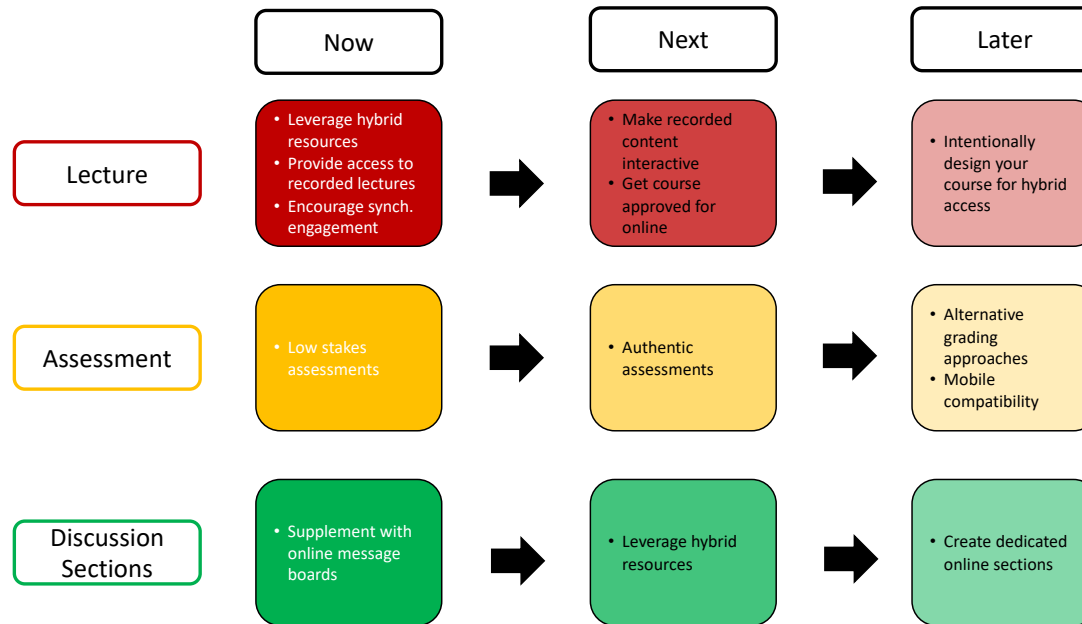
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- Create dedicated online sections

Figure 1: Recommendations for adapting your lectures, assessments, and discussion sections for the return to in-person instruction. The recommendations are ordered for things you can do now, next, and later. More information about each recommendation can be found in-text below.

Adapting Lectures Effectively

Students will request hybrid options for class delivery as they now know these options are possible and have grown to embrace them. Whether these requests come from a place of concern regarding health and wellness, accessibility, or other accommodations, it is better to intentionally design your courses for hybrid[3] learning rather than making last-minute changes.

Now:

- Leverage UCR's resources. Check with your ITS department and center for teaching and learning about the technological possibilities of your classroom. Many universities have upgraded their classrooms to create hybrid-enabled learning spaces. UCR's RISE initiative converted 110 general assignment classrooms to include PTZ (Pan-Tilt-Zoom) cameras and state-of-the-art microphone arrays. **This technology increases engagement for students, wherever they are accessing their classes, but is not much extra work for the instructor.** However, be aware that many of these upgrades mean the standard procedures for using things like projectors may be different when accommodating remote students. UCR ITS and XCITE can provide instruction on effectively incorporating remote cohorts (email either multimedia@ucr.edu or icc@ucr.edu).

- Provide students with access to recorded lectures. Though students are likely to get more out of in-person instruction, having lecture recordings accessible helps students take charge of their learning. There are many ways to offer such recordings **that do not involve much extra work on the instructor's part**:

    - If you made recordings during remote instruction, repurpose all or part of them.

    - If you practice your lectures before class, record your practice runs and post them on your course page.

    - You can even record your in-person lectures and post them after class with no editing! You can set up your Zoom account to automatically port your recordings over to YuJa to save you time. You can find instructions on how to do this here.

- Encourage synchronous engagement. Active learning–moving beyond purely passive lecture and requiring students to work with the content or one another–can help support student engagement (Freeman et al.,

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[3]Though there are many definitions of hybrid learning, we use the term in this paper to refer to courses that allow students to engage with the content either in-person or online as they choose.

2014). During lecture, consider using a real-time polling software like Poll Everywhere to **encourage live engagement** with your course (while providing flexible online options as needed). Students can use Poll Everywhere regardless of attendance format, making it the perfect tool to increase engagement for all students. For example, if students cannot attend class live–online or in-person–have them watch your recorded videos and submit notes on the content. Anecdotally, students will prefer attending synchronously and answering polls, which will increase your attendance!

Next:

- Make previously-recorded content interactive. 28% of instructors indicated that adding interactive questions to pre-recorded videos is one of the teaching techniques from online instruction that they plan to continue to even after transitioning back to in-person instruction. Such quizzing gives students the opportunity to learn and allows them to revisit lectures and activities later. See how to create interactive videos using Yuja here.

- Connect with your institution's course approval committee to continue offering your course in a hybrid or online format. As we continue the transition back to in-person, the demand for online courses will remain. Make sure that you have the necessary approvals to formally offer your course in a given format. This is particularly helpful if you regularly teach summer session courses, as UCR is encouraging departments to offer more summer courses completely online. [4]

Later:

- Increase the quality of your hybrid offerings by intentionally designing your course for this modality. For example, XCITE offers workshops and grants to aid in designing your course for hybrid instruction (but you don't need to have a course redesign grant to propose a hybrid or online course!). Though designing your course to accommodate both in-person and online students requires more work up-front, the return on investment is worth it.

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[4]Currently, UCR approval is only needed for online courses that meet the definition of "Remote Learning." According to the Committee on Courses' "General Rules and Policies Governing Courses of Instruction," Remote Learning is defined as when "face-to-face contact with an instructor represents less than 1/3 of the total hours of required work per week." (Committee on Courses, 2018)

Adapting Assessments Effectively

Many instructors initially met the move to remote instruction with a heightened fear of cheating due to less oversight and the ubiquity of available internet resources. This fear has receded as the pandemic has continued and instructors have adapted new approaches to assessment. Consider these "lessons learned" from online instruction with the return to in-person teaching.

Now:

- Implement more lower-stakes, rather than a few higher-stakes assessments. Regular assessment allows students to see their progress and where they stand in a class. These evaluations can take the form of brief, follow-up quizzes, in-video lecture questions, or brief reflection papers completed before or after class (e.g., one-minute papers, muddiest point responses, exit tickets), and other active learning activities. **These assessments can be automatically graded in Canvas, or graded only for completion, to save instructor time**. Engaging with these assessments (even without feedback from the instructor) can serve as self-checks for students' learning and provide valuable information to both students and instructors about misunderstandings. They are also **fun and engaging for students to complete, since they encourage application of the course content to real-world scenarios outside of the classroom!**

Next:

- Use authentic assessment. An authentic assessment requires students to apply what they have studied, rather than simply providing correct responses (potentially without understanding why they are correct!). This reduces cheating by emphasizing demonstration of understanding, often in the students' own words. This type of assessment has long existed, but labor-intensive grading can be a barrier to its implementation in larger class sizes. However, with rubric creation software like those available in Canvas or GradeScope, delivering feedback on these assessments can be streamlined. Creating these assessments may take a bit of time, so make sure you are budgeting accordingly. Again, the return on investment is worth it.

Later:

- Consider alternative grading approaches. Though we are all familiar with traditional points-based grading systems in which students accumulate points that translate to a letter grade, this is not the only

option for assessing students. Instead, consider something like [specifications grading], [mastery grading], or [ungrading]. Such dramatic shifts in the educational paradigm are critical to continued innovation in pedagogy, but take considerable effort to implement. Consider communicating with XCITE and/or members of the Academy of Distinguished Teaching for more information about these options.

- Make sure your assessments are mobile-compatible. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the move to emergency-remote instruction highlighted existing inequities with access to home broadband and computers with internet access. A PEW research study from 2019 indicates that 18–29-year olds are more smartphone-dependent than other age groups, and anecdotally, students do try to complete coursework using just their phones ("Demographics of Mobile Device Ownership and Adoption in the United States," 2021). Lower-income households and underrepresented or minority groups are also disproportionately smartphone-dependent. Instructors can make their assessments more equitable by administering them on mobile-compatible platforms like Canvas and making sure that 3rd party tools used for assessment are also mobile-compatible.

Adapting Discussion Sections Effectively

The small size and hands-on active learning format of many discussion sections make them effective for learning. Teaching Assistants (TAs) reported openness to implementing new techniques and technologies in the classroom (90% of N_{TAs}=11) but also demonstrated a hesitancy to return to face-to-face instruction as the proximity of group learning can create a dangerous environment during outbreaks of infectious disease (36% of N_{TAs}=11). Additionally, it can be challenging for TAs to offer hybrid options when they are not the instructor of record for a course. The suggestions below encourage open lines of communication between TAs and their departments to develop the infrastructure necessary to support remote attendance to in-person courses.

Now:

- Consider supplementing in-person discussions with online message boards, such as Piazza, or other communication platforms like Slack. The exploratory nature of face-to-face discussion is a valuable contribution to learning; however, research suggests that written communication better serves recall and reflection (Blanchette, 2001, p. 41; Wells, 2000). A combination of both offers the best of face-to-face and written discourse while simultaneously allowing students their desired and needed flexibility. Clear participation rubrics that spec-

ify what constitutes "quality" participation **encourage students to critically engage with the material and with one another**.

Next:

- Leverage UCR hybrid teaching technology resources. The smaller class size of discussion sections also means they are more likely to occur in recently upgraded rooms–if they are general assignment rooms. Some discussion sections are offered outside of such rooms, however, so check with your department about the available technology. It is possible that your department has equipment available for check-out to facilitate remote participation (e.g., Owl cameras in UCR's Psychology Department). TAs should confer with ITS and XCITE for training on ways new technologies can facilitate the hosting of in-person discussion sections with options for remote participation.

Later:

- Consider creating permanently-dedicated online discussion offerings. As we expect requests for hybrid and flexible options, departments should consider dedicating some discussion sections for each course permanently online with dedicated TAs managing the online communication platforms. Furthermore, departments can consider assigning remote TAs who can support in-person discussion sections by managing the remote cohort. Such efforts will likely need administrative approval.

Resistance is NOT Futile–Lessons Learned & Considerations for Students

We have all learned many lessons during the pandemic. After being forced into technologically-mediated teaching, instructors continue to use new tools to support student engagement and increase the number and variety of assessments. By giving students flexible options for engaging with course content and more frequent assessments, we allow them to have more opportunities to succeed, and reduce the penalty of one-off poor performances (Myers & Myers, 2007). In short, flexibility in education is possible, and supports our students' learning by providing multiple avenues for success.

There is an ever-increasing sense of optimism among instructors regarding our return to the "new normal." Instructors have adopted a growth mindset as they learn and adapt to ever-changing environments. As we try new techniques and expand our pedagogical toolkits, we must maintain transparency to help students understand the reasoning behind our methods of instruction and learning. Any change to education is difficult for students (and instructors!) to adapt to, so we all need to remember to support each

other with patience and compassion as we relearn how to navigate the return to the in-person educational space.

While we may not know what the future has in store for us, we can make small changes now, plan for what's next, and aim to elevate our learning experiences to their highest potential. Meeting students' demands for flexible learning options helps ensure their success, and makes us more resilient and ready for whatever the future may bring.

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