Teaching Through COVID:
Faculty Debrief Their Experiences

The following themes and comments were taken from five small-group debrief sessions conducted via Zoom in May 2020; twenty-eight UW faculty across colleges and designations participated. The sessions encouraged those instructors to reflect on the rapid shift to remote teaching after spring break. This document presents interpretation and synthesis of comments.

Administrators, especially, may want to note these five major trends:

1. *Teachers found that teaching well in the remote setting required more, not less time.* This was not just because of the learning curve associated with learning new technologies, but also because of the time it takes to teach *well*. Participants felt colleagues who spent *less* time on teaching after the shift to the remote setting might simply be eliminating or decreasing the interactive and responsive aspects of good teaching.

2. *Faculty are unsure how to create community with students in the fall*. Many faculty attributed their success this spring to their ability to build upon seven weeks of face-to-face interaction, and they are unsure how to *establish* meaningful relationships with students in fall if the delivery format is entirely remote. (This realization does not mean they want to move back to face-to-face delivery at any cost, but rather that they may need further guidance on—and time to prepare for—this aspect of teaching in remote settings.)

3. *Faculty were impressed and buoyed by students' resilience.* While some instructors reported a drop in student participation and engagement after the shift to remote delivery, most were surprised by the level of students' commitment to finishing out the semester. They found students patient and thoughtful of other students, as well.

4. *Faculty desire clearer forward-look communication for themselves and for their students .* While acknowledging that the next academic year will necessarily require ongoing adjustments, faculty feel that the university's decision-making process is not being clearly conveyed. They are eager to think about fall planning and want to create effective classes, but they feel they are in a holding pattern waiting for information. They also expressed deep sympathy for students who are trying to make plans as well, and they believe that students deserve to know if UW plans to be online in the fall.

5. *Prior pedagogical knowledge and professional development helped faculty adjust.* Even faculty who had previously taught online found the shift to remote delivery of their courses this spring to be surprisingly complex. Faculty who had previously participated in UW-facilitated professional development training (even several years ago) felt that that experience gave them more strategies for moving to remote delivery. Some instructors currently participating in a faculty learning community found that group was an important support system during the shift.

Further details, comments, and themes

A. Faculty reported major shifts in <u>how</u> they spent their instructional time.

- Overall, *faculty seemed to be satisfied with the technologies they had access to and support for* (WyoCourses, VidGrid, and a variety of applications recommended by colleagues). The learning curve for these seemed manageable for most, and several indicated a desire to learn more advanced techniques/programs moving forward.
- *Preparing a recorded lecture was different than preparing for a live lecture*. Faculty who were used to being able to quickly refresh lecture notes for live lecture found they needed to spend significantly more time recording lectures. Some teachers also realized that recording lectures was far more draining than teaching live: while many felt energized after lecturing in the classroom, they found it difficult to record lectures with no audience and no immediate opportunity to assess (and adjust to) student understanding of content.
- Faculty reported that *they often increased the amount of time they spent with students in individual or small-group meetings*, beyond regular meeting times. This trend seemed especially true for upper-level and graduate classes. These increases were often in addition to (not merely a replacement for) office hours
- For commenting on student work, some *faculty preferred and advised using the overall "comment" feature within the WyoCourses SpeedGrader*, rather than using in-line comments. Some were dismayed to learn that some students ignored or struggled to find the extensive in-line comments they had made. They felt the overall comment box was often more efficient and perhaps more effective for pointing students to major strengths/weaknesses (rather than getting bogged down in smaller corrections).
- *Some faculty reported switching from broad coverage of content to more of a deep dive, focused on paring down to essential features/frameworks, rather than on covering a lot of ground.* Faculty seemed to feel mixed about this shift—some felt student engagement and learning were better after they shifted their model, while others lamented what they felt had been lost in this shift.
- Some *participants felt that it was harder to maintain group projects after the shift to remote learning*. In some cases they simplified group projects, and sometimes they replaced them altogether. Many wanted to think about how to create effective group activities if they continue teaching remotely in the fall.
- Some participants recognized that *it was easy to assign "too much" homework after the switch to remote delivery*. Calculating "time spent" seemed more complex in a remote setting, particularly an asynchronous one; participants who polled their students directly or worked in advising roles found that some instructors *increased* student workload without ensuring that students were supported in that learning.

B. The shift to remote teaching helped many to rethink their pedagogical approaches.

- *The forced shift to remote teaching helped some faculty realize that they could teach online* with a reasonable level of effectiveness, even if they had previously been skeptical or apprehensive. However, though most participants felt that what they did online mostly "worked," they felt limited in their ability to make adjustments to their approaches.
- *Teachers were surprised to find that some of their teaching translated online more easily than they expected*, and they saw the value of making recorded/asynchronous content available to students in future courses. One participant noted that recorded lectures require more prediction about what students currently know and how to move them through a learning progression effectively; another noted that recording videos about coding in a new programming language allowed students to keep up better (because they could pause or go back as necessary). In hindsight, some faculty believed that using VidGrid to record voice over slides was an acceptable but not the most pedagogically sound way to move their lecture-based content online.

- Though many faculty had positive experiences moving their content and courses online, *others found it hard or impossible to transfer certain types of embodied learning online*, especially in science and fine arts courses focused on teaching physical activities that require immediate feedback.
- *Time became a less direct driver of curricular planning.* In terms of time "owed" to students, it was not always easy for faculty to figure out how to replace some face-to-face activities. Over the course of the experience, some faculty realized that recorded lecturers should be *shorter* than live lectures, because part of time during live lectures is spent being responsive to students.
- *Some faculty found that online discussion boards seemed to really engage students in extending conversation and debate about course readings*—even when they had not previously considered their face-to-face course approach to be especially discussion-based. In contrast, some instructors who relied heavily on discussion in face-to-face teaching found that their online efforts (on Zoom or in threaded discussion) did not always translate to the same level of engaged dialogue among students.

C. Pro-active and responsive communication became even more important

- Overall, faculty seemed to agree that *structure, simplicity, and flexibility were key features in effective courses*—based both on what they heard about their own courses as well as what they heard about student frustrations in other courses. Especially for students unfamiliar with online courses, consistency matters. One participant noted that, somewhat ironically, an increase in clear *structuring* on the instructor side provided increased in *flexibility* and choice for her students. Thus, consistency of format did not necessarily stifle creativity or student self-directed learning.
- *Some participants felt less able to be spontaneous*. Even when COVID and other events were directly relevant to course content, they felt that the shift to structured remote teaching limited their ability to make last-minute changes. Additionally, some participants also noted that the ability to gather feedback about engagement was deferred; for one person, the final course projects served as a positive confirmation of how engaged students had been, even though it had been hard to gauge their engagement on a more immediate/ongoing basis.
- Many faculty noted that *they struggled to read student non-verbal communication using Zoom*. They felt more prepared to read non-verbal cues face-to-face than online, which meant they struggled in Zoom to gauge student understanding and engagement. Faculty in discussion-based courses also felt unsure how to create an online environment where students could express uncertainty and disagreement, which limited open democratic dialogue.
- *Participants recognized that it was best to limit the number of messages they sent to students* (as emails or as announcements within WyoCourses). Many tried to consistently send out just one announcement at the same time each week, structured in a consistent way. They reported hearing that some instructors sent out many communications each week, which students struggled to manage. Participants also recognized that five-minute announcements in class can do a lot of important work that is hard to replicate online.
- There was a perception among participants that *some faculty struggled to adapt online because they believed there was a <u>certain</u> kind of experience they needed to recreate*. In some of those cases, that rigidity may have created unnecessary friction because those colleagues were less flexible in developing new ways to accomplish pedagogical goals.

D. Student engagement shifted in both expected and surprising ways.

- Among participants who had polled students, they were surprised to find that *most students strongly preferred to keep meeting synchronously*. Some students, in fact, were disappointed in classes that shifted to entirely asynchronous formats.

- Faculty recognized that *a needs assessment may help them better understand student preferences for course design and support*. Some faculty initially resented students for not making full use of additional resources—but in retrospect these instructors recognized they should have better explored students' desires.
- *Students reacted to the satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading option in various ways.* Some faculty found that S/U grading seemed to diminish engagement of some students. Others found that S/U grading helped them to renegotiate their relationship to students in positive ways that will affect their grading policies going forward. Similarly, some faculty found that the low-stakes assignments they created helped students work through new ideas in a low-pressure setting.
- Some faculty were surprised how *many students got jobs (or worked more shifts) after the transition to remote delivery*, which made efforts to continue a synchronous meeting component more complicated. In some cases, these additional work expectations affected students' engagement with courses.
- *Students appreciated opportunities for informal social time*. One instructor, for example, found that students would often join Zoom sessions before class began, and that they seemed to be hungry for these informal social exchanges. Some teachers also established a practice of being the last to sign off from their Zoom class sessions, so that students could "stay after class" to informally touch base with the instructor.
- *System analytics (in WyoCourses, VidGrid, and other applications) helped some faculty understand trends in students' time on course activities*. They appreciated these (admittedly imperfect) methods for tracking students' engagement with course content.
- *Teachers appreciated that students were willing to try things and experiment with them*. In some cases, the less-than-optimal conditions seemed to produce greater student engagement (such as when students had to conduct lab activities in their own kitchens rather than in a formal laboratory). Some participants also reported that WyoCourses test shells were generally useful for "playing around" with course design and testing things outside of their actual course sites. Despite the stress of not knowing exactly how a new technology or task might turn out, some faculty enjoyed the atmosphere of experimentation.

E. Participants noted their own and their students' resilience—and also felt exhausted.

- *Most participants were impressed with students' patience and resilience through the experience*. In many cases, participants felt that students seemed to make the adjustment to the remote setting more easily than they had.
- Faculty realized that *participating in teaching and learning from home highlighted their varied life environments, in both positive and negative ways*. One instructor noted that, in a literal way, you become a guest in someone else's home when you meet them over Zoom. It was helpful for faculty to see where students were trying to continue their learning, and in some cases that knowledge made them more sympathetic to students' out-of-class lives. Participants also described their own efforts to work from home variously as peaceful, isolating, time-efficient, boundary-less, and easily disrupted. Some found that remote meetings (both for classes and for other academic work) allowed for a different form of cognitive processing that was draining differently than face-to-face interaction.
- *Despite feeling resilient, the shift was exhausting*. Some faculty felt that their spring break time was replaced by high-stakes, intensive preparatory work, on top of the planned grading, research, travel, family obligations, etc. Though understandable, the timing left some faculty feeling wiped out even before classes formally resumed.
- *Typical markers of the semester were often absent or diminished, and faculty struggled to recreate some of those valuable rituals.* Some noted that ending their classes in the remote setting felt anti-climactic and impersonal. Some participants felt that early, clearer information about fall plans would help them be better prepared, less stressed, and more creative in approaches to develop valuable markers of orientation, progress, and closure.