South-Central Synod of Wisconsin
Distance Learning Instructor Tips
By Deacon Vicki Hanrahan

Walk Before You Run

Did you know that right here in our own backyard, the University of Wisconsin was one of the early pioneers of distance learning instruction? Universities, colleges, seminaries, elementary and high schools across the country have modelled their classrooms after the Instructional Communications Systems at the University of Wisconsin. While on-line instruction has been around for 60 years, it is just now taking off in the church world as the pandemic drives its use. As we in the ecclesial community hold in high regard the value of in person gatherings as a model for Christian fellowship, we have not been a fast follower of teleconferencing technology…until now. A few other synods have utilized the technology for Diakonia, but you will be one of the pioneers of distance learning for Diakonia in our synod. Congratulations!

With this depth of history behind distance learning, we have access to tried and true practices for adjusting your in-person teaching methods to teaching at a distance. While there are hundreds of award-winning ideas from teachers who have been teaching this way for years, we are going to ask our instructors to walk before you run. Let's get comfortable with teaching at a distance first, then you may wish to consider incorporating additional creative teaching practices into your classroom as you see fit. Links to additional resources beyond getting started are provided at the end of this instructional guide and resources available via the internet are abundant. So while you could hit the ground running, we recommend that you walk before you run.

First, get comfortable with the technology and execute a simply designed class well. From there, with each class you can add another level of creativity to your teaching by adding videos, additional audio sources, break out groups, and perhaps guest speakers to your classroom instruction.

BEFORE THE CLASS

Logistical Considerations:

1) Get comfortable with the Zoom technology. Participate in Zoom training with synod staff and if you need refreshers, view videos on-line at zoom.com.
2) Email handouts and materials at least one week in advance to students to give them time to review and print materials if they so choose to use printed copies during the class.
3) If using a Powerpoint, providing the students with the Note-taking version of your presentation will help them follow along. They can print these out and use it to take notes during the class. 3 slides up on a page should work well. This is especially helpful when learning at a distance.
4) Consider document sharing during the meeting to reference anything with the students during the meeting.   Opening and "queuing up" your documents before hand will help you to find them faster when you want to share them with the class.
5) If this is the first time teaching this class, familiarize yourself with the student roster.
6) As the "Host" of your classroom, you have the option of recording your class but we ask that you record to your computer. These accounts are shared by synod teams and there is limited storage in the cloud. You may wish to record just a portion of your class to review and make adjustments for future classes. If you choose to record, it is necessary from a legal standpoint to make sure your students are aware that you are recording.
7) If you want to send out a video introduction to your students before the first class to help build rapport and a connection with you before the course begins, contact Deacon Vicki Hanrahan for assistance: (608) 270-0201.

Optimize Your Audio and Video

1) Don't underestimate the importance of good lighting. The best lighting source should be centered on your face. If you can sit facing a window, this is best if you can draw the blinds to soften the light. The light source should be central to your face. If you need a fill light, let us know. Ring lights can be purchased inexpensively on Amazon and help to remove shadows from your face.
2) Camera Angle – We don't want to see your ceiling fan. The optimum angle is straight on. You will need to elevate your laptop so that your camera is level with your face. We find 2 Lutheran or equivalent study bibles work well for this! Your camera should be straight on or slightly higher than your eyes. You don't want to be looking down at your camera.
3) Remove distractions – tidy up your space, remove the laundry basket and treadmill. Try to minimize the background…a plain wall, simple picture, icon or cross is ideal for a background. Bookcases are fine provided there aren't too many distracting photos or nick-nacks.
4) Start with a quiet environment by keeping out the dog and children. A room with a door that you can close to block out unwanted household noises and distractions is preferred.
5) If you prefer to use dual monitors, you should be sitting in front of the computer that has the camera. Profile angles are unfriendly and ineffective for making connections with students. You will want to be able to make eye contact with your students just as you would in a traditional classroom.

DURING THE CLASS

Humanizing the Experience for Students

Possibly right now, humanizing the distant learning experience is more important than ever. This will keep classrooms personal and help students experience what they enjoy most about Diakonia—the transformative effect that learning in community has on our faith formation. Your learning objectives for the class don't change, but enhanced attention to socio-emotional learning will benefit your classroom. Attention to these will also help to reduce your fatigue as the instructor of a three-hour on-line course.

Consider for example:

1) Arrive early so that you are there to greet students as they arrive. Take a little extra time to truly greet each student. Give yourself a moment for each person to make an impression on you and you on them. Give yourself an opportunity to feel what it's like to be in the presence of one another. [1]

2) Begin the class by providing an overview of the day, what to expect, when you will take comfort breaks and how you would like the students to participate. Do you want them to interrupt with questions while you are presenting or wait until a set time for questions? Do you want them to type their questions in the chat box and then pause at set times to address those questions? Find what works for you.

3) Open the class with a short meditation to allow students to settle in. Distant learning could be very new to some students. Find out where they are at with their experience with it. Then invite students to share what it feels like to connect at a distance. Use the white board feature to share a composite of their thoughts. Ask each student to share an experience at the beginning of class and then facilitate a conversation about the needs and goals of the class.

4) Choose between *Speaker View* or *Gallery View*. If you want to see all the students at once, choose Gallery View. If you want to focus on the student that is speaking so that student gets your full attention, choose *Speaker View*.

Build in Discussion and Opportunities for Real-Time Feedback

- Learning takes place in a social environment. When students are engaged with each other and can share their perspectives with others, that is learning taking place. When they are evaluating and defending ideas, they are engaged in learning.   All these contribute to learning and provide opportunities for students to give and receive feedback.
- True discussion happens when both the teacher and students pose questions and there are multiple or limitless possible answer, versus a question asked by a teacher that has only one answer. Discussion is a back and forth between teachers and students and between students and other students.
- Students need to be connected with the students, (their peers), the instructor and the content. They need to feel connected to learn.
- Interaction prevents students from feeling anonymous. For some, on-line learning can be an isolating experience.

- It prevents the course from feeling like it is assign, teach, grade, assign, teach, grade. Interaction makes the course more interesting and fun!
- Just like face to face learning it facilitates learning and enriches their understanding of the content.

When to Create Opportunities for Discussion

- When the content is particularly difficult & students might be confused.
- There are any possible ideas or perspectives to consider
- Students would benefit from **getting** clear, quick feedback on their work
- Students would benefit from **giving** feedback on others' work.
- When would I have them turn and talk about something with their peers?
- When would I ask questions to the class and work to create a whole class discussion?
- When would I want my students to share ideas in front of the whole class? (whole class sharetime/brainstorm?)

AFTER THE CLASS

- Follow up with any promises made during the class, eg., resources that were mentioned that would be helpful.
- If you wish to send a video message to students between classes, this is a nice touch. Thank them for their participation and class and that you are looking forward to next week's discussion. You can remind them of their assigned readings or any homework. Again, the synod office is happy to help you create this.
- You might also send a personal note via snail mail to a student/week to foster connections.
- Follow any other instructions provided to you by the Diakonia coordinator.

Footnotes:

1-Steve Hickman, Psychologist & Executive Director of the Center for Mindful Self-Compassion. 2020

2-Dr. Eileen Shanahon, PhD, Dept. of Curriculum Instruction, Eastern Kentucky University / Feb. 11, 2020

If you have any questions about teaching at a distance, feel free to contact:

Deacon Vicki Hanrahan, Assistant to the Bishop for Synodical Life – (608) 270-0201

Linda Wulff, Diakonia Registrar – (920) 210-2675

Helpful resources:

Forging Community in On-line Classrooms

https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-forge-strong-community-online-classroom
https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-forge-strong-community-online-classroom?fbclid=IwAR1MMSsrLTsyAkUsuempS1liffeYotWXiu-KD9mOG9_KJh-tS3Y5ZcK-9HU

Instructional Design for Distance Learning - Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPMOgeTDb4c&feature=youtu.be