Best Practices, Advice, and Quotable Quotes

Online Teaching & Learning

Spring 2020

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Oh, thank goodness!
Introduction

This project is an attempt to collect what we have learned from our immediate and urgent pivot to teaching online during the quarantine of 2020. With a sense of Yankee ingenuity and a shared spirit, we moved forward, and with our efforts and community we made the spring successful. Our student surveys (n = 3,700 students) report that 63% of students were satisfied or highly satisfied with the online portion of their UConn ECE course, while 22% were neutral, and only 14% were dissatisfied. 43% of students reported that their UConn courses continued with the same level of rigor, while 27% said the rigor was slightly less, and 19% saying the rigor was slightly more – 5% said much less, and 6% said much more. While we as educators tend to be hard on ourselves, I would conclude that little damage was done, and we have many reasons to be proud. This document combines mostly the best practices, but also the things that we should avoid, if/when we have to do this again. Many of the comments below were repeated by the dozens of responses to my request – send me your best and worst practices for online teaching. I edited comments to sound like an editorial conversation. Some of you added hyperlinks, but many hyperlinks I added myself so you can find something that you previously were unaware of. You will also see quotes that I included from individual instructors – things that had a certain poetry or resonance – that needed attribution. Please learn from this document and enjoy it too.

With my appreciation,

Brian

Brian A. Boecherer, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Biggest Problems

Student engagement was really tough. Some students completely checked out.

“I found the students who “checked-in” and met with the class, completed their work regularly and learned a lot. The students who didn't “come to class” tended to not get started until later, were less focused and sometimes didn’t finish or submit.”
Karen Beitler, UConn ECE Environmental Science, Staples High School

Many high school students were pulled away from school because they needed to take care of siblings, and/or they ended up working full time because the family needed money or they needed money.

Class Engagement - Best Practices

“I was able to treat it as a flipped classroom and give assignments and when we meet online, 2 to 3 times a week, we would have some great discussions on the topics. 100% participation. We also were able to bring many other topics into the conversation due to having more time. I utilized many of the [journal] articles that your group [the HDFS Faculty Coordinator and graduate student] had sent to me.”
Kate Morrone, Human Development & Family Sciences, Glastonbury High School

Schedule regular class times. Establish a routine, because humans (adults and students) work best with routines and expectations.

Students either had to attend a Zoom class OR they had to complete 2 blogs per class to make up for class-time and preparedness/participation.

Shorter classes were best, but it was important to explain expectations for out-of-class-time and independent learning.

Use one day a week for chit-chatting to meet the social-emotional needs of the students, discuss time management in this new world, and work through projects and assignments.

Outline expectations! Give your students a one-week and sometimes a two-week overview of content, assignments, and readings so they can move at their own pace, but finish at the same time.

Use multi-stage assignments with a two-week final deadline.

Student Engagement & Energy

Having students work in small groups on a common project was very popular and effective.

Meeting with students in smaller groups increased student engagement and allowed students to engage more often, allowing their voices to be heard.
Short meetings with individual students helped keep momentum, especially for those who had external factors that were interfering with their work (like being sick, having parents at work while they took care of siblings, having parents who worked in hospitals...).

Live sessions are essential because students need opportunities to ask questions, engage, and for you to ask them questions too.

Recorded lectures need to be done by the teacher, not found on YouTube and conducted by some other teacher.

Recorded lectures where good for the students who could not show up because they were taking care of the family – babysitting, working, sharing computers with others.

Have students do presentations and require the other students to engage with the presentation.

Invite guest speakers to come to class. These guests included faculty coordinators, artists, siblings, parents, and even the principal. Family members were invited for their expertise, but it was also a little “show and tell”, which made it fun. These new and familiar faces made things fresh and also reassuring.

“If a student is falling through the cracks, call the student and the parents. I found that when I could get a hold of either a parent or a student, I had more results than with emails. Sometimes phones will not take messages from blocked phone numbers (I would do *67 before I called anyone) but often I could get parents on a cell phone.
Lisa Ahlstrom-Nasry, UConn ECE French, Bunnell High School, Stratford

Take a break from the computer every day so as to rest and relax. It really helps.

Ask the students if everything is ok. When I didn't get work and I would email a student I always started with "Is everything ok?". The students really appreciated it and often said thanks for asking.

Teaching a Lab Course

You-Tube videos of labs and demos are great, but adding your own analysis is required.

If you can record yourself doing labs, that's even better. But there are only so many things you can take home with you.

Students making and sharing their own videos of anything we can think of that they can do at home or of solutions to complex problems.

The on-line labs that Dr. Selampinar got us access to from textbook publishers were great. They were tedious to complete but they really forced attention to detail. If you used a dirty beaker, they made you start over!

ExploreLearning.com's GIZMO's are awesome on-line simulations, but costly.

PHET on-line simulations are awesome and free.

Sciencegeek.net has great practice/review activities.
Teaching in the Humanities

Give students academic articles with embedded questions.

I had a lot of success having my students listen and reflect on various economic podcasts, Fed Chair interviews, CNBC stories, as well as 60 Minutes and Frontline.

A lot of primary source materials (some of things that received positive feedback from students was analyzing poems and works of art)

A mini-research paper in which I gave the students 40 different choices, and they could also do something else if so inclined (as long as it related to Western Civilization).

“A major takeaway from long distance learning is student choice. In my other classes I was using a ‘choice board.’ Students were able to select from 12 different assignments on the weekly lesson. This method is a bit more challenging for the West. Civ. class. This is because there are times when you want to discuss the same reading and/or topic. Nonetheless, there are ways of bringing more student choice into lesson plans. That is something I will be thinking about for next year. Bottom line, they like choice!”
Bruce Bardos, UConn ECE European History, Middletown High School

Using Technology – Best Practices

“Get familiar with screen recording apps and extensions (Screencastify is a good one for Chromebooks, but Apple has their own version, and there are options to screen record on iPhone and Droids). This will allow students to continue to create presentations (prezis, slides, ppt, etc) and present them to instructors or classmates.”
Christopher Morgan, UConn ECE US History, Prince Technical High School, Hartford

Make videos of lessons and videos of instructions and expectations for the week.

Microsoft Teams will allow you to create sub-team level discussion groups.

FlipGrid.com is really useful for distance learning and sharing student voice!!

Edpuzzle was great for the videos - I highly recommend it.

Schoology (It's like Google Classroom or Blackboard if you are unfamiliar) has better discussion board that makes it easier to tell who is responding to what comment more clearly than some other digital discussion boards.

Keep the cameras on and scan through your students – it helps to see the confusion, attention, and whether students are raising their hands.
“I used the share screen feature to present them with a side-by-side comparison of the 1914 map of Europe with the 1919 map. We walked through a map analysis together, with students taking notes as they normally would in the classroom.”
Trina Bowman, UConn ECE European History, Lauralton Hall

Have students make use of the chat feature to raise a question if they didn’t want to interrupt the formal instruction/lecture part of the lesson. There is also the electronic hand raise option too, but you need to instruct the students on using that.

LawlessFrench.com and LawlessSpanish.com are wonderful resources of grammar, dictations, readings, “word of the day”, culture, and videos. Students take a comprehensive quiz to find out their level and have a dashboard of lessons, quizzes, a “notebook” to save lessons to and a brain map to show them their strengths and weaknesses. This allows me to chime in where needed and be helpful in specific areas as shown by the testing. Love it.

Pedagogy

Project-based learning!

Stay true to your teaching style and pedagogy as much as possible (don’t allow the digital to dictate)

Don’t value synchronous over asynchronous teaching (they are just different, not hierarchically ordered)

Explore multimodal learning and teaching

Build community so everyone can learn online

Allow yourself to fail (no need to rock any platform at all costs)

Once a week, ask students and colleagues to mention a silver lining to the pandemic.

Crash Course videos were helpful. I use those in class normally, but I created written responses for the students based on the perspectives shared by John Green in these videos.

Opportunities

“I taught the ECE class “Introduction to Companion Animals” this past semester. It was definitely a challenge with the ECE component. One of the highlights ….. I set up webinars with the CT Humane Society for my students. This was like having a guest speaker attend class. They do request a $50 donation per webinar but it is all for a great cause and was well worth it! Currently they offer 4 different webinar topics.”
Cheryl Carberry, UConn ECE Animal Science, Nathan Hale-Ray High School
Used the pandemic as a reference to other lessons – historical comparison, role of government in catastrophe, literature during other plagues, and science research.

“For my ECE Macro class, I could not have asked for a more direct line to the 'real world' due to this pandemic.

[sic]

Honestly, I think most of my seniors will be better prepared for their first semester of college since the pandemic allowed them to make some of those classic first semester mistakes - not managing their time effectively despite having more of it and missing 'option' meetings where easy test concepts were discussed if you showed up.”

Brendan Walsh, UConn ECE Economics, E.O. Smith High School

There was more and better writing going on because [instructors and students] were sending emails, writing reflection papers, and using writing as a tool to communicate and share ideas, rather than just seeing it as an assignment.

“My teaching of the unit on Black Lives Matter couldn't have been more timely, which was totally coincidental. Because of distance learning, this unit got pushed further toward the end of the year and it truly brought to life the relevance of this movement. My lesson plans changed daily as a result of what was in the news. My kids felt connected to the information I provided and knew they were witnessing history. My hope is that I ignited a spark in them to move them from complacency to action against the oppression of all marginalized people.”

Michelle Papa, UConn ECE English, Woodland Regional High School

Students and teachers both got tech savvy. Students are tech dependent but not always tech savvy. Now students know how to use virtual platforms in an organized way, create Google Drives, Google Docs, and, believe it or not, send something with an attachment.

Don’t do this, please

Stick to the rigor of your college level class (while at the same time be attentive to social/emotional/technical needs). Don't be browbeaten and keep the class all that it was intended to be - a Freshman or Sophomore UConn class. Hold students accountable.

Pass/Fail was a total demotivator. If/When we return to this in the fall, we need to fight against this option.

Simply posting an assignment and asking students to complete the work with no live component incorporated.

Don’t allow the digital to dictate – stay true to your teaching.

Using class time for students to do independent work rather than not attending class was not successful.
Oh, thank goodness!

A supportive school district makes everything possible.

Leadership that leads. When administration takes a firm stand to support educational integrity, I can do my job, which is to teach.

I am so glad UConn ECE didn’t allow Pass/Fail, it was the only thing that kept my students working.

“Anthony Rizzie did a great job communicating with the MA 1132Q teachers, giving us information in a timely matter and even meeting via Google Meet.”
Elizabeth Capobianco, UConn ECE Mathematics, Trumbull High School

“Dr. Morty Ortega was a huge help in crafting a final project for my NRE 1000 (E) students and advising how to sell it so they would buy in. I have been very fortunate during distance learning to have a strong showing from my students.”
Diane Herr, UConn ECE Environmental Science, Waterford High School

“The on-line labs that Dr. Selampinar got us access to from textbook publishers were great.”
Bill Schultz, UConn ECE Chemistry, Enfield High School

“I want to recognize Dr. David Perry who oversees the physics teachers in the UCONN ECE program - Dave has been helpful from the start, and this year, he gave good, practical guidance and helped us maintain a rigorous approach while accommodating for COVID-19 restrictions. He keeps the perfect balance between upholding college-level course standards and understanding the realities of high school teaching. For the second year in a row, teaching UCONN ECE Physics has been an outstanding experience for me and my students, thanks to you and Dave, so thank you both!”
Bryan Holmes, UConn ECE Physics, Thomaston High School

“So glad to be an educator, tapping into the youthful resourcefulness and adaptability of my students while also hopefully inspiring them as a teacher/learner in spite of our strange circumstances.”
Janet Devaux, UConn ECE French, North Stonington High School

“Thanks to you and all of the ECE group for your continuing support and fast replies to my questions! I am beyond grateful. I am also pleased that you simplified the App and Enrollment process.”
Jane Mitchell, Head of Guidance, New Canaan High School

“They really were the dream team of students, and I feel so fortunate that UConn has given me the opportunity to teach this course.”
Elise Weisenbach, UConn ECE Latin American Studies, Branford High School

Thank you to all of the UConn ECE instructors and faculty coordinators who helped contribute to this document.