These tips to help instructors navigate a quick transition to online teaching and learning are provided by Dr. Lisa Yamagata-Lynch, UT Knoxville’s Ombudsperson and a seasoned researcher and practitioner of online teaching. Dr. Yamagata-Lynch is a tenured Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, in UT Knoxville’s College of Education, Health, and Human Sciences.

For more resources, visit these web sites:

General Ground Rules for Online Learning
http://tiny.utk.edu/sample-ground-rules

An Example of Ground Rules for a Specific Course
http://tiny.utk.edu/P252-ground-rules

Sample Online Course Announcements
http://tiny.utk.edu/sample_announcement

First, take a deep breath

It’s understandably daunting to be in a situation where instructors and students have no choice but to transition to online teaching and learning. But remember that as an instructor, your students already see you as an expert in your field, and nothing will change that.

If you’re new to teaching online, make sure that you provide both yourself and your students time and space to learn how to engage in online teaching and learning. There may be several moments of trial and error — especially during the first couple of weeks — but that is our “new normal” for the time being. And it’s OK.

Getting ready for the transition

As Monday approaches, it’s a good time to consider what both your experiences, and your students’ experiences, might be like. Lots of things will still be in transition, not only on Monday but through the entire week. It will help you and your students if you clearly communicate, early on, your plan for the week.

Take a fresh look at your syllabus and make an inventory of the topics, readings, lectures, assignments, and other learning activities you had originally planned. Think boldly and creatively about online versions of these activities, but be sure to keep it simple so that you don’t burn out. Remember that an online activity could be modified substantially from your originally-planned activity.

Consider sending an e-mail to your students this weekend or using a Canvas Announcement to accomplish the following:
Welcome students to the online version of your class. Remind them that for the first couple weeks you will all be learning together, but you will eventually find a new normal.

Remind students that OIT can provide them with loaner laptops and Wifi hotspots if they need them.

Explain how you plan to deliver online instruction. Will you use primarily live lectures on Zoom? Recorded lectures? Asynchronous discussions on your Canvas site? All of the above? Something else entirely? If you will be relying on live or recorded lectures, be sure to explain to students how they can access these resources.

Set expectations regarding how you will be communicating with students. Will you mostly use e-mail? Canvas Announcements? A mix of these? Tell your students how often they need to check for communications from you.

Explain how you plan to hold office hours. These might be live through Zoom, asynchronous through a discussion board, by telephone, or using a variety of remote communication tools.

Explain any modifications you plan to make to the schedule for the rest of the semester. Be sure that if you tweak your syllabus or schedule of class sessions, your students know where to find the updated versions.

Explain to your students how you will communicate information about upcoming assignments, and how these assignments will be submitted to you.

Creating concrete ground rules for online learning

We take a lot for granted when we interact with our students in a brick-and-mortar classroom. In an online learning space, clear ground rules will be essential in helping students understand your expectations. Be sure to set the ground rules early, whether in an extended version of your syllabus, or through an e-mail message or Canvas Announcement.

Consider addressing the following points in your ground rules:

- Explain that we need to be kind to one another and that we need to be flexible. The goal for the rest of the semester is to learn from one another and create the best online learning experience possible under difficult circumstances.
- Describe what you consider online course participation or attendance to look like. If you are going to teach using live lectures, and students are unable to attend, how can they make up for missed sessions? Will there be make-up or alternative work to substitute for “attendance” in place of a live lecture? Could they get make-up credit by viewing a recorded lecture and submitting answers to questions about the lecture?
- For asynchronous discussions, how often do you expect students to post and respond to others? If students miss a deadline for posting to an asynchronous discussion board, can they make it up? In live Zoom sessions, do you expect students to speak up and ask
questions? How should they signal that they are ready to do so? How often do you expect students to speak up?

- Describe what you consider as being “engaged” in class, and what student responsibilities are associated with engagement.
- Remind students to be proactive by informing you when they need help. This can be done through asking questions through email, participating in a discussion board in Canvas, or asking questions in a live course session.
- Explain to students that OIT can assist if they have trouble with technology.
- If you are going to use live lectures to teach online, remind students to be mindful of how they dress and to ensure that their dress is appropriate for class attendance. Background noise levels from a student’s remote location, as well as visible “clutter” in the background, can present a distraction for other students. Remind students that for safety purposes they must not view live or recorded lectures while driving.

The power of regular announcements

Canvas Announcements or e-mail messages to your class will likely be a primary form of communication with your students. Strategic use of these communications can be very powerful. Your communications will help remind students where they are in the schedule of class activities for the rest of the Spring term.

Consider starting every week with an announcement that reminds students of the main topics and goals for the week.

If you expect students to take part in asynchronous discussion during the week, a mid-week update can help signal to students that you are reviewing their discussion posts and that they are not laboring on their own. This can be especially helpful in a large class, where you are unlikely to be able to respond to every student. Instead, consider sharing broad themes that you see students raising in their discussions, and point out specific topics you would like them to think about and post about during the rest of the week.

At the end of the week, consider sending your class a wrap-up message to bring the week to a close and prepare students for next week’s activities.

A regular cadence of announcements will help students adopt a rhythm for online learning in your class.

Will you rely on live Zoom sessions?

To improve the Zoom experience for students, consider the following points:

- Start class with a check-in. You may have been doing this already in your regular brick-and-mortar classroom. Remind students where you are in the course schedule,
announce upcoming assignments, and provide a safe space for students to ask questions about the class. If a student has a question that would require considerable time to answer, consider asking them to visit your office hours.

- For large classes, when scheduling a live Zoom session, consider choosing the setting that turns off participants’ audio and video when they enter the room. If you do not choose this option, you may spend a lot of time trying to hunt down a student who has an open microphone that is sharing distracting background noise with the entire class. For small classes, you may consider keeping the microphone unmuted upon entry so that students are able to speak with one another before class starts. Just remind students to mute their microphone when you are ready to start class.

- If you plan to record your live class sessions, you might consider setting your Zoom session up to record automatically. However, remember that every conversation, including casual conversations among students before class begins, will be recorded. If you would rather start recording when class session starts, then you need to hit the record button in Zoom. It may be helpful to post a note on your computer that says “HIT RECORD.”

- When teaching back-to-back courses, consider creating separate Zoom meeting spaces for each section rather than creating one space for all your sections. This will allow you to provide a cue to students that class has ended as you prepare to enter the following class session. This will also allow you to record each class session separately.

- In live Zoom classes, consider opening the Manage Participant panel. You will be able to see who is in the Zoom session. You can also see who is raising their hand to ask a question.

- Also consider using the Chat panel to allow students to ask questions. When students experience temporary difficulties with their microphone, they will still usually have access to the Chat panel. In a large class, it may be unmanageable to allow very many students to speak up in class; the Chat box could be the best way for students to show that they are being attentive and participating. However, remember that in a large class it will be difficult for you to keep up with the Chat conversations. If you have a teaching assistant, you might ask them to monitor Chat conversations and report back to you when there are questions that were not answered in your lecture. You can also review the Chat session after class is over if you have recorded the class.

- If you plan to use the Breakout room feature in Zoom, note that students may need more time to start their conversations than would be typical in a physical classroom. The optimal number of students in a breakout room for engaged discussion is generally between 3 to 5 students. It often helps if you assign students specific roles during a Breakout discussion. Roles you may want to consider include:
  - Facilitator — This student makes sure that the Breakout conversation is on task, and acts as the timekeeper.
  - Prompter — This student makes sure that all Breakout session participants are engaged in the conversation. When students have not participated, the Prompter gently reminds them to share their ideas.
- Notetaker — This student reports back what was discussed during Breakout to the whole group during live session or sends discussion notes to the instructor.
- Active Participant — When not assigned to any of the above roles, students in Breakout rooms are responsible for actively engaging in the small group discussion.