Instructor Survey Spring 2021: What Worked Well

This document contains the partial results of a survey administered in mid-May 2021 to all WashU instructors who taught in the 2020-2021 academic year. Please refer to other documents at the Center for Teaching and Learning for the results of other survey items. For questions concerning this report or the survey more generally, please contact Rick Moore (rick.moore@wustl.edu).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: WHAT WORKED WELL

In the recent Spring 2021 Instructor Survey, respondents answered a question about what worked well in their teaching that they plan on continuing in future semesters. Highlights from the data include:

Wide Range of Successful Strategies
- No overall consensus was present, but there were often clusters of instructors doing similar things in the areas of engagement and interaction strategies, course modality, assessments and assignments, Canvas, course structure; and other areas. These have been broken out here into different sections.
- Active learning style engagement strategies were often a common thread within these areas that instructors intend to continue both into the fall semester and beyond, past the pandemic.

Canvas
- Many instructors reported using Canvas successfully for a variety of tasks including course organization, assignments and assessments, and for engaging students.
- Many instructors indicated they intend to continue using Canvas for these activities.

Engagement and Interaction Strategies
- Creating opportunities for students to engage with one another was a popular teaching method.
- Strategic use of various educational technology tools helped increase engagement in many cases.
- Zoom for office hours and individual student meetings is popular among many instructors with many intending to continue its use even once fully in-person classes have resumed.

Course Modality
- Many instructors had success with asynchronous course activities and content, such as discussion boards or asynchronous videos, and intend to keep using them.
- Hybrid course models having some synchronous and some asynchronous activities and/or days were also a model that some may continue.
- Some instructors indicated they may continue recording some number of class sessions.

Assessments and Assignments
- Wide range of assignments and assessments were successful.
- Quizzes and frequent low-stakes assessment were popular with some instructors and will see continued use.
Course Structure
• Flipped classrooms were successful with a significant minority of respondents.
• Guest speakers, often from distant locations, are a course aspect that some intend to continue using.
• Student-centered course organization (e.g., student agency within a course, accessibility, clear expectations, soliciting feedback, etc.) worked well for many instructors.

WHAT WORKED WELL

This section of the survey asked about lessons learned since the start of the pandemic that instructors may carry forward to future semesters. Respondents were given a short introduction followed by two questions, one asking what worked well and a second question asking what did not work well. Only the results of the first question, what worked well, are reported here. The text of the introduction and first question were as follows:

*Since the start of the pandemic, instructors have adopted many new teaching strategies. We would like to learn more about which of these new teaching strategies instructors intend to keep as we transition towards a more normal teaching environment, and which practices instructors intend to discard.*

*We’re interested in hearing about any aspects of teaching and learning, including (but not limited to): assignments, discussions, exams / quizzes, group work, in-class activities, lecture strategies, labs, office hours, papers, working with AIs and TAs, etc.*

*What worked especially well in your teaching [this past semester / the last semester that you taught] that you plan to continue in future semesters?* 

Open response

A total of 390 respondents gave substantive answers to the question about things that worked well from recent teaching that they plan to continue doing in the future. The strategies listed were extremely varied and covered nearly all aspects of teaching and learning. In general, the things that instructors reported worked well fell into the 6 categories listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
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<td>Engagement and Interaction Strategies</td>
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<td>Course Modality</td>
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N = number of respondents who mentioned something falling into the category.
Respondents voiced a wide range of opinions on these topics and often expressed very different views from one another on any given issue. Although there was, therefore, no overall consensus on lessons learned from pandemic teaching, several clusters did emerge where respondents tended to give similar answers. The summaries below represent these key themes from the data, but because of the wide variety of opinions, these themes often only surfaced in a subset of the responses.

**Engagement and Interaction Strategies**

The area where the largest number of instructors shared things that worked well for them was in strategies for student engagement and interaction. Most of these engagement strategies centered on various forms of active learning.

**Interactions among students**

The largest subset (158 individuals) talked about interactions among students in their courses. One of the most common successful strategies was student group work (in person or virtual via breakout rooms), which was talked about by 79 people. Instructors talked about how intentionally forming working groups for students and encouraging (online) communication definitely seemed to help students work through problems and understand the material, and also how establishing small teams of students to support each other on group work and provide feedback over longer and more involved individual assignments worked well in classes, especially where student teams established norms, team roles, and responsibilities.

A significant portion of the interactions among students described by respondents was facilitated though educational technology beyond Zoom breakout rooms (62 respondents). Canvas discussion boards were the most common item talked about and were mentioned by 37 individuals. Instructors noted how some courses in the past have not engaged with the course readings, despite attempting multiple strategies, but when making the readings the basis of a discussion board, all students participated and at a much higher (and more thoughtful and considered) level than ever before. Discussion boards were helpful, and for certain activities the discussions were much richer online than they used to be in-person, and students appreciated that they could refer back to the online discussion boards, which was not possible with in-person discussions.

Some instructors (62) used a wide range of additional educational technologies to encourage student interaction, including Google Docs/Slides, annotation software (e.g., Hypothesis), Padlet, Miro, Slack, and many others. Some instructors used Hypothesis to integrate social annotation and reported students loving the tool and requesting to keep using it in the future.

Instructors from Sam Fox spoke favorably of Miro for in-class image sharing using a mobile app. This tool was very helpful and engaging for bringing student experiences (and drawings) to the center of the conversation in real time, and also eliminated costs of plotting for students.

**Interactions between students and instructor**

Respondents wrote about continuing interactions that were primarily between the instructor and individual students or small groups of students (74 respondents). By far the largest of those kinds of interactions were office hours and individual student meetings (66 respondents). Most instructors who talked about them seemed to find benefits in keeping at least some of these kinds of meetings virtual,
even if they were otherwise looking forward to completely in-person teaching in the fall. Some faculty even reported that virtual office hours were more successful than previous in-person office hours, although some others had the opposite experience. These instructors found online office hours to be more time-effective for them and for their students, and noted how student attendance was higher online than it had been in person.

Other classroom engagement
Instructors talked about continuing many other strategies in the classroom to maximize student engagement, including warm calling, avoiding lectures, using video clips in class, and using technology such as the chat function in Zoom, among others (“warm calling” refers to letting students know that they will be called on in the future and giving them an advance opportunity to formulate a response). Some instructors moved away from PowerPoint presentations for imparting lecture material, instead shifting to more discussion-based delivery, which made a huge difference in engaging student in class. Some faculty noted the effectiveness of saying hello to each student when they entered, either into the room or online, and especially of prepping students in advance when they will be called upon to participate.

Course Modality

Many instructors wrote about different course modalities that worked well for them and that they plan on continuing to use (139 respondents).

In-person, non-hyflex teaching
In general, and as reflected very clearly in responses to different questions on the survey on what did not work well, most instructors indicated a strong dislike of simultaneously having some students attend class in-person and others attend remotely for synchronous class sessions, as well as a strong dislike for “hyflex” models where students can choose to attend in person or remotely on any given day. Throughout the entire survey there were many comments by many instructors indicating that in-person teaching was their preferred mode of instructors. Instructors noted how it was very hard to keep students engaged with their work without the built-in accountability of physical presence and that it was hard to build the classroom community while being distant. They also noted how it was hard to assess the quality of the work without a physical presence.

Asynchronous videos & content
However, despite a clearly expressed desire by many to return to primarily in-person teaching modes, a sizeable segment of instructors also wrote about accomplishments with asynchronous content in their courses. A total of 58 of those instructors wrote about successes with asynchronous videos. Instructors wrote that pre-recorded lectures were very helpful, allowing the class to focus primarily on interactive discussions and activities during synchronous class periods. One model was to make individual asynchronous recordings for each homework problem, which gains back a lot of class time. Reviewing homework questions has traditionally been done during class time, but can be a poor use of time because any given student might only have a problem with a small number of questions. Doing this activity asynchronously, students can just watch the videos for the homework questions that they didn't understand. Faculty also noted that the Kaltura video editor allowed them to make a single recording at one sitting and then chop it up into separate files as needed.

Asynchronous videos were also used by some instructors at the beginning of each class to preview what
was going to be covered in a fun way, which students found very engaging. Overall, the data suggest that a significant subset of instructors may continue to incorporate more asynchronous content in their courses than they did before the pandemic.

Hybrid teaching
There were some instructors (19 respondents) who reported success with a fairly strong hybrid approach to instruction where some days or certain activities were synchronous for everyone in the course while other days or activities were asynchronous. Note that this is different from a hyflex model, where students can choose to participate either remotely or in person, and also different from traditional hybrid models where some students participate remotely while others are in person at the same time. For example, synchronous and asynchronous classes could be combined in way that the students really enjoyed. The pre-recorded sessions might consist of a series of short videos, YouTube media clips, or weekly quizzes that students had to complete before the start of the next Zoom session. Live Zoom sessions also had the advantage of being able to include guest lectures from scholars and policymakers from around the world. In some cases, faculty separated their class into different groups, meeting on zoom as a full class on some days but meeting with small groups individually on other days. The small-group meetings could foster a sense of community among students that was difficult to produce in a full-class zoom.

Recording classes
Several instructors talked about continuing to record at least some synchronous classes for later viewing by students (26 respondents). This included on-line review sessions as well as class recordings. Some instructors noted that students’ ability to refer back to previously recorded classes seemed to improve the quality of essay assignments, allowing students an opportunity to engage with material on their own terms.

Assessments and Assignments

A total of 131 instructors wrote about new assessment and assignment strategies that they may continue in the future. Highlights included the following:

Canvas assessments, assignments, and grading
Forty-five faculty talked about the usefulness of Canvas for assignments, assessments, and grading. Many of them had never had students turn in papers or assignments via Canvas before but plan on continuing to have them do so even when they go back to meeting with students in-person. It was noted that students appreciated having all their assignments and readings laid out in a structured order and being always accessible. The Canvas-integrated tool SpeedGrader was identified as being excellent in making the grading of digital assignments fast, efficient, and reliable. Canvas was also noted as being very helpful for posting and updating course assignments.

Quizzes
A considerable number of instructors (43) mentioned their desire to continue using low-stakes assessment quizzes in their courses. Some respondents did not mention the delivery mode of those quizzes, but others specifically talked about their success using the quiz feature within Canvas, particularly to ensure attendance and preparation. These Canvas quizzes could be made automatically due at a date and time before the class period, ensuring that students would engage with the material
before class. The quizzes also had options such as randomizing the order of answers that discouraged the sharing of answers among students.

**Assignments**
Thirty-five instructors described strategies for assignments that worked well for them and that they plan to continue post-pandemic. The types of assignments mentioned were varied and included class presentations, longer projects, student video projects, scaffolded assignments, among others. One method involved giving reflective homework assignments where students would answer a few "new" questions each week and then look at the solutions to past questions in order to reflect on and correct their original solutions. Sometimes these kinds of assignments would be graded on completion and not accuracy so that students would be more encouraged to learn the material instead of feeling anxious about “getting the right answer.” Other assignment types included the incorporation of group assignment work into class time and using iterative assignment structures.

**Frequent assessment and assignments**
Twenty faculty described how the use of frequent assessments worked well in their courses. Low-stake assignments such as lecture review questions and online graded homework could be assigned regularly and frequently, prompting students to stay on top of the course materials and providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their understanding of course content in ways other than high-stakes tests. Having brief weekly assignments due before class could leave room for student to raise questions they had about the material, generating additional questions and insights as to where the students were with their understandings. This was found to generate more engagement than in a typical course structure. Weekly reading quizzes in Canvas were also seen as a great way to make sure that students engaged with the readings before a class. If questions were multiple choice they could be graded automatically with the scores going directly into the Canvas grade book.

**Canvas**
Many instructors reported on significant successes using Canvas. In response to the question on what worked well that they intend to continue, 110 respondents (28% of those who answered this question) mentioned positive aspects of Canvas. Although there are many others who criticized various aspects of Canvas, there was in the survey evidence that Canvas is a valuable part of many instructors’ course design and teaching strategies. Areas mentioned by several respondents included:

**Discussion boards**
Mentioned by 37 respondents who answered this question, discussion boards were used for both their traditional purposes, which is allowing out-of-class discussions among students, as well as several new and creative ways. One method was to give each student their own individual Canvas discussion board that they could use as a personal journal that only they and the instructor could see. Another involved students replying to each other on discussion boards, providing peer review on their work.

**Course organization**
Thirty-two faculty respondents described how Canvas was very helpful in allowing them to organize various aspects of their courses. The use of weekly modules was strongly identified, which, when published well in advance of due dates, allowed students to work ahead as needed. The Canvas gradebook was also very helpful in letting students know where they stood in terms of their course performance at all times. Even when the course was divided into separate cohorts (because of physical
distancing requirements), Canvas kept the whole course together on expectations and deadlines.

**Quizzes**
Fourteen respondents directly mentioned plans for continuing to use Canvas quizzes in the future, post-pandemic. It was noted that building the quizzes within Canvas initially took more time than just writing a quiz as a Word document, but the distribution of the quiz was easy and time-saving, and the grading was very fast and easy. The quizzes could also be easily readapted and repurposed when the course is taught again.

**Course Structure**

A total of 109 respondents wrote about new ways that they planned and structured their course that they may continue to use in future semesters.

**Teaching styles**
One important aspect of a course’s structure is the main teaching style used throughout the course (e.g., lecture, flipped, discussion, etc.). A significant minority of respondents (34) described moving towards more “flipped” classroom models where most content delivery is moved to outside of class time and the time spent in class is then used for more interactive work. For example, in language courses, students could read half of a chapter of their textbook outside of class and then could read the other half together in-class. The in-class time could be used for debates, polling with programs such as Kahoots, watching YouTube-style videos and answered questions about them, working on exercises in groups, and so on. Mini-lectures in the classroom were still used in flipped formats on occasion when the material was particularly complicated, but the variety of in-class activities was found to be more engaging for the students than if the courses were taught in more traditional ways, such as lecturing for most of the class and then working through one or two exercises together, with most of the exercises or readings assigned for homework. Faculty talked about how Zoom and Canvas facilitated this flipped approach and that they plan on continuing this post-pandemic. In general, it was noted that pre-recording lectures that were more of a more straightforward delivery preserved class time for much more interactive discussions.

Although flipped and other interactive teaching styles were most frequently mentioned as something that instructors intend to continue, there were also a small number of respondents (7) who focused on using digital tools to augment aspects of traditional lectures in the future, such as lecturing via an iPad shared screen.

**Student-centered course organization**
18 respondents wrote about wanting to continue to teach and structure their courses in ways that put students at the center of the experience. The motivations for this included giving students agency within the course, making the course accessible, setting clear expectations, soliciting student feedback, and posting notes and slides. This might involve using a wide variety of available media for students to respond to in-class, or allowing students to lead in-class discussions so that the class focus, once the necessary mechanics were covered, could follow student interest and needs. Other methods of enacting student-centered structures centered on having multiple and flexible assignment submission types (written, audio, video), or having lots of in-class small-group work, using google docs for class brainstorming sessions, and having students take ownership over portions of course discussions. There were 34 respondents who also talked about using Canvas to help structure their course.
**Guest speakers**
Thirteen respondents mentioned planning to continue to use guest speakers, who often joined via Zoom from far-away locations. This is a unique aspect of Zoom that was not possible for courses before, and even though the speaker might be distant, having everyone on Zoom could make it seem like everyone was there together.

**Other Areas**

Other comments addressed:

**Technology**
There were 63 additional technology-related comments, including general praise for Canvas, Zoom, and other EdTech software programs. Despite being critiqued by many in the open comments of the survey (31/59 comments in the survey directly mentioning Kaltura were negative), 16 respondents did indicate that Kaltura worked well for them and that they intended to continue using it.

**Support**
13 respondents to this particular question talked about the important and significant support that they received via Assistants in Instruction, workshops, consultation with specialists, and other venues. In other areas of the survey, over 90 individuals offered thanks for the various forms of support they received.

**Everything went well**
Although there were many struggles with teaching during the restrictions of the pandemic, a few respondents (5) described overwhelmingly positive experiences where most everything went well for them. Some even expressed that, surprisingly, teaching in these online ways allowed them to get to know their students better than they had in past years, even though they never physically met them in person.