Four Weeks In: 10 Lessons from Teaching Online at Duke Kunshan University

March 2020

To help instructors and the university transition to online teaching, various assessments were conducted to gather timely feedback from students. This report is prepared to summarize student feedback and recommendations collected from a pre-survey on student online learning readiness, an end-of-session course evaluation survey, and individual communications with students.

During the first online week, students' main complaints were related to **technical difficulties** such as slow Wi-Fi, insufficient access to computers/tablets, unstable access to online platforms, and unstable VPN connection. Thanks to the prompt support from the IT department and the campus leadership team, students' access to online platforms and resources has been significantly improved. Students' feedback, therefore, after the first week, focus primarily on issues related to **increased cognitive load (perceived by students as increased workload)**, **lack of motivation, social and academic isolation**, and **demand for time and task management**. As those issues are often intertwined, it is highly recommended that the following strategies suggested by students should be integrated to make an optimal impact on student learning.

(1) Structure course materials in a logical way on LMS for easy navigation.
It is important to organize course materials on LMS in a way that students can easily locate various course content, such as announcements, deadlines, meeting links and recordings, readings, assignments, discussion board, and external resources. It is equally important to identify and clarify communication channels that are used to inform students about availability of course materials at the very beginning of the class.

(2) Keep the use of technology simple and accessible. Be flexible and offer alternatives when needed.
Limit the number of platforms/systems used for online courses and choose the ones that are easy, accessible and necessary. Alternatives should be provided to students who experience technical issues when using course-related platforms or tools. Students suggest that instructors share copies of articles instead of links for easy access, and create short clips of recordings or podcasts for easy streaming. Recordings of online meetings or mini-lectures organized by topics are helpful for students, especially those who cannot attend live sessions due to different time zones or other urgent commitments.

(3) External learning resources can supplement online courses and address various learning needs.
Coursera has greatly enriched DKU courses. DKU students self-enroll in courses that they are interested in, and faculty also supplement their courses with Coursera modules. Other external resources such as podcasts, adaptive eBooks, TED talks, and guest speeches are recommended by students to enrich their online learning.

(4) Pre-class assignments motivate students to be prepared for online meetings.
Students reported that pre-class assignments such as quizzes, reading checklists, and guiding questions motivate them to review previous course content, synthesize what they've learnt, and prepare to contribute to synchronous and/or asynchronous discussions.

(5) Synchronous sessions promote faculty-student and peer-to-peer interaction.
Students have a strong desire for interpersonal interactions to maintain and strengthen academic and social connections with peers and instructors. To alleviate the isolation and stress caused by the global crisis and

increased workload, students would like to meet regularly with instructor and peer students synchronously in the form of class meetings, small group discussions, and live office hours. With the help of video conferencing tools (such as Zoom) and its advanced features like "Breakout Room" and "Waiting Room", all these synchronous meetings can be hosted to foster an online learning community.

(6) Discussion Board offers an effective venue for students to exchange ideas and seek peer feedback asynchronously.

Students can use discussion board features in the LMS, such as Sakai Forums, to engage with course materials, exchange opinions, and get peer feedback. For large classes, students can be divided into small groups to make online discussion more manageable. It is also recommended that students take turns being the discussion leader, initiating and managing online discussions, to increase student ownership and engagement.

(7) With clear guidance and supervision, collaborative learning activities can enhance student engagement and foster an online learning community.

Collaborative learning activities, in the form of group labs, team problem solving, group presentation, and in-class group writing, are very helpful to reinforce peer interaction and promote peer coaching. However, without clear guidance, structured peer evaluation, and detailed rubrics, some students may work extremely hard, while some may take a "free ride" more easily in such a virtual learning environment. Also, group size and time zones should be considered when instructors assign groups.

(8) Students would like to have more experiential learning activities to apply what they've learnt in an authentic context.

To maintain experiential learning, a key feature of DKU curriculum, online, DKU students would like to work on more hands-on projects and experiments in applied and natural science courses, practice speaking with instructors and learning partners via Zoom in language courses, and write policy memos or case studies in social science courses. These experiential or application-based activities can help solidify what they've learnt in class.

(9) Foster an inclusive and supportive online learning community to ease student stress and anxiety.

Some students reported that they are more prone to confusion and frustration when learning independently online, and some feel uncomfortable or stressed with expressing their opinions in an online environment. Instructors can alleviate such anxiety by initiating bonding activities, meeting regularly with students in groups or individually, modeling desired online learning behaviors, setting discussion guidelines, and providing timely feedback, support and encouragement.

(10) Care and encouragement from academic staff and peers promote and strengthen student motivation.

Faculty's care and encouragement effectively motivate students. Sending an encouraging email, offering to help when students are struggling, or simply being flexible show students that you really care and want to help. Regular communications with faculty and peers prompt students to stay on track and foster a sense of community and strong bonding. Encouragement and support from other academic staff (e.g., TAs, tutors, advisors, and peer mentors) also helps alleviate the stress and workload of online courses. Instructors may encourage students to take advantage of other academic support (e.g., academic tutoring, academic advising, and Writing and Language Studio) offered by the university.