Flexible Teaching Strategies

Flexible teaching is a key factor in supporting equity and student success. There are a variety of course components where you might consider implementing adaptable strategies and providing a greater level of student autonomy. You might let students decide whether to participate in-person or remotely during class meetings or offer them options for completing their assignments without adding to your workload. The purpose of this guide is to share practical tips for flexibility in any course format.

Strategy 1: Consider Using the Flipped Course Model

In a traditionally designed course, students come to class, you teach them the material, and they leave with homework to do. In the flipped model, some or all of your lectures or other preparation materials would be recorded (if applicable) and made available to students online prior to the class meeting. Typically, students would have some sort of activity to guide and prep them for in-class work. Class time would then be used for shorter clarifications of lecture points and engagement via discussions, debates, case studies, or other practice activities. These meetings could be hosted in your physical classroom and/or via Zoom or Teams for remote students.

This model is ideal for a variety of reasons, including a [body of supporting research](#) and a variety of affordances. For example, recording your lectures would already be part of the course plan, giving all students equitable access to your content. This approach also makes your lectures available to students who are unable to come to campus and when they review for exams and final projects. With synchronous course time devoted to activities, rather than lectures, you would have more freedom to check the virtual chat while students work on activities in groups, both in-person and synchronously online. By using your meeting times for activities, you are able to check students' understanding of the materials and allow them to learn from their peers, which has been shown to be beneficial to [student learning](#) and [satisfaction with the learning process](#).

Strategy 2: Make the Most out of Canvas

As a central platform for all your course materials, Canvas can create structure and consistency that is key to supporting student success and saving you time in the long run. You can use Canvas in the following ways:

- [Post and organize your content using Modules and/or Pages](#).

- If you have students joining you virtually and in person, consider assigning an in-person chat facilitator to monitor Canvas Chat messages. The chat facilitator could have responsibilities such as asking remote students' questions and typing in-person students' questions in the chat to make sure all students know what was asked. This kind of backchannel can allow all students to ask and answer questions while creating a connection between virtual and in-person students.
- Use SpeedGrader to provide feedback to students on their submissions.
- If you're offering virtual attendance for your courses, schedule the Zoom meetings in Canvas, so that all students (and you!) have the link in a central location.

Strategy 3: Keep the Tech Simple, yet Impactful

When managing various aspects of your course, you might use additional tech tools to help you. While technology can be powerful and boost engagement, too many tech options can lead to confusion and challenges for you and your students. If you're thinking of adding tech tools other than Canvas to your course, think about your learning outcomes and what tools would be necessary to reach them. Additionally, consider what the simplest tool would be to reach your goal, along with the tech access and comfort levels of your students. Generally, try to limit additional tools to 1 or 2 to reduce confusion and technology challenges. Be transparent with students when you're using a new tool and consider doing a test run and getting student feedback on their experience. The OTL has a brief overview video of the WSU-supported tech tools at your disposal.

Strategy 4: Combine Flexibility with Structure

Finding the balance between flexibility and structure is a delicate process and there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. While flexibility has been shown to support student success and retention, it is also important to keep your own well-being and workload in mind. One way to build structural flexibility is to offer late passes for assignments. You could give students a set number that they can use to excuse late assignments, no questions asked. Some instructors give these passes an expiration date, such as 2 weeks before the end of the semester. You might also offer students the opportunity to choose the format of their final project submissions, such as a podcast, video, or traditional paper.

Attendance and participation are other areas where you might consider building flexibility. One way you can do this is to offer different ways to participate. Some instructors give students the opportunity to self-assess their participation by sharing the ways they were active in the course. You might provide students a list of ways to engage, including sending messages in the chat, posting in the discussion forum, attending course meetings or office hours, and forming study

groups outside of class. Then students reflect on what they did to participate in the course. This approach acknowledges that each person might feel comfortable engaging in the course in different ways and encourages students to stay home when they're sick and be aware of how they are engaging with course materials and their peers.

Strategy 5: Be Kind to Your Students and Yourself

Policies are an area of your course where you may build in flexibility and a student-centered mindset while also keeping your own workload in mind. Beyond structural pieces of your course, consider adding small gestures to show kindness and care to your students. For example, you might have a small warm-up activity that asks students to discuss a topic unrelated to the course. A popular example would be debating silly questions, such as, "Is a hot dog a sandwich?" You could also use the warm-up time to check in with students about how they're doing, including using tools like Mentimeter for anonymous answering options.

When we talk about student-centered teaching methods, it is important to remember that centering students doesn't mean we need to decenter our own well-being. You can be kind to yourself through a variety of structural considerations, such as saving time by using auto-graded items in Canvas instead of hand-grading written exams. Additionally, you can include a communication policy in your syllabus. A communication policy includes when and how to contact you and when you'll respond to communication. Here is some sample language you can adapt for your syllabus based on your schedule and availability:

> *I am available via email Monday through Friday from 8 am to 6 pm. I will answer all emails within 24 hours during the week and on Monday for emails sent over the weekend.*

While having this policy is great, it is key that you hold yourself to it as much as possible. Sticking to your schedule gives you permission to step away from your course and make time for other priorities. Along with these tips, the Employee Assistance Program offers a variety of support services for WSU employees, including short-term counseling.

Related Resources

- C&IT Classroom Technology & Support
- OTL First Day Survey Template
- Hybrid Flexible Course Design – Brian J. Beatty