

THE OFFICE OF DIGITAL LEARNING

2020-21 Course Planning Guide

PART 1: DESIGN THE COURSE

Research | Reflection | Action



RESEARCH

Resources that have shaped our thinking for online course design

TOP 3 RECOMMENDATIONS

- [Questions to Ask to Develop an Effective Online Course](#) from the Office of Distance Education and eLearning at The Ohio State University
- [“Small Teaching Online,”](#) an interview with Flower Darby by Doug Lederman
 - Also check out the first chapter of Darby’s book, [Surfacing Backward Design](#)
- [“Moving a Course Online and Other Community Questions”](#) – a Podcast from Teaching in Higher Ed

ADDITIONAL READING

- [Essentials of Online Course Design](#) by Marjorie Vai & Kristen Sosulski
- [Conquering the Content: A Blueprint for Online Course Design and Development](#) by Robin M. Smith
- [“Organizing Syllabi for Online Courses”](#) from UC Davis

REFLECTION

Ideas and questions to consider as you rethink your course

GUIDELINES FOR REVISING COURSE STRUCTURE

Perhaps the two greatest challenges that we and our learners will face this year are

1) feelings of isolation or disconnection from one another, and 2) screen fatigue.

To combat these, intentionally dedicate synchronous time to discussions and activities that build connection and invite participation, while course components that focus more on content-delivery should be delivered asynchronously, so that students can engage them at their own pace and without the added fatigue of live, synchronous web conferences.

Interactive presentations or conversations are ineffective with large groups, since the number of participants greatly affects the ability for participants to engage. The ideal number for interactive conversation is fewer than 10.

With dedicated attention to participation and breaks, meaningful conversations can be facilitated with groups slightly larger than 10, but the amount of work to make these conversations meaningful grows as the number of participants grows.

Even the most interactive, dynamic synchronous class session causes screen fatigue. Web conversations hit a point of diminishing returns after a certain amount of time. This is true to an even greater degree for classes that meet in blocks of 2 hours or more at a time.

With this in mind, the following suggestions represent the amount of time participants should be expected to engage in group conversation before being given a short screen break. Screen breaks can be as simple as a two-minute stretch break away from your screen or as intentional as a two-minute written reflection on the topic just covered. These numbers vary slightly depending on the level of interactivity and the overall length of the full class period.

- 2-10 participants = 40 minutes
- 10-19 participants = 20 minutes
- 19+ participants = less than 10 minutes

Remember, this is a new teaching context. In some ways, “something’s gotta give.”

If you try to replicate the same structure as your face-to-face class, students will experience screen fatigue and have difficulty connecting. If you move some content to an asynchronous format, you may sense a loss of control over that material or engagement in that experience as the instructor. Think of it as a different class – because the same class in a different context is a different class. Covering less content may be the best way to teach in this context. Meeting in small groups rather than lecturing may be the best way to teach in this context. Having students read and report on material that you would normally deliver in a lecture may be the best way to teach in this context. Consider your context, and design from there. That will yield meaningful teaching and learning.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE COURSE DESIGN

1. In a sentence, what is the goal of this course?
2. How many students do you expect in your course (based on current enrollment as well as previous enrollment in this course or similar courses)? This answer greatly affects suggested course structure.
3. What are the meeting times days and hours of your course? Briefly describe how you would normally spend class time in a face-to-face class (e.g., 1-hour lecture, 1-hour discussion groups, 1-hour back together for reporting and Q & A).
4. Based on the meeting times of your course and the number of students, how might you rethink your course structure to best address the challenges and implement the guidelines presented above?
 - a. *Keep in mind that some time will need to transition into an asynchronous resource or activity and that you may need to divide your participants into smaller groups to facilitate meaningful conversation synchronously.*

SAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR CLASS ON NEXT PAGE



5. What do you see as the most important content components (lectures, in-class discussions, in-class activities, other presentations, etc.)? This need not include required readings or activities you would normally consider “homework” or “outside of class time.”
6. Which of these content components, could be delivered asynchronously? Which should be addressed in the synchronous time? These questions can help you determine which content components will be best suited for asynchronous delivery:
 - a. *Is the presentation one-directional or interactive?*
 - i. If the presentation does not include interaction, consider delivering it asynchronously (as a recording).
 - b. *Could this interaction be facilitated outside of our synchronous meeting?*
 - i. Consider a punctuated video lecture using EdPuzzle, which would build interactivity into what would otherwise be passive on the part of the student.
 - ii. Consider building assignments around asynchronous content to facilitate online discussion or individual reflection on the content. These could include Discussion Boards, question lists, or creative engagements with or representations of the content.
 - c. *Would this interaction best be facilitated in a live, synchronous meeting?*
 - i. If the presentation would be most effective during a live synchronous meeting, consider how to break the larger group into smaller groups for better interaction. If the presentation isn't interactive, consider making it asynchronous.
7. Can any of the activities, assignments, and assessments that make up the “outside of class” work for the course (student presentations, precept groups, exams, papers) be moved away from on-screen work, or can they be redesigned to foster connection?



SAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR ONCE-A-WEEK BLOCK CLASSES

Note: All of these sample structure move some synchronous time into asynchronous modes of learning

PUNCTUATED LECTURE & PRECEPT

3-12 students meeting weekly

[2:00-4:50pm slot]

- 50-60 minutes asynchronous activity completed before class
- 2:00-2:50—Synchronous lecture and discussion, punctuated with screen breaks every 15 minutes (2-3 minutes each, sometimes answering questions or for silent reflection on material)
- 2:50-3:00—Break
- 3:00-3:50—Synchronous precept; students will either a) engage questions posed by the instructor, or b) offer in-class presentations related to activities done in asynchronous hour

COHORT PLENARY AND PRECEPT

10-19 students meeting weekly

[2:00-4:50pm slot]

- Students watch recorded lecture and complete asynchronous activities adding up to 50 minutes
- 2:00—Cohort A meets with instructor [greetings, prayer, case studies, discussion, and break out groups as needed]
- 2:50—All students meet for Plenary – summary, announcements, send to precept
- 3:00—Precept Meetings for all students (divided by cohort or into even smaller groups; instructor bounces between precepts)
- 3:50—All students meet for follow-up/Plenary
- 4:00—Cohort A dismissed / Cohort B meets with instructor
- 4:50—Cohort B dismissed

SEMINAR STYLE + PRECEPT

4-10 students meeting weekly

[8:30-11:20am slot]

- Students watch recorded lecture and complete asynchronous activities (translation or active reading work) adding up to 60 minutes
- 9:20-9:50—Dialogical Discussion Segment 1
- 9:50-10:00—Lecture Break
 - *Suggestion: Have students reflect on a question from the asynchronous work so that participants are more active in discussion. In groups larger than 4 or 5, it's best to be intentional about who is being asked to share (whether going down a list, rotating each week, etc.).*
- 10:00—Short Discussion of Asynchronous Work
- 10:10—Dialogical Discussion Segment 2
- 10:30—Precept (instructor moves between precept groups)
- 11:10—Report Back from Precept/Conclusion
- 11:20—End

Note: The benefit of this schedule for students is that they either meet from 2:00-4:00 or 2:50-4:50, without a break in between synchronous meetings. The downside is that some students have Plenary before precept, and some have it after, which requires a bit more flexibility in terms of preparation.



SAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR TWICE-A-WEEK BLOCK CLASSES

ALTERNATING LECTURE & PRECEPT DAYS

Up to 19 students meeting twice a week
[2:00-3:20pm slot]

Tuesday: Lecture Day

- 2:00—Lecture segment 1
- 2:15—Quick Activity (in pairs or screen off)
- 2:20—Report back - discussion
- 2:25—Lecture segment 2
- 2:40—Break or Quick Activity
- 2:50—Report back -discussion
- 3:00—Lecture segment 3
- 3:15—Questions
- 3:20—Closing

Thursday: Precept Day

- 2:00—Short Large Group Greeting / Set-up for Discussion
- 2:10—Precept
- 3:00—Short Large Group Check-in (each group gives a small report)
- 3:20—Closing/End

Notes: This model makes all contact hours synchronous, so it is important, especially for the Large Group day that you make sure to stick to the breaks and make at least one of them off-screen.

The Quick Activity should be very low stakes, a simple activity that helps pull people's minds from inactive to active attention. It should ask them to rephrase or repeat something that was communicated or to recognize something new that they learned, but it should not require more intricate critical thinking on the matter (that should be left to the longer precept conversations or outside of class assignments).

COHORT-SWITCH LECTURE & PRECEPT DAYS

Up to 38 students meeting twice a week
[2-3:20pm slot]

This structure is the same as the one to the left, with one change: Students are divided into groups of 19 or fewer. The instructor gives the same lecture on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and preceptors lead small groups on both Tuesday and Thursdays. Cohort A attends Lecture on Tuesday and Precept on Thursday; Cohort B attends Precept on Tuesday and Precept on Thursday. Schedules will either need to be staggered (so that precept conversations always follow lectures), or precepts need to be flexible to either debrief or prepare for lecture, depending on the cohort.

COHORT SHORT LECTURE & PRECEPT DAYS

up to 38 students meeting twice a week
[2-3:20pm slot]

Another option would be to break the class into two groups and cut the time in half; having each group meet for 40 minutes of Large Group lecture.

Thursday precepts would stay the same, and you would need to develop 40 minutes of asynchronous material to make up for the portion of the class that each group does not attend. For example:

- One hour asynchronous lecture or activities
- Tuesday: Lecture Day
 - Group A meets from 2:00-2:40
 - 2:00 Lecture segment 1
 - 2:15 Quick Activity (in pairs, or screen off)
 - 2:20 Lecture segment 2
 - 2:35 Closing Announcements
 - Group B meets from 2:40-3:20
 - 2:40 Lecture segment 1
 - 2:55 Quick Activity (in pairs, or screen off)
 - 3:00 Lecture segment 2
 - 3:15 Closing Announcements
- Thursday: Precept Day
 - 2:00 One-hour Precept



SAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR LARGE “PLENARY/PRECEPT” CLASSES

RETHINKING “CONTACT HOURS”

In a face-to-face setting, instructors would provide just shy of 3 hours of contact with students each week. For many introductory courses, approximately 2 of these hours were met with 2 fifty-minute plenary sessions per week, where the class met for lecture. The final contact hour was met in a fifty-minute precept once a week. In addition to these contact hours, students had readings to prepare them for lecture and assignments due throughout the course.

For the online context, contact hours can be met in a variety of ways: recorded lectures, online discussion forums (monitored by TAs), and precept discussion groups that meet on Webex or face-to-face as conditions allow.

One way to consider rethinking your contact hours would be to divide them between recorded lectures, online Forum Discussions, and Precept groups (allotting less than 1 hour for each of these). Such a structure would result in the following Weekly Rhythms:

WEEKLY RHYTHM (STUDENT POV)

Read

- Complete the assigned reading for the week
- This should be done before watching the lecture

Watch

- Watch the week’s lecture
- This should be completed before interacting with your peers online

Reflect

- Response to the prompt by noon Tuesday in Brightspace
- Response to one of your classmates in your forum group by noon Thursday in Brightspace

Discuss

- Participate in your small group (Precept), led by a TA
- At least once during the semester, one or both of your instructors will meet with your precept group

SUMMARY OF DEADLINES AND SYNCHRONOUS TIMES FROM STUDENT POV

- Read before watching the lecture
- Watch the lecture before participating in the online forum
- Respond to the forum prompt by noon on Tuesdays
- Respond to a peer’s forum post by noon on Thursdays
- Participate in Precept at the assigned time (for some Intro courses, these times are the same for all students, for some they are different. If different, the weekly rhythm will be more complex to outline and follow).
- Prepare for other assessments or assignments as indicated in the syllabus



WEEKLY RHYTHM (INSTRUCTOR/TA POV)

Assign Readings

- Students complete the assigned reading for the week before watching the video lecture
 - Note from ODL: If you can offer guidance for the reading (key terms, questions to have in mind, etc.) that can help combat the isolation of online learning for the student

Record Lectures

- Students watch the week’s lecture before interacting with peers online
 - Note from ODL: Remember that recorded lectures are most effective when broken into smaller sections or punctuated with activities. Consider creating 5-10 shorter videos rather than 1 fifty-minute video, or using EdPuzzle to punctuate your video with reflective or assessment activities.

Facilitate Forum Discussions

- Instructors craft a precise prompt based on the reading and lecture for the Forum in Brightspace where student forums are divided by precept group
- Students post a 500-word response to the prompt (or 5-minute video) by noon Tuesday.
 - Note from ODL: While the video option will be nice as a change of pace, you may want to limit the number of video submissions in order to make sure students are working on their writing.
- Students post a 300-word response to a classmate (or 3-minute video) by noon Thursday.
 - Note from ODL: While the video option will be nice as a change of pace, you may want to limit the number of video submissions in order to make sure students are working on their writing.
- TAs/Preceptors facilitate the discussion and comment on posts
- TAs/Preceptors synthesize posts for Instructors, highlighting certain comments for Instructors by end of day Thursday
- Instructors review Forum Discussion notes and record a short video message (2-5 mins), where they mention certain points and answer recurring questions. This video could be posted before precept in order to set up that discussion.
 - Note from ODL: The short video message gives students the experience of more “face time” with the instructors, even though much of their work has been asynchronous and online. Book-ending the week with a recorded lecture on the front and a more personal message on the back is very effective for students who may otherwise feel that the instructors are unaware of their work. Reference to particular comments made in the Forum Discussions also reminds students that their work there is meaningful, not “busy work.”



SAMPLE STRUCTURE FOR LARGE “PLENARY/PRECEPT” CLASSES CONTINUED

WEEKLY RHYTHM (INSTRUCTOR/TA POV) - CONTINUED

Facilitate Precept Discussion Groups

- TAs lead a fifty-minute small group (“precept”)
- During the semester, instructors could meet with various precept groups to provide more face-to-face (even if on Webex) interaction with the students.
 - Note from ODL: If feasible, a visit from one or both professors for part or all of a precept discussion would likely be very meaningful for the students. Instructors can decide whether they want to join a different group each week, or depending on the number of precepts, simply visit each group once at a pre-set time.

SUMMARY OF DEADLINES AND SYNCHRONOUS TIMES FROM INSTRUCTOR/TA/PRECEPTOR POV

- Assign Readings (done before the start of the semester)
- Record Lectures (some advance preparation will give your TAs or ODL staff a better chance to support you in getting them posted to Brightspace)
- Write prompts for Forum Discussions (some advance preparation will give your TAs or ODL staff a better chance to support you in getting them posted to Brightspace)
- TAs/Preceptors facilitate the discussion and comment on posts throughout the week
- TAs/Preceptors synthesize posts for Instructors, highlighting certain comments for Instructors by end of day Thursdays
- Instructors review the notes from the Forum Discussion and record a short video message (2-5 mins), where they mention certain points and answer recurring questions – perhaps before precept meetings or in advance of the next week’s video lecture
- Prepare other assessments/assignments as indicated in the syllabus (review days, designing test on Brightspace, etc.) Note from ODL: Smaller, more regular assessments prove much more effective, especially for online learning.

ACTION

Tasks to make progress on your course design

Make a list of 3-6 course objectives for each course. Use this [Learning Objectives Builder](#) if you need a hand.

Make a list of course components (content delivery, activities, and assessments) that will help you know that those objectives have been met.

Divide your list of course components into synchronous activities (best accomplished in live, interactive discussion) and asynchronous activities that can make up some of your class contact hours (see Questions to Guide Course Design Nos. 5, 6 & 7 on previous page).

Note: The expectation is that you are not requiring your students to sit on Webex for the three scheduled hours of your class! At the very least, they will need time away from the screen for parts of that time. You may want to consider, for example, having students come for only 1 hour of the scheduled class time. The other contact hours can take place asynchronously as students watch recordings, read, discuss, etc. on their own time. This doesn't mean class time is lost. Rather, there is more fluidity in how the learning is taking place and when the learning is happening.

Sketch a new course structure, reimagining your course time to be a mix of synchronous activities that take place during part of the scheduled class time and asynchronous activities that students do on their own time (see Sample Structures for Class, previous page).

As you do so, consider the weekly rhythm for your class from the student's point of view (e.g. Precept A meets from 2:00-2:45, entire class meets from 2:45-3:15, Precept B meets from 3:15-4:00)



TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

- Take a deep dive into some of the more robust Course Design Guides from [MIT](#) and [UC Davis](#). Book a Meeting with the Office
- of Digital Learning using our [online scheduler](#).