Teaching in Crisis Situations

Gone are the days when a snowstorm, illness, or other crisis means that we have to suspend student learning! There are many reasons you may need to unexpectedly move your residential class to an online environment, perhaps just for a day; perhaps for longer periods of time. Weather emergencies that prevent you from coming to campus, flu outbreaks in the residence halls (or in your household), or an emergency in your family are all events that could happen in any given semester. More rarely, a local emergency or crisis that closes campus indefinitely could also cause us to move classes online, perhaps even for the remainder of a term. In any case, it’s a good practice to be as prepared as possible to quickly adapt your residential class to an online environment. Here are some tips and resources:

- **Prepare students in advance** for switching from residential to online education. The more time students spend in Moodle during the regular class, the better able they will be to adapt to online learning, whether for a day or for multiple weeks. Use Moodle minimally for your syllabus, online schedule of activities, and gradebook. Even better, use Moodle dropboxes for assignments, use the weekly calendar to structure each class week, post non-textbook readings, and offer quizzes and discussion forums online, etc. Ideally, if students are looking at Moodle several times a week, or even every day, it will be an easier transition if they are suddenly required to rely on Moodle for the progress of the class.

- **Prepare students explicitly for the possibility of a crisis.** Especially if you live far from campus and are teaching in the winter months, let students know on the syllabus that having to move quickly to accomplishing their learning goals via Moodle is a real possibility. Get them into the habit of checking Moodle, their email, or whatever way you wish to communicate with them about class (whether or not there’s an emergency). Using a **consistent communication plan** helps them to develop these habits.

- **In the event of a crisis, communicate with your students right away.** Even if you don’t yet have a plan in place, let them know how and when you’ll communicate with them about their coursework. Offer some sense of the structure of your communication plan: for example, tell them that you plan to send a Moodle message (email, text, etc.) at 5 p.m. the evening before the regularly scheduled class time.

- **Focus on immediate requirements and activities.** Achieve progress by getting through one day at a time--ideally, once you’re back in the classroom, you can deal with the longer term assignments and course structure.
● Figure out what can be done online and what assignments or activities can be put off until you’re back in the classroom. **Prioritize what needs to be done** and communicate with students about what you’re putting off until later.

● Try to pick **assignments and activities that will be familiar to your students** (a crisis is not the time to be trying out new pedagogical methods!). For example, if students commonly do a reading before every class, followed by an in-class quiz or writing assignment, that structure can be moved online easily and will give them the comfort of an assignment they already understand. If students are used to having a class lecture each day, you can move the lecture online via powerpoint, video, and the like.

● **Communicate your new expectations clearly.** If students will be moving to an online discussion thread, for example, give them a rubric for what their discussion participation should look like (have this prepared in advance, just in case!). If students are turning in work using a dropbox, tell them clearly when it is due, whether the dropbox will lock, etc.

● **Think creatively about using Moodle.** You can incorporate video, chat sessions, whiteboard lectures, etc. Visit the CETL for advice on how to do this.

● **Focus on your teaching priorities.** If class will move online for a long period of time, it may help for you to make a list of things you need to continue to accomplish, depending on the class. Perhaps it will include things like:
  
  ○ Offering **consistent learning activities**, such as lectures, readings, videos, and the like. Make readings easily available.
  ○ Offering **opportunities for students to work together** on discussions, projects, or whatever else is already part of your class structure.
  ○ Having students complete **assignments** consistent with the syllabus.
  ○ Giving **timely feedback** on the assignments and clarifying how those will be returned to students
  ○ Running **lab activities and other field experiences**, as appropriate

● **Have some back up plans** you can enact in case you can’t teach at all (such as in the case of a family emergency or loss that might take you out of class all together). There are times that colleagues might be able to step in and deliver a lecture or facilitate a class discussion. When that is not possible, however, you can always ask a CETL person, the dean, or a faculty peer to conduct a mid-course review in your class. **Having a very clearly laid out course (such as on Moodle as suggested above) is helpful to students on the best of days, but is also helpful if someone else needs to teach your class while you’re away.**

If you have any questions about how to help students make good progress in their academic work in the case of emergencies, please contact Heather Keith in the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, or Dean Jennifer Sellers in Dunton.