Teaching UC Merced students in the time of COVID-19: who, why, and how of engaged teaching
Compiled by UC Merced faculty and staff on the Instructional Resilience Work Group, May 2020

The primary goal of our teaching in the time of COVID-19 is simple: we want our students to make it through the semester. We want them to learn new skills and concepts while supporting and nurturing them so that they stay enrolled at UC Merced. Engagement in their courses should be our number one focus, without which no learning can happen.

To keep our students enrolled and engaged, we suggest UC Merced instructors keep the following in mind: A) **who** are our students; B) evidence-based **principles** for supporting our students **(why** we should design our classes in certain ways); and C) proven **practices** for supporting our students (**how** to teach in an engaged way).

These guidelines should be considered for remote, in-person, and hybrid instruction.

Here is a quick version of what is described in detail below:

> **Create a nurturing community for your students, allowing them to feel safe and confident enough to learn.**
> **Prioritize their actual learning over assessing their learning.**
> **Create courses that are coherent, predictable, manageable, and flexible.**
> **Communicate clearly and frequently.**

A. **Who are our students?**
    The majority of UC Merced students are from low-income families, the first in their family to attend college, and/or are underrepresented minorities; many are undocumented or battling mental and physical health challenges. Often, they face several barriers to success including:

- Lack of family knowledge of "how to succeed in college." Lack of knowledge about what resources are available and how to use them.
- Imposter syndrome: feeling like they don't belong in college
- Financial burden: they might need to work on or off campus, and have trouble affording course materials

There are several additional barriers our students face now:
- Inability to live in Merced and access in-person instruction, resources and their community of peers due to family and financial obligations and/or health concerns
- If at "home": lack of sufficient and quiet study space; lack of computer, printer, scanner, etc; lack of internet access and inability to use resources that require high-speed internet
- Increased family responsibilities: need to care for siblings and elders, and household chores; need to work to support family
- Inability to afford textbooks, solution manuals, equipment
- Increased imposter syndrome due to any of the above

Because of our distinctive student demographics/conditions, and what they need in these extraordinary circumstances, we should consider the following:

B. ***Principles (why our teaching needs these considerations):***

> The first three principles address the kind of environment that instructors should create before student learning can flourish. Students need to feel that their classroom (or virtual learning space) is a community; they need to be assured that their instructor cares about them and their education. This initial trust-building will go a long way towards preventing online harassment as well as academic dishonesty.

1. **Learning is social** and students need to feel they are part of a **community**.
2. Students must feel **safe and confident** in order to learn.
3. Students grow when their **learning** is prioritized **over assessment**.

The final three principles address the design and execution of classes:

4. Course design should be **coherent**, use **appropriate technologies**, and be as **predictable** and **manageable** as possible.
5. **Flexibility of learning** and assessment options best respond to students' changing needs.
6. **Clear and frequent communications** alleviate anxiety and increase the likelihood of success.

C. ***Practices*** **(how to address these principles in your teaching):**

1. **Learning is social and students need to feel they are part of the community.**

> • If you have the opportunity to meet in person, prioritize community building in those initial face-to-face meetings, while also including those who are joining remotely.
> • Start with trust: indicate to students that you trust them and know they will learn more when they are honest about their work. Emphasize that you want them to trust you; do your best to support them.
> • Introduce yourselves and your TAs in a warm, engaged way.
> • Refer to UC Merced's Principles of Community on Day 1.
> • Create a "chapter zero" before or during the first few weeks of the semester and focus on community building:
>> • Facilitate initial peer-to-peer interactions to provide social grounding for the semester.
>> • Prioritize name learning: learn your students' names if possible, and help them learn the names of all or some of their peers; and
>> • Hold small (e.g. 5-on-1) meetings in person or on Zoom in the first two weeks of class, in which the instructor learns the names and a few things about each student (and so that they meet and bond with a few fellow students). This could be done as organized office hours, or during class time.
> • Facilitate break-out group conversations during larger classes throughout the semester.
> • Assign students to "pods" of 3-5 students that they can use for group projects, check-ins, and/or study groups throughout the semester.

NB: Spark seminars and lower division courses *especially* need to spend time on community building as first-year students won't have the benefit of previous socialization to faculty and fellow college students. All courses need to do this, no matter the level or content.

2. **Students must feel safe and confident in order to learn.**

   • Foster positive emotions in your students by affirming and encouraging them frequently while showing and telling them how much you care about them.
   • Be explicit regarding everyone's responsibility to prevent harassment in an online environment and understand how to use cybersecurity tools.
   • Provide personalized and encouraging feedback on work early in the semester.
   • Later in the semester, schedule 10-20 minute one-on-one Zoom or phone conferences for students to articulate their struggles and receive personalized advice and encouragement.
   • Be aware of how visual cues may reinforce stereotypes, and combat discrimination.
   • Make use of peer tutoring services: make sure students know who they are, what they offer, and how to access them.

3. **Students grow when their learning is prioritized over assessment.**

   • Assign frequent low- or no- stakes assignments and no or few high-stakes assignments.
   • Allow students to make mistakes and learn from them without negative grade impacts; help students see that failure is a part of learning and not something to be feared.
   • Consider options beyond tests and quizzes for demonstrating expertise, like short writing activities, presentations, videos, and/or live or recorded conversations with instructors or among peers.
   • Allow for individual discovery and foster curiosity and creativity: creative projects in place of, or in addition to, tests and papers can often allow for this.

4. **Course design should be coherent, use appropriate technologies, and be as predictable and manageable as possible.**

   • Create an environment of structured agency, where you provide a structure for students to assert their agency in order to learn.
   • Do not assign more work in a hybrid/remote-only environment than you would in face-to-face teaching.
   • Establish and reinforce predictable patterns of activity.
   • Organize materials on Canvas for clarity.
   • If applicable, seek tech solutions that can allow for efficient use of question banks and question pools.
   • Do not use technology for proctored exams; instead, make use of honor code statements, and make use of deep learning strategies.
   • Consider how to integrate tech-heavy experiences with off-line activities, like free-writing or problems solving on paper, away from a screen, and then sharing.
   • Select and use technology to support and enable learning goals and pedagogy.

5. **Flexibility of learning and assessment options best respond to students' changing needs and constraints.**

- Be responsive to students' emergent and shifting learning and health needs.
- Consider dropping a certain number of low scores.
- Set up flexible and floating due dates.
- Make sure that students with severe time constraints and internet access issues have the chance to follow along with the class; support low-tech and asynchronous options.
- Permit variance in the format when accepting assignments; for instance, not requiring students to print out assignments, or allowing students to write on paper and upload with a scanner application.

6. **Clear and frequent communications alleviate anxiety and increase the likelihood of success.**

• Spend extra time making sure all of your expectations are as clear as possible, and iterate them frequently in class sessions and in emails to students.
• Make deadlines and assignment requirements easily visible on Canvas, and in one location.
• Be clear about how you want students to contact you and/or TAs.
• Remember that remote instruction might involve sending more reminders than we would need in face-to-face instruction. Use automated or scheduled tech features such as "message students who have not completed assignment" feature on Canvas.
• Be transparent: tell your students what you are doing and why so that they understand why you have selected the format that you have.
• Encourage students to reflect on how and why they are learning (metacognition).
• Provide guidelines for student groups to set their own rules and expectations for communication; define acceptable modes of communication and hours of communication

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Action Steps (Suggested next steps for process, resources, and coordination)

- Ask Chairs to identify faculty & GSIs who have self-selected to teach in a digital format and those who would like to try to have some in-person options if safely possible; and also assess who would be willing to teach outdoors. You may also want to determine who is planning to use their offices next year in order to reassign shared offices.
- Ask Chairs to identify where discipline-based, customized solutions might be needed.
    - Identify shared needs at the dept/discipline level, e.g. solutions for virtual laboratory or remote access to classroom computer lab software.
- Design a programmatic offering. e.g. a **Summer Institute**, for faculty to access resources, support, and consultation
    - 1:1 consultation
    - Webinars
    - "Choose my own Adventure" branching logic
    - Consider a train a trainer model
    - Embed instructional design/Instructional technology expertise
    - Use ILTI faculty expertise as champions

- Curate resources virtually in a central location
- Create easy to use templates for modular remote courses

- Crowd-source bibliographic reference lists for knowledge-sharing
- Faculty as learners building community and coherence around this condition/situation/initiative

Sample Pathways to Action

- Designing Resilient Courses: Principles, Practices, and Possibilities
- Scaffolding Learning with Technology Matrix

Campus Communications (to faculty)

- Messaging should provide reassurance
- Keep messaging clear, concrete, and simple
- Iterate and reinforce messages via various formats: texts, videos, websites, live classes
- Encourage faculty to reflect on recent experiences
- Encourage faculty to start from what you know