Virtual Learning On The Fly (Jim McGrath, Brown University; March 2020)

1. **Keep it Simple**: Expand uses of digital tools currently in use by class (Canvas, Google Drive, email, continued use of stuff you’ve already introduced to students). Introduce new tools (Zoom for virtual meetings likely being the big one) only when absolutely necessary (beyond Zoom, not much is likely necessary). Use tools supported by Brown (Canvas, Zoom, Google Drive, Adobe) so you know that there are likely tutorial guides online and instructional technologists on campus for bigger problems.

2. Don’t invest substantial time in creating new digital spaces or recording content that will likely only be used once in a moment of crisis (blogs, web sites pre-recorded videos, podcasts, Powerpoint slides, etc.). Online learning is time and labor-intensive and highly collaborative; this is not that.

3. When introducing new tools or features, don’t assume your students are reading tutorials / have things installed / are familiar even with local Brown digital resources. When making the initial shift to virtual learning, send an email with clear instructions in the body of the email and relevant links to access particular tools / resources. Send these instructions sooner rather than later so students have time to download and access and test relevant stuff (Zoom is likely the only thing they will need to download). Copy and pasting is your friend. Screenshots of your desktop could help too so students can see what you are seeing when installing stuff.

4. Instructional technologists on campus will likely be generating additional documentation and tips. They will also be extremely busy for the next month at minimum, so familiarize yourself with documentation if you are worried about particular tools. You will likely have to troubleshoot some stuff via email or after checking in with students on Zoom. Talk to TAs (if you have them) about their experiences with technology, but don’t default to outsourcing this work to them without a conversation (and you should learn some basics yourself).

5. Zoom will likely be tested by the significant increase in simultaneous users on campus and nationally/globally. I expect technical difficulties but I am happy to be wrong about that.

6. Keep lines of communication direct and open with students and tell them to monitor their Brown emails and Canvas notifications (students complain of Canvas notification fatigue; they need to be more attentive, given the changing circumstances here). Access to wifi, time zone issues, and questions of accessibility are some topics to anticipate.

7. Asynchronous learning tools (Canvas, Google Drive, even Slack) don’t require students to be online at a set time. Scheduling in a crisis for Zoom check-ins can be difficult.

8. Not everything will neatly be transferable in a digital space with little planning in the midst of a crisis. Anticipate what will be lost, explain why new approaches are being taken with students (who likely understand but may nonetheless appreciate the transparency), acknowledge moments of inelegance and your own learning curves.
**Zoom** is good for video conferencing with an entire class or individual students.

- **Mics / Video**: You may want students to turn off their mics (so you don’t hear them typing / their surroundings) and video (backgrounds can anonymize space if video seems important)
- **Screensharing**: When walking through a specific text, web site, or example, consider sharing your screen with the class. You may want to just screenshare for the duration of a virtual class session. Just know that students will be seeing everything on your screen / background / tabs.
- **Chat**: For medium-to-large classes, consider using chat to field questions and comments from students. Easier than awkwardly waiting for people to speak via video/audio. You can also share relevant links with students this way.

- Zoom is not ideal for collaborative work / breakout sessions during a class session. Probably a logistical nightmare for a big class (there is a “Breakout Rooms” tab to divide up a class though).
- Zoom could be a useful space for small groups of students (2-5) to check in with one another and work on course assignments. I would just make sure there were mechanisms for students to report back on that work, or that these small groups were working on specific tasks (I don’t think “breakout sessions” just to talk about readings will be particularly useful or generative here but I could be wrong).

- **Lesson planning**: Consider breaking up class time into some combination of lecturing / walking through particular texts or case studies via screenshare, Q&A via chat is likely the move to make. I like aiming for 15-20 minute chunks where we’re doing a specific thing in IRL classes; works for virtual classes to some extent too. Consider time and attention spans.

- You could also assign segments of time for student presentations. They could then utilize screenshare to share slides / walk through stuff on their screens. Ditto for final presentations.
- It may be tempting to monologue for the duration of a class. Easy from a technical standpoint, probably not great from a pedagogical perspective. That said, keep it simple.

**Canvas** will likely work best for the creation of additional written work and the sharing of relevant course materials and files in a centralized location that is accessible to all students.

- **Discussion posts**: you may consider expanding your use of this feature to account for responses to readings, questions you might have otherwise asked in a more conversational class setting, peer review of written work.
- You may also encourage students to use the *reply* feature on Discussion posts to make room for commentary and conversation.
- I like specific prompts / context for discussion responses: use of first person voice, expectations of length, citations, hyperlinks, deadlines.

**Google Drive** may be useful for collaborative work, but collaborative work will be trickiest in this new virtual learning context. That being said:

- You could encourage students to set up their own working spaces via organized Drive folders (give some guidance here)
- Students could use Zoom or Google Hangouts to talk while writing collaboratively or reviewing each other’s written work; Google Docs have comment / chat features too
- You might consider requiring “meeting minutes” or other documentation that shows what students were working on (a working agenda for a meeting, topics covered, next steps)