



5 Ways to Keep Your Course Flexible—For Whatever The Next Academic Term Holds



Ensure your class is equipped to handle change while providing the same engaging, inclusive learning experience for students

Better learning, better access and a better student experience—for instructors, keeping flexibility top of mind means putting students first, regardless of teaching modality. Below, we share tips and strategies educators can implement in their classrooms to ensure their teaching is flexible enough to accommodate changes in course delivery, while still providing students with the same high-quality learning they expect from their higher ed experience. We also share a [flexible instruction checklist](#) and [hybrid teaching webinar with Top Hat](#) to help you pivot from face-to-face teaching to remote instruction at a moment's notice.

1. Consider backward design

Backward design is a strategy instructors can use to create learning experiences and leverage instructional techniques to meet specific goals. Backward design curriculum usually involves three stages:

- First, educators identify their desired results. This stage focuses on broader ideas and skills that students should learn, considering both goals and curriculum expectations.
- The second step focuses on determining suitable evidence that confirms the desired results identified in the first stage have occurred.
- The third and final step focuses on designing activities to achieve learning goals.

There are many benefits to backward design. Starting with the end goal in mind helps educators design a sequence of assessments, readings, course materials and group activities that are more likely to result in learners achieving the academic goals of a given course or unit—that is, actually learning what they were expected to learn.

2. Make your activities and assessments resilient and mitigate disruption

This is an excerpt of our [Guest Lecture Interview with Josh Eyler](#). Keep reading to learn more about “Resilient Pedagogy,” Eyler’s approach to flexible teaching and learning.

Resilient pedagogy is a course design strategy that helps make your classes, assignments, and assessments as resistant to disruption as possible. Regardless of which modality you’re teaching in—online, in-person, or blended—you’re designing one time and one time only.

Resilient pedagogy can be broken down into three areas of focus:

- **Course design:** Consider what is most important to you as an instructor. If it’s collaboration or group problem solving, a simple strategy like organizing students into groups for the duration of the semester can build in some resiliency from the get-go.
- **Tools and platforms:** Find an intuitive way for students to communicate with you and each other that won’t change. This can be office hours, a general questions discussion forum that stays open for the duration of the term or a buddy system that pairs students into small study groups that you can check in on.

- **Engagement methods:** How are you going to ensure students remain engaged in course material? Options like polling and quizzes, discussion forums, interactive readings and creative assignments ensure that students are able to approach learning material in a way that works for them.

You can also check out the [Resilient Pedagogy](#) Twitter community, with plenty more strategies to overcome distance, disruption and distraction.

3. Think about when to use synchronous vs. asynchronous methods

The reality is, effective remote teaching requires a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Ultimately, the key is to play to the strengths of each approach and what you're most comfortable with.

Consider using synchronous teaching methods for:

- Creating speed and intimacy, and fostering a sense of belonging, particularly in online and hybrid environments
- Running interactive activities, like polling, quizzes and discussions

Consider using asynchronous teaching methods for:

- Helping students collaborate with peers through online group work.
- Assigning prep work before any synchronous lessons, in-person or online.
- Providing students with an added level of flexibility in assessments, readings and lecture modules. By allowing students to learn on their own schedule, they get the flexibility they need to find a time and place where they can engage with course materials.

Each course and each educator are different. Let your learning objectives, your students, and your personal teaching style guide you in determining the right balance between using synchronous and asynchronous teaching methods.

4. Stay organized

To help streamline the learning experience, consider a few ways you can design your course site to allow students to move through material intuitively and logically. Here, we share a few suggestions to get you started:

- Use modules and folders (such as “Week 1: Synchronous (lectures, poll questions)” and “Week 1: Asynchronous (readings, quizzes)”

consistently to introduce topics, clarify student deadlines and responsibilities, and organize the lesson content

- Add checklists so students can monitor their own progress
- Consider adding suggested times to complete tasks
- Create a course “rhythm” by using a smaller number of tools and tasks and using them consistently across modules and units
- Break course content down into smaller sections by using collaborative activities, videos and reflection exercises between lessons

[Nicole McNichols](#), lecturer in the Psychology Department at the University of Washington, recommends organizing your course in a methodical way to ensure that it is intuitive to navigate. Students should be able to progress through course content easily so that their attention remains focused on learning the material, rather than searching for specific content. McNichols personally stores all recorded lectures, discussions and homework assignments on the Top Hat platform.

5. Use technology to engage with Gen Z

Educators can use technology to their advantage to ensure learning objectives and teaching goals are still met, even when learning modalities change. Here, we share a number of ways to use technology to make sure students are engaging in course content in a way that is flexible and accommodating.

Teaching goal	Best practices
Reduce distractions in class	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Use polls during synchronous or asynchronous lectures to see how students are progressing through course material2. Begin each class with an icebreaker activity to build collaboration and community into your class
Allow students to learn at their own pace	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Sarah Sletten, Associate Professor of Biomedical Sciences at the University of North Dakota, uses a flipped classroom model to encourage students to complete learning modules in Top Hat before live lectures2. Supplement live activities with learning exercises that students can complete on their own time such as sharing their thoughts in a discussion forum or completing a reflection exercise3. Reduce the number of online platforms you use to make it easy for students to access and complete coursework on their own
Motivate students to keep learning outside of class	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Use customizable learning materials with discussions that reflect real-time events and case studies to engage students2. Facilitate a quick quiz at the start of each lesson and consider reusing questions from digital textbook readings to understand what concepts are landing and which aren't
Create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable participating	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Use an anonymous discussion board during in-class polls, like Matt Numer, Associate Professor, Health Promotion at Dalhousie University2. Try to respond to, and acknowledge, students' contributions in and out of class, through informal feedback. Use this feedback to offer support to struggling students.
Give immediate feedback on student performance	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Consider using regular low-stakes quizzes to get actionable correctness and participation data, which can help you address points of confusion and support struggling learners2. Grade assignments using a built-in rubric in your LMS and provide personalized feedback upon student request

[Eric Davis](#), sociology professor at Bellevue College, emphasizes the importance of using online platforms to keep learning active and engaging for Gen Z students and uses Top Hat to complete textbook readings, share lecture slides, engage in discussions and distribute quizzes.

[Download our checklist](#) to get tips on how to pivot from face-to-face to online.

We empower educators to engage students and
unleash their potential. [Learn more](#) about the
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