

## Remote Teaching and Learning Preparedness Taskforce

### Recommended Online Delivery Model for 2020-21

May 29, 2019

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The Remote Teaching and Learning Preparedness Taskforce has carefully considered questions related to the delivery of courses and the use of synchronous or asynchronous teaching approaches in the event that StFX has to deliver our programs online. At its meeting of May 28, 2020, the Task Force unanimously approved the following recommendation.

#### Background & Context

Undergraduate education at StFX University is built on relationships: student to professor, student to student and student to community (local and beyond). In normal times, these relationships are served by face-to-face interactions.

COVID-19 has presented StFX with significant challenges. As we consider the move to online teaching and learning for the Fall term, we keep in mind that this is a short-term solution to a very challenging situation. We very likely will not be back in the physical classroom in the Fall term, or if we are, there may be a second wave of COVID-19 for which we must pivot once again and consider alternative delivery. To the extent that it is possible, our goal is to replicate the kinds of experiences students would have if they were coming to campus and taking face-to-face courses. We recognize the academic freedom of faculty to make decisions regarding online course delivery and we also recognize the narrow timeframe that instructors have in order to transition to online teaching.

Therefore, in keeping with our Guiding Principles of the Task Force, we consider the following:

- How do we do as much as we can to replicate the in-person teaching approach that is the hallmark of our undergraduate programs?
- How do we maintain our academic quality while managing expectations that relate to the time it takes to develop high quality online education?
- How do we start now to support the development of high-quality instruction while acknowledging that we have differences in how we teach that must be taken into consideration?
- How do we do everything we can to ensure that none of our students (especially first year) feel the need to withdraw from their studies?

#### Recommendation

*The Remote Teaching and Learning Task Force recommends an online course delivery model that is primarily synchronous using a defined set of tools and augmented with asynchronous activities/tools.*

This involves

- Live delivery of class lectures with recordings posted to allow for asynchronous consumption of material as required.
- Discouraging the use of strictly asynchronous course delivery given the limited time available to prepare well and risk to student experience.
- Limiting the number of tools used for online delivery to a small, defined set to deliver a more manageable experience for students and improve the ability to provide adequate support.
- Use of asynchronous tools as a way to assign regular check-ins (e.g. discussion board posts, chapter quizzes, etc.) to ensure that students are practising good time management.

## Rationale Supporting this Recommendation

This is what we know:

- Our first-class teaching experience is based on interactions with faculty and other students in real time. While asynchronous learning has some advantages, we know through years of experience at StFX that synchronous teaching, through such e-learning platforms as *Collaborate*, is the best option for replicating the face-to-face teaching and learning experience we normally offer.
- Most students will be enrolled in five online courses per term and managing the self-directed nature of asynchronous courses require tremendous self-discipline. We need to imagine this from an undergraduate student perspective. If we can keep the experience as close to an on-campus, face-to-face schedule, this will support keeping students on track.
- We want to give our students, especially new students, the best experience possible to give them a sense of what their experience will be once they are able to come on-campus.
- Decisions about which technological tools are used impact students' participation and learning, so as a university we need to be intentional in which technological tools we use.
- Approximately 95% of StFX undergraduate classes are under 80 students.

### Synchronous / Asynchronous?

StFX currently offers two types of online learning: synchronous and asynchronous (and variations thereof). There are tools in both *Collaborate* (synchronous) and *Moodle* (asynchronous) that will provide opportunities for communication and discussion. There are advantages and disadvantages to both formats. As we think about the short timeline for moving face-to-face courses online or remote delivery, the synchronous classroom will provide students with an experience most similar to what they would receive in a face-to-face classroom. The use of asynchronous activities (such as discussion forums) can be used to increase student engagement.

#### Synchronous (real time):

##### *Students*

- Teaching & learning is in real time. The boundedness of time creates a structured and predictable environment that supports the learning of many undergraduate students.
- Students have the opportunity to actively participate in the course, ask questions in diverse formats (orally, chat box), and receive instant instructor feedback.
- Classes using *Collaborate* can be recorded and the link made available in Moodle, which is a means to address accessibility for diverse groups of students or students in various time zones. The record feature also provides opportunities for students to review and reinforce the content they are learning.
- Frequent interaction increases the sense of social presence and may lessen feelings of isolation. This is important given that students will be doing all their courses remotely.

##### *Faculty/Teaching Staff*

- Synchronous teaching and learning closely replicates many of the features in a face to face classroom. Going from face-to-face to the synchronous classroom requires less transition to instructors new to online learning.
- Both large classes or smaller seminar-type classes can be delivered in real-time with similar levels of interaction as would be typical in face-to-face classes of the same size.
- Given that courses unfold in real time, instructors have a similar flexibility to plan and prepare ahead of each class as they would have in face-to-face teaching.

- *Collaborate* provides a variety of tools to actively engage students in learning, for both small and large classes. The size of the class will determine which tools can be used. (For example, the recent PD session on using asynchronous activities was held in a synchronous class of 90 participants and had much interaction).
- Planning a synchronous course takes considerably less time than planning a quality, interactive completely asynchronous course.

#### **Asynchronous (anytime):**

- Asynchronous generally requires students to be very organized, motivated, and self-directed. This could be a challenge for many undergraduate students, particularly first-year students.
- Contrary to some misconceptions, asynchronous teaching is not simply about posting material, like PowerPoint slides. The work required to make these courses interactive and manage communication with students requires much up-front preparation and ongoing work.
- The move from face-to-face teaching to quality asynchronous learning is a greater shift for instructors because it is so different from the typical class. For example, StFX Continuing & Distance Education normally begins working with the course developer nine months in advance of course delivery. Course developers work with an instructional designer and support team in the development of the asynchronous courses.
- Asynchronous works well for providing flexibility for students who work full-time/part-time, have family/work/commitments, etc. Asynchronous gives less boundedness to the students and instructors. However, with that flexibility comes more instruction preparation.

The synchronous environment most closely provides the opportunity for instructors to replicate how they teach in the face-to-face environment. The record feature in the Synchronous program *Collaborate* also allows students to pause and reflect on the synchronous class experience. The record feature is especially helpful for students who are more reluctant to ask questions in class, or for whom more time to reflect is their preferred learning style.

#### **Resources:**

University of Waterloo: <https://uwaterloo.ca/keep-learning/strategies-remote-teaching/synchronous-vs-asynchronous-online-learning>

Faculty Focus <https://www.facultyfocus.com/free-reports/synchronous-and-asynchronous-learning-tools-strategies-for-engaging-online-students/>