

## Undergraduate Student Panel

### Skylight Online Teaching Series (November 2020)

Four undergraduate students in first, second, third, and fourth year joined our November Online Teaching Series to talk about their experiences with remote learning. This document provides a summary of the main questions posed and the students' responses (which have been edited for clarity and to preserve anonymity).

#### GETTING STARTED

##### **How does learning online, and the workload, compare to previous face-to-face classes?**

- It can be perceived that we have more work online because everything is documented (recorded lectures, clickers questions, student chat). I don't know that there is more work, it's just that it feels like there's more.
- It's a fine line. I don't think the workload is that much different, but it now takes a lot longer to get through the same content. It takes me longer with the asynchronous recordings because I can take more time and pause the video to learn something better—which is a blessing and curse as I could spend too much time on things. It just feels like it takes longer to get through the same amount of work, something I hear my peers saying, too.
- Students' workloads, needs, finances, and living arrangements have shifted as a result of COVID-19. I like the lecture recordings and asynchronous work but many friends can't always watch the video within a certain time span. One thing people might appreciate is more flexibility for when things can be watched. I know that it can be hard to give more time, but hopefully we can be a little more flexible in dates and timelines and have some videos prepared in advance.

##### **(For the first-year student) Did you feel prepared for university and for your online experience learning?**

- I thought I would be prepared as I was part of a government program this summer to help students transition to university. The thing I wasn't prepared for was all the online stuff and finding things on Canvas. That was a lot of work for me as it was all new.

#### COMMUNITY, INCLUSION, AND WELLBEING

##### **Can you speak to the class culture and sense of community in your courses?**

- Many of us already had face-to-face courses together in previous years, so it wasn't too hard to connect online.
- If you're a bit shy, the annotation tool on Zoom gives you an opportunity to contribute and share your ideas without having to speak publicly.
- Using the features of Zoom are good for larger classes (annotation) and how the instructor engages with the chat is a part of it too. It's a lot easier to ask a question via typing it than asking in person in a large class. There seems to be more opportunities to engage in that large class

than before. And if the TAs and instructor are engaged with the questions and comments in the chat, it promotes engagement.

- Piazza has been really good. Also making small, consistent student groups that stick together through the term and that talk every week is great. Jump Start also helped because I'm still talking to one of the senior students. In larger classes, people keep their videos off and I only talk to people [I know] from high school in those classes.

#### **What has made online learning more equitable and inclusive?**

- I really miss the 10-minute breaks between classes. I miss the mental break and the exercise to walk to your next class. It can be rough when you have back-to-back classes and meetings.
- Don't penalize students who are not able to join synchronous lectures or join breakout groups. Missing class is penalty enough.
- Wi-fi connectivity can lag if there are multiple students or people living in a house. It's nice to have recorded lectures so that people can split up when they need the internet.
- If there are [synchronous] in-class participation marks it can be hard for students not in the Vancouver time zone. They may have to stay up until 1am to do things and then they might have a synchronous lab at 5am. I understand having to attend things like labs live, but I wonder about the benefit of assigning in-class participation when it can really disrupt students' lives. I don't know what is currently done or if there are accommodations—but it would be great to do.

#### **I am experiencing ergonomic challenges with so much online activity/work. Are students experiencing similar issues (repetitive use injuries, neck, back pain, headaches)? If so, what would help?**

- I used to bike to school and did intramural sports, and with that taken away, I struggled in the first few weeks. I try to set aside some time and do a fake commute—like going running or for a walk. With a busy schedule it can be hard to fit it in so having the 10-minute break between classes is important.
- Asynchronous lectures and content help with that so students can take breaks as needed. It's also important to give breaks halfway through the lecture. In meetings I lead, someone shares a stretch of the day and we do it together. It's great to get students moving.
- In terms of three-hour lectures, I don't know about everyone else, but it's a long time to go without eating something and I get a little tired. I would prefer to have a solid 10-minute break in the middle of those long lectures.

#### **COURSE ORGANIZATION AND FACILITATION**

##### **Could you comment on course content organization in Canvas? What was easy? What was difficult? What was intuitive, etc.? What would be one thing you would change?**

- Having the Canvas content set up by the week has been really helpful because you go through the material week by week and know when things are due. Having consistent due dates for assignments is really helpful online. Most of mine are due the night before the next lecture.

- Please ensure all info related to assignments is in the assignments tab. That way, I can put my assignments in my calendar and don't have to update it. It's hard when info about assignments is in all different places on Canvas.
- Consistent due dates are also really helpful. I also put assignments into my calendar and a couple times this term, a midterm date was changed but we didn't get an announcement about it. It threw me [for] a loop as I already had two midterms that week. Try to lock down those dates at the start of term and make sure to clearly tell students if the dates do change. In face-to-face classes you would talk to your peers more about it which helps with messaging, but this general chat doesn't happen the same in online classes.
- I don't know anyone that likes the Canvas discussion board. If you're using it, maybe ask your students what they think of it. Piazza is great because you can have different threads and can pin things and put "to be read" on certain items.

**Coming back to the breakout rooms, you mentioned persistent groups/rooms as good, but that sometimes there's difficulty with students not talking. What do you see as the pros and cons of breakout rooms?**

- I really liked the persistent groups. When there are consistent groups, you get their contact info and create social media to communicate time which is really helpful. I could build relationships and we could figure out how we worked together best. As per the silence, some of us actually work well when we're quiet. It's not that we're not talking, it's just that we might be working on something silently.
- I'm happy with profs dropping in, but like a warning so we're prepared to talk about our work. Having a whiteboard in the breakout room is great so that students don't have to speak if they're not comfortable. The whiteboard is also great for keeping track of what we're working on. We use it a lot in our student meetings.

**I now have 10 x 5% quizzes. I have sensed an increase in anxiety from students. Is this perception backed up by your experiences? Students seem to be on edge more often because the grades count, and they count more often. Is my perception accurate?**

- Having more quizzes can be more work for an instructor as there might be more students who follow up on their grades. My friends and I talk about our marks/quizzes right away and reach out with questions. It's nice however, when some of the quiz grades are dropped.
- Dropping a grade here or there lets students have a bad day or week.
- I can see that with lesser weighted assignments and more of them, you're on the go consistently. In one of my classes, the final exam was cumulative and things I did before it were dropped if my exam score was higher. This can give flexibility to students especially if they need to make something up.
- In one course, we could do a makeup assignment. If you didn't perform the way you wanted to, you could do a different assignment and part of that weighting was shifted into the other assignment. It does put the onus on instructors and TAs to mark it, but if we submit an assignment and do poorly, it would be nice to try it again, even if just once a term.

- I struggle with my mental health, and there are days I might have a quiz/assignment and don't have the mental capacity for it at all. If you know a quiz can be dropped or you have the choice not to do it, it's really helpful, especially those with mental health issues.
- In transitioning from high school, I found it really easy to procrastinate. So, having weekly quizzes and assignments has helped me a lot because I don't procrastinate as much for the midterms and finals. I am happy for there to be quizzes, too, as they keep me on top of things.

**What have been the challenges and advantages of remote labs? What lab features work best?**

- I don't really know what to do about it, but I do feel they are lacking in comparison to face-to-face labs. There's a lot less hands-on work. I'm enrolled in two labs right now. And [when] the live part [wa]s us just sitting and watching the professor pour agar gel or doing the lab, I found I was really detached and it was hard to write a report on it. It's the only time I've ever fallen asleep in a class. It's hard to keep my attention for three hours if someone is just going through a procedure.
- In the other lab, there's always something we're doing, like breaking off in groups and working on a portion of the lab or a question together. It has modules you go through before each lab (with multiple choice and short answer questions) and after the lab, there is a follow-up group assignment over the week. I have really enjoyed the group assignments because they haven't been too much work and I've been able to connect and explore the lab in more detail with my peers. The group work builds on things and is great.
- In one of my labs, for the most part it's okay because everyone is working on their own stuff. But it can be hard to reach out to the TA for help because it's harder to get their attention and you have to wait a long time (waiting in silence). And no one can talk to each other like you could in face-to-face settings.

**I'm interested in hearing about online office hours and if there has been an increase in your 1:1 interactions via Zoom office hours?**

- Office hours for peer tutors are different online than face-to-face. In person, you could move around and answer students' questions more easily. It's harder online as not everyone wants to share their document and then you have to put them in breakout rooms for personalized conversations. I'm not really sure what to do about that. Maybe holding a midterm review addressing common questions might be good.
- As a student, being in a waiting line/queue can be hard. Perhaps a solution to that is having the peer tutors and/or TAs hold general office hours and that students talk to the prof if they have personalized, grade-specific questions. I also wonder if there could be more peer tutors in upper-year classes. Might be helpful for some third-year courses.

## EXAM FACILITATION

### **I was wondering about how easy or challenging it is when an exam requires uploading files. And what about if you have to complete the exam within a specific 50-minute window?**

- I didn't find it too difficult to upload as we were given time to do so in case there were connectivity issues. We were given a 12-hour window to complete our exam, which worked well (e.g. complete this 50-minute exam within 12 hours of release).
- Having an extended period to write an exam is great. It can ease the stress of uploading your work.
- A friend was super stressed out with WebWork crashing during their exam as they had an issue with their VPN connection in China. One thing is for students to know ways to let the professor know if they have some technical issues. Everything worked perfectly for me, though.
- Staggering the start time of the exam by 5 minutes so the system could handle the number of students or student traffic worked well.
- Having 10 extra minutes for uploading was great, too.

### **I'm curious about how the students feel about the lengthening of time for exams versus the idea that some of their classmates may not be honest when they take their exams.**

- For the most part with the timed exams, some students might have issues submitting their test, so as long as they're able to say they had a tech issue, that should be okay. However, the 12-24-hour time is helpful if I have other plans.
- I have quite a few thoughts on this:
  - In your fields, do you ever really have a time when you have to regurgitate information in a 50-minute period? Please correct me if I'm wrong, even before the pandemic, we had to know something in a time crunch. I get it's how to get things done but if you're concerned about it, set a time limit, and let students take it when they're ready.
  - There's a lot of mental health and family things going on for everyone so expecting people to perform at a level we were previously at is unfair. If we ease up a little bit and that means reducing the lecture material a bit, I'd rather know something better than knowing things at a surface level.
  - Related to concerns about cheating: if your exam is written in a way that we can't Google [to] answer, then that might help. I think a lot of us have integrity and we don't want to be cheating. For students who cheat, it's a penalty enough that they don't know what's going on. I'm not bothered if others cheat because I know the exam is a reflection of how well I know the material.
- I've had some classes take different approaches for this issue, some things I think are effective are:
  - Reducing the weight of an exam. It's less pressure to just get a better grade and then students might learn the material and be less stressed.
  - I really don't like things like Proctorio, so I get anxious when a robot is watching me. I think it has affected my test performance quite negatively. Lockdown and Zoom invigilation would be better.

- But if a student doesn't learn the content and wants to cheat, it will bite them in the butt later. It's a big consequence for them.

### **How do students feel about Zoom/CU room invigilation?**

- I think invigilation is weird. People can forget that we are there. It's pressure on students that we're being watched and it's just different from in-person [testing]. It's weird as an invigilator. Open book is the way to go moving forward to ensure students are just regurgitating things going forward. I'm fortunate and I have my own room, but my peers may not be able to do that at home and might not have the quiet space to do so. It can be flimsy and there are ways to write exams to make it unnecessary.
- It was okay for me because I would ignore it. But when we were told we might have to share our screen or show our ID, that was a little more stressful. Throughout the exam I had that thought in my mind and you don't know when you'll be asked to show things. It made me extra nervous.

### **CLOSING REMARKS**

#### **When we do go back to face-to-face classes, are there any things that you would like to retain from what is being done in your online classes?**

- The flexibility that some profs have built into their courses now is great. Moving back to face-to-face doesn't mean we won't be going through similar issues later on. The university process can be long, tedious, and expensive. It's nice to be flexible as getting an accommodation letter can take a long time and it's a lot of work if someone is having a crisis. It would be great to have inherent flexibility—especially around disability justice—like if something can be done so that the student doesn't always need to be the one asking for an accommodation. I can be intimidating. (“Down with squeaky wheel policies. up with inclusive flexibility.”)
- Keeping the chat option in face-to-face classes would be great. Slido was good because you can upvote and downvote questions and see what your peers are asking. Some of the accessibility things like having online office hours would also be great, especially for commuter students who might not be on campus.

#### **Do you have any final thoughts for the group?**

- I don't want to speak for anyone else, but I really, really miss in-person classes. It is so hard to stay motivated and to keep going with in online classes. The lack of motivation is pretty real and we really do miss in person and everything that came from that.
- Thank you all for being here and listening to us. We're just four students so we can't speak for everyone, so you could ask your students what's going on and what they would prefer.
- I also want to say thank you for the accommodations that have been made. Makes a difference for students that student feedback is being considered. And even if not everything can be changed, it helps to know you're listening. Thank you for coming to listen.
- University is different from what I expected because it's online, but so far it's been great. So, thanks to everyone.