Reengaging the In-Person Classroom
Considerations for Autumn Quarter 2021

Returning to the in-person classroom brings both exciting prospects for renewed engagement with students as well as shifting challenges as we continue to teach amid a changing pandemic. There are several distinctive issues to be thinking about for Autumn Quarter, such as teaching with masks and creating a supportive learning environment in the current circumstances. At the same time, our teaching and learning experiences during the last 18 months have yielded ideas and innovations that may inform our pedagogy going forward. The aim of this document is to suggest some considerations to shape our approach to the coming quarter, to summarize and synthesize insights gleaned from UChicago instructors' pandemic teaching practices, and to point to further resources on teaching at this moment.

The Chicago Center for Teaching is available to discuss anything related to your teaching, and you can schedule a time to chat through our online portal. You can also be in touch by email at cct@uchicago.edu. Support for academic technology is available through virtual office hours offered by Academic Technology Solutions.

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Teaching with Masks
The current UChicago masking policy requires face coverings over the nose and mouth while indoors for both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. For classrooms, the policy notes that "a fully vaccinated instructor or presenter may choose to lower their face covering temporarily while actively speaking, if they must do so to be heard or understood, and in which case social distance is advised. Generally, however, masks should remain on indoors. An unvaccinated instructor or presenter may not remove their face covering while actively speaking." The communication issues posed by mask-wearing present a number of challenges for instructors and students. Consider the following strategies and see below for further resources:

- **Consider your mask options.**
  Experiment with a few different kinds of masks to determine which allow for the best intelligibility and comfort. These studies suggest that surgical masks are better than cloth masks for being heard, and there is variation across cloth masks due to differences in materials and

weave. Among other tips, this resource from the University of Michigan proposes a sport cage insert to create more room under the mask.

- **Consider a microphone, if appropriate to your classroom.**
  Most masks, whether cloth or surgical, "have little effect on lapel microphones," so depending on your classroom a microphone may be of use. Contact AV Services at avs@uchicago.edu or your unit-specific technology support office for inquiries.

- **Be mindful of the clarity, speed, and volume of your voice.**
  Slowing down and speaking more deliberately can help you be understood. Projecting your voice will help you be heard, but do what you can to avoid taxing your voice. Avoid speaking with your back turned to students while writing on the board. Remember to drink water throughout the day. Remind your students to do these things as well.

- **Encourage students to signal if they can't understand you.**
  Identify a specific gesture for this, such as a handwave.

- **Reinforce important information visually.**
  Write key ideas on the board. Use text and images on slides. Make handouts with outlines, key questions, activities, and the like. Use Canvas and email to remind students about due dates, exams, and other requirements.

- **Foster connection and community before the quarter begins and over the course of the term.**
  Since it is harder to recognize individuals and read facial expressions when masked, think about how you can promote a welcoming classroom environment to mitigate this. See the next section for specific strategies to consider.

References and Further Resources
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  - University of Chicago Masking Requirements.
  - University of Michigan LSA Technology Services, "Teaching Tips: Tricks and Tips for Teaching with Masks."

Fostering Connection and Community

The transition back to in-person teaching brings yet another new learning experience for students, as many of them reacquaint themselves with the UChicago classroom and many experience it for the first time, after adjusting to learning remotely for the last 18 months at the University or in their

high schools. As we know, such transitions can be difficult, and establishing a sense of community can help students feel comfortable and connected to the classroom. Since we will be masked and some students may be a bit anxious, consider the following strategies:

- **Write a welcome message or record a brief introduction video of yourself, unmasked, before the quarter begins.**
  Set a welcoming tone for the course, share a bit about yourself, and start to set expectations. Convey your enthusiasm for the material and excitement about what your students will learn.

- **Survey students before the quarter begins.**
  Ask questions about their hopes and concerns for the coming quarter, including what they're excited and nervous about for in-person teaching. You can also ask questions about their prior knowledge of or engagement with the course material. Both kinds of questions communicate care for their learning and well-being.

- **Have students create short video introductions, without masks.**
  To give students a chance to introduce and see one another without masks, have them record 1-2 minute intro videos using Panopto, Zoom, or Flipgrid. Ask students to view them before the first class, or perhaps show them during the first class and give their peers a chance to ask a question or two, to make a connection in the moment, etc. Be sure to do one yourself as well.

- **Incorporate further low-stakes videos throughout the term.**
  If, say, you have students give brief presentations on a reading, consider having them record their initial comments in advance and play the video in lieu of them talking in class. They can then take up questions and comments from their peers in class.

- **Create assigned learning groups.**
  Whether they are "research pods" that are working together on a substantial project, or homework/reading groups who work together on problem sets or generating discussion questions, putting students in groups of 3-4 to work on something outside of class can help to foster a deeper sense of connection to their peers.

- **Check in with students.**
  It may be more challenging to read the room and gauge how students are doing while everyone is masked, so regularly check in and look to connect with students. Chat with students before or at the beginning or end of class. Use occasional "temperature check" polls (Poll Everywhere, Google Forms, or even a show of hands can work for this) to get a sense of how students are doing and convey care for their well-being. Send one or two mid-quarter surveys to assess how students are feeling about the course, the learning environment, and their studies in general.

Planning for Flexibility and Empathy

A clear theme from student feedback and instructor conversations over the past 18 months is that transparent expectations that evince empathy and allow for flexibility help to promote a supportive learning environment during challenging times. What this looks like depends on the context, and

flexibility for in-person teaching in Autumn 2021 may be different than for remote or hybrid teaching over the last year. Some areas to consider are:

- **Offer remote office hours.**
  Holding office hours over Zoom—perhaps as a supplement for in-person office hours—allows for greater flexibility for when you can schedule them and makes them more accessible for students. Consider using [Microsoft Bookings](#) or [You Can Book Me](#) so students know when you're available and how to reserve a time. Also be sure to clearly communicate the purpose of office hours and why/how visiting office hours helps students learn in your class.

- **Build flexibility into late work policies.**
  Be proactive, transparent, and consistent about your approach to extensions. Consider building in, say, three or four "grace days" that students may use for no-questions-asked extensions.

- **Build flexibility into attendance policies.**
  Active engagement in a course is essential to student learning. Think about how students may actively engage in your course should they need to miss class due to illness or exposure to COVID-19. Options include asynchronous activities such as discussion posts on Canvas, assignments that reflect the material a student may miss in class, visiting office hours, and/or live or recorded video of class meetings. Instructors should consult with their program for specific policies and procedures.

- **Convey care about students' well-being and provide information about resources.**
  The pandemic has been a traumatic experience for many, and students face particular stressors as they attempt to focus on their learning amidst the upheavals and multiple transitions of the last 18 months. Communicate that you care about them and their learning and make sure they know about key campus resources, such as:
  - Mental health resources available through [UChicago Student Wellness](#).
  - The disability accommodation process available through [Student Disability Services](#).
  - Academic, personal, and professional support available from their [Academic Adviser](#).
  - Support for First-Generation, Lower-Income, and Immigrant (FLI) students available through the [Center for College Student Success](#).

References and Further Resources
- Johnson, Matthew R. ["10 Course Policies to Rethink on Your Fall Syllabus."](#) *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 11, 2021.

Drawing on Pedagogical Insights from the Last 18 Months

What have you noticed about your teaching or student learning that you didn't notice before the pandemic? How might that observation shape your future teaching? We should be mining the adjustments and innovations of the last year and a half for lessons we can take back to our teaching in Autumn 2021 and beyond. Following are several questions that might help to spur such reflections. They touch on issues commonly surfaced during the many workshops, panels, and other conversations hosted by the CCT over the last 18 months. Each question is followed by sample insights drawn from the contributions of a number of faculty and instructors who participated in

these conversations (with references to relevant pedagogical literature where appropriate). This is not exhaustive, and such reflections will of course yield different insights for different instructors. This is meant only to suggest the kinds of questions to ask ourselves and to illustrate some approaches that might translate back to the in-person classroom.

- **What features of the learning environment did the pandemic reveal or make newly significant?**
  The transition to remote instruction meant that the often-unspoken norms, assumptions, and practices that shape the learning environment had to be explicitly articulated and enacted as we thought through how to help students learn in unprecedented and trying circumstances. But being transparent about the aims of a course, explicit about its expectations, and deliberate in structuring its practices help to foster a supportive learning environment in any circumstance. In addition to the thoughts on fostering community, flexibility, and empathy canvassed above, other relevant insights on this question include:

  - Transparent discussion of the goals and norms of the course. Given the chaotic, disconnected circumstances we found ourselves in, many instructors paid particular attention to exploring with students just what the aims and expectations of a course are. To give shape to her class, Na'ama Rokem, from Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, told her students that "the class is the discussion we have together about the text." At the beginning of the term, she would also have students write about why they are taking the class, what they wanted to learn, and what they were apprehensive about, a practice she plans to do more of in the coming year.

  - Marshaling the social dimensions of teaching and learning. Allyson Nadia Field, a professor of Cinema and Media Studies, began every Zoom class with 5-minute social breakout rooms—small groups of students were placed in random breakout rooms where they could talk about whatever they wanted. The aim here was to approximate the pre-class chit chat that would normally happen in an in-person classroom, and her students reported this was a much-appreciated practice for connecting with their classmates.[1] While Zoom social breakout rooms may not translate back to the in-person classroom, we can take from this experience a renewed appreciation for the social dimensions of learning and the benefits of intentionally fostering such interactions in our classrooms.[2]

  - Clear, structured learning support—often with peers. For Valerie Levan, an Instructional Professor in the Humanities Core, remote teaching made visible student needs for writing support. Concerned that the disconnection and diminished social presence of remote learning would lead students to flounder in the development of their writing, she created space on Canvas for students to post writing concerns and questions for their peers and worked with the Writing Program to hold virtual write-ins where students would set writing goals and work quietly together over Zoom. Observing that

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[1] For a discussion of this kind of practice in the context of promoting student motivation, see James M. Lang, *Small Teaching* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 178-82.

[2] For more on the social dimensions of teaching and learning, see Joshua R. Eyler, *How Humans Learn* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2018), chapter 2.

students would benefit from such structured, peer supports even during in-person teaching, Valerie is working with Ashley Lyons in the Writing Program to offer hybrid write-ins in Autumn Quarter, with some students participating in-person on campus and some joining over Zoom.

- **What modes of student engagement might translate from remote and hybrid teaching?**
  Whether through various digital technologies, asynchronous activities, or other modalities, remote teaching meant finding new ways for students to actively engage with ideas and develop new understandings. Tools such as [Hypothes.is](#) and practices such as collaborative notetaking with Google Docs suggest new methods for collaborative learning worth considering for in-person learning. Other innovations with potential for in-person teaching include:

  - <u>Expert conversations</u>. Teaching over Zoom made it easier to bring in outside experts to talk with students. This of course allows students to engage with alternative expert views of the material, often from individuals in relevant professional roles that help students to make connections from the course to the world beyond it. Perhaps more interesting from the perspective of student engagement was innovation in *how* to incorporate such expertise. For example, Borja Sotomayor, a Senior Lecturer in Computer Science, held podcast-style conversations with individuals from the software development industry. This allowed for an engaging, and perhaps more authentic, conversation rather than experts "talking at" students. Note that this strategy need not rely on outside experts. Paul Poast, a professor of Political Science, modeled one of his Intro to International Relations lectures each week as a podcast-style conversation with a TA over Zoom. As they would discuss the material, students would post questions and comments in the chat, often linking the material to current events, resulting in a more fun, interactive conversation, rather than a longer, relatively passive lecture.

  - <u>From asynchronous to flipped classrooms</u>. Many instructors ended up producing a good amount of asynchronous course content to provide a robust structure for remote student learning. The result, often, was the course was essentially [flipped](#): students gained substantial and meaningful first exposure to content before class, allowing for more actively engaged learning during synchronous meetings. Sarah Newman, a professor of Anthropology, took this approach. Using [Shorthand](#), she [built](#) [visually engaging](#) [content](#) that provided students background knowledge and context for readings, and guidance on what they should focus on. When students showed up to class, discussions were especially active and more meaningful as a result. Though she had never considered a flipped model previously, Sarah now has this structured content to use as a foundation for a similar approach during in-person teaching.

  - <u>Multiple options for meaningful participation</u>. Like many instructors, Joe Maurer, a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in Music, made use of the Zoom chat as a way for students to participate in class, and this opened new vistas for thinking about the nature of student engagement. Joe appreciated the low stakes and ephemeral nature of chat comments, that it lets students try ideas out and take intellectual risks. He found value in this productive side conversation that could be integrated into the oral discussion— but didn't need to be. Joe is interested in exploring ways of cultivating similar forms of

participation for in-person teaching, perhaps using a Google Doc or some other tool for such backchannel discussions. Providing multiple options for meaningful participation like this reflects Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles for making our teaching more inclusive, and it is worth reflecting on other ways we provided options for student engagement during remote teaching that might carry over to the in-person classroom.[3]

- **What assessment innovations might continue to enhance our in-person teaching?**
  As exams and other conventional forms of assessment became more difficult, instructors turned to new methods for students to demonstrate and get feedback on their learning. Many embraced frequent, low-stakes assessments to mitigate the challenges of exam proctoring and the stress induced by fewer, high-stakes exams or projects—an approach that helps promote learning no matter the circumstances. Other considerations that are worth keeping in mind as we return to in-person teaching include:

  o Assessment as practice and reflection. In light of the challenges posed by pandemic assessment, Chris Andrews, a Senior Instructional Professor in Biological Sciences, aimed to emphasize revision, reflection, and mastery in a course that had previously relied more on high-stakes exams. She gave students "preliminary" or practice exams, the focus of which was to provide feedback on their work so students could learn from their mistakes (which was reflected in the grading scheme). These exams then formed the basis for reflective portfolios students submitted at the end of the term, in which they reflect on and explain their thought processes behind several exam questions, allowing them to benefit from feedback from instructors and to develop the metacognitive skills necessary to become independent learners.[4]

  o Collaborative and authentic work. Some instructors turned to assessments as a way to promote student connections or to have students engage in meaningful work while away from campus. Susan Gzesh, a Senior Lecturer in the Pozen Center for Human Rights, had students work in "research pods," groups of 4-5 who researched a particular human rights topic and presented to their peers and outside experts at the end of the term. Such collaborative projects promote and leverage students' connections with each other, and connecting their work to what experts in the field do imbues it with authenticity that helps to deepen their learning.[5]

  o Making student learning visible. One consequence of remote teaching is that instructors developed ways of making student learning more legible, often resulting in products that were more engaging and meaningful than conventional assignments. Again, Sarah Newman from Anthropology, looking for a form of student work that could productively integrate texts and images for a class on Maya archaeology, used Shorthand as a medium for student projects (shared with their permission). Students appreciated the freedom of the format, and they enjoyed perusing their peers' projects, creating

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[3] For a useful approach to UDL they characterize as the "plus-one mind-set," see Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone* (Morgantown: West Virginal University Press, 2018), 128-40.

[4] For a good explanation of metacognition and implications for teaching and learning, see Susan A. Ambrose et al., *How Learning Works* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), chapter 7.

[5] For a helpful discussion of authenticity, see Eyler, *How Humans Learn*, chapter 4.

additional learning opportunities and an audience for student work beyond the instructor.

- **How can we continue pedagogical reflection, innovation, and support?**
  A common refrain from instructors over the last 18 months (both on campus and beyond) has been the value of sustained pedagogical discussion as we have confronted truly unique challenges for teaching and learning. While just one indicator of this, the Chicago Center for Teaching has held over 60 formal workshops and panels on remote and hybrid teaching since March 2020. Countless similar discussions have taken place in departments, programs, and other venues across campus. Academic Technology Solutions has produced trainings on dozens of topics. And units throughout the University have synthesized, documented, and disseminated innumerable reflections, guides, and other resources. While pedagogical reflection may have been thrust upon us by the pandemic, many instructors have newly appreciated the value of having regular, supportive conversations about teaching. The CCT is available to support the continued facilitation of such conversations and to consult on how to structure them. A schedule of ongoing CCT events is always available on the website and via our listserv.

References and Further Resources

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