



# White Board

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## Giving Students an Individualized Experience in Online Learning: Staying Connected while Disconnected

Andrew St. James and Darlene Campbell, PhD

NO COMBINATION OF WORDS can put together the feeling of relief, comfort and gratitude I have towards your course and your fantastic TAs.” –Student comment, Spring 2020

As universities across the country begin to make the difficult decision to continue with online learning in the fall semester, faculty will again be asked to adapt their classes to an online format. During this past spring semester, we adapted our individualized instruction class for introductory biology to an online format with measured trepidation. By the end of the semester, we were excited to hear reports from students that the transition to online learning was not only successful, but enjoyable. We believe the unique contours of our course’s individualized instruction model set us up for success and we would like to share some thoughts on how other instructors can incorporate aspects of individualized instruction into their online courses to increase student engagement.

### Making Content Manageable

“I never really learned that much from lectures and being able to go at my own pace has fit so well with my learning style.” – Student comment, Spring 2020

In an individualized instruction model, students have the freedom to work through course material at their own pace while being provided a safety net of support from course staff to shepherd them through the course. In our class, we divide the content into 10 units which are each assessed about one week apart. Breaking the material down into these manageable chunks is important (especially so amid COVID-19) in keeping students from becoming overwhelmed with the content.

For each unit, we provide our students with a list of concepts and objectives we expect them to master by the end of their study on the unit. To help our students master these concepts and objectives, they take advantage of textbook readings, online supplemental

materials, mini-lecture videos produced by the course staff, and tutoring sessions (both one-on-one and with larger groups). By replacing the traditional lecture with these myriad forms of content delivery and review, our students were engaged throughout the online portion of our course and by some measures, their content mastery was higher than in previous semesters where we were in-person.

### Be Available, Be Flexible

“I loved the remote instruction format and the flexibility of the course.” –Student comment, Spring 2020

One of the most important aspects of any individualized instruction model is scheduling. In our course, students adhere to a “deadline schedule” to ensure they continue progressing through the course. For each unit of material, students have a “deadline” by which they need to complete the unit. In a normal semester, if students don’t complete the unit by the deadline, they still have to finish the material, but incur a small grade penalty. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, we chose to provide flexibility on deadlines and not penalize students for completing units past their deadline. At first we were concerned this would lead to swathes of students falling behind on the material, but we felt it was a necessary move to accommodate our students. The students were grateful for our flexibility, and we were surprised to discover that not only did students continue to complete the units in a timely manner, but by the end of the semester there were fewer students with outstanding material than in previous on-campus semesters.

Another important aspect of scheduling is finding time for students to interact with course staff to discuss material. We provided three such outlets: (1) regularly scheduled virtual office hours, (2) weekly review session focused on content from specific units, and (3) student-scheduled individual

(or small group) tutoring sessions with the course staff. Surprisingly, hardly anyone took advantage of the virtual office hours. There was a small but dedicated group of students who regularly attended the weekly review sessions (and an unknown number who accessed video recordings of these sessions afterwards. By far, students preferred scheduling individual (or small group) meetings with course staff, which speaks to the power of human interaction in our individualized instruction model. While course content can be disseminated via recordings of traditional lectures, viewing of these lectures leave students with “Zoom fatigue.” Our small group interactions succeed in keeping students engaged, and therefore learning, throughout.

### The Value of Human Interaction

“The TAs for this class are absolutely amazing. I really appreciate how this class allows you to become so close with the professor and TAs and they were such

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Full Term Summer - Grades Due - Aug 2  
Full Term Summer - Grad Day - Aug 3

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# The Unessay Experiment: Moving Beyond the Traditional Paper

I SAID TO MYSELF IN SPRING of 2019, after reading through the final papers for a class, “I cannot read another history research paper.” I was done. While some papers rehashed my lectures, others read as if they were amended from a Wikipedia site. Overall, I was frustrated by the (lack of) effort and the redundancy. And, I wasn’t necessarily inspired to grade them either, as I felt the research paper was becoming a rather stale component of final history class examinations.

That summer, I attended a conference on becoming a chair in a history department. I was surrounded by like-minded historians discussing academic leadership. However, in casual conversation, I heard of an evaluative measure called The Unessay. The word unessay immediately caught my attention, as I was desperately thinking of new ways to evaluate beyond the writing scope.

Upon some research, I found that the unessay moved beyond traditional papers. It was a form of self-expression and a way to demonstrate learning in a hands-on and visual way. It catered to students of different learning styles and expressions. When looking at examples of other unessays, I saw students who created a quilt on the topic of the American Revolution and a game created from a World War II course. Needless to say, I was inspired.

I decided to try this in my 2019 fall course and carefully chose to implement this in my Ancient Civilizations course. I started with a course that was considered to be above a 100-level and consisted of a small number of students. This class was unique; consisting of a mix of juniors, sophomores, and one senior. They were quite inquisitive and asked questions that indicated a high level of intellectual inquiry. I felt this high level of interest and competency (seen in both oral and written assessment) would fit my plan of the Unessay Experiment.

I wanted my class to consider the project throughout the semester. I told them that the final project would bring together all of the topics in the course, in their own interpretative way. I reminded students throughout the

course to remember a topic we covered in class that interested them enough for a final project. (I believe continuous reinforcement of the final project was crucial to how the students viewed each topic weekly.) In the future, to promote this further, I might do a monthly assignment to gauge what the students are thinking for a final project.

As far as teaching, the Unessay took pressure off me to “cover everything.” Instead, we dug deeper on certain topics of the ancient world, such as the burial practices of Egypt, the terracotta warriors of China, the Easter Islands, and the Roman Punic Wars. I also included guest speakers who talked about artifacts and local, ancient history. I wanted to go deeper into subjects that I hoped would trigger student interest in a final project.

I gave the project prompt to my students about a month before final exams. I wanted students to consider carefully what they wanted to do. I asked for a proposal within a week. The proposal consisted of what their topic would be, what they would do with the topic, and what the end project would possibly look like. I encouraged them to think of something that fit their personality, their interests, and their abilities. Their final project, when due, would include a two to three-page reflection paper, discussing what they learned from doing the project, along with a bibliography.

I also handed the students a generalized rubric of criteria for letter grades. I asked them to take it home and come up with their own thoughts of what would be considered a good or bad project. I thought it was necessary for them to have a template to work with and be able to amend it with student feedback. I also thought it was necessary to incorporate student input so they had more ownership in the creation and grading of the project.

The final Unessay projects were amazing. One student, who had a large collection of dolls, created ‘Roman costumes’ to demonstrate the various classes of women. Another student, who was interested in the Punic Wars, created a monopoly game based

on the event. Another student created a game of ancient empires, based on the game Risk. Several other students, who had a background in online gaming, recreated battle scenes, such as the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, and showed their craft to other students. Other variations included an Egyptian burial complete with a mummy and canopic jars, a booklet of Greek architecture, a children’s book of the Roman Emperor Nero, and a Sim’s online game that resembled a home for the Greek Gods.

In conclusion, would I do this again? Yes.

The elements of the Unessay project I would keep the same include the proposal, student input with the grading rubric, and the end of class showcase for students to see what other students did. This project also made me rethink how I can evaluate students over the semester. What I would do differently is be more specific in what I wanted to glean from the reflection paper, such as what they learned about their topic and what they learned about putting these projects together. I would also give more time for each project presentation and allow extra time for students to engage with each project. For example, I would have allowed the students to play the Empire risk game or the Punic Wars monopoly. Overall, the Unessay has sparked creativity and engagement in my students and allowed them to better relate to course concepts throughout the semester.

*Jodie N. Mader, PhD, is a professor and chair of the history department at Thomas More University in Kentucky.*

For more on the Unessay experiment, visit Cate Denial’s [blog that dives into deeper detail](#).

Dr. Jodie M. Mader; The Unessay Experiment: Moving Beyond the Traditional Paper; Faculty Focus; July 22, 2020 [ <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/course-design-ideas/the-unessay-experiment-moving-beyond-the-traditional-paper/> ] July 28, 2020.

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an integral part of this course.” –Student comment, Spring 2020

### Assign a Point Person to Every Student

When we transitioned to online learning, we assigned every student to a course staff member as their point-of-contact. This proved to be one of the most consequential decisions in ensuring a seamless transition. Throughout the online portion of the semester, students developed relationships with their assigned instructor or teaching assistant, who provided regular contact to their students via one-on-one tutoring and guidance through the assessment process. By the end of the semester, most students identified their relationships with the course staff as their favorite part of the class. Our course is privileged with a large teaching staff and expecting all students to be able to schedule one-on-one sessions regularly with course staff may not be feasible for all. In a large class, meeting with small groups of students at a time could be a useful strategy. Personalized interactions are comforting to

students and keep them more engaged, no matter how far from campus they may be.

### Suggestions for Building Community

Individualized does not mean isolated. Building a sense of community in an individualized instruction class is essential to its success. In our class, we start building a community from day one when students assign themselves to small group discussion sessions that meet during the first four weeks of the class. In these sessions, students get to know each other, get to know course staff, and begin to familiarize themselves with the resources available to them for the course. These relationships often last throughout the semester as students form study groups or actively seek out help from course instructors they interacted with early on. In an online class, these groups can meet via videoconference and students may be grouped based on time zone to ensure that students have access to a community from anywhere in the world. From one-on-one tutoring, to small group discussion sections,

to whole class review sessions, community should be incorporated at every level.

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*Andrew St. James and Dr. Darlene Campbell; Giving Students an Individualized Experience in Online Learning: Staying Connected while Disconnected; Faculty Focus; July 27, 2020 [ <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/giving-students-an-individualized-experience-in-online-learning-staying-connected-while-disconnected/> ] July 28, 2020.*