Center for Teaching
and Learning
UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
1785

PLAs in a time of COVID
2021 PLAdawgs Kick-off

Working Effectively with PLAs During a Pandemic

Teaching during the COVID pandemic has provided instructors with both opportunities and frustrations. Simultaneously teaching to students who are present in the classroom and attending class remotely has forced many of us to rethink student engagement and in-class group work. PLAs are (potentially) able to engage with both remote and in-person students simultaneously, provided we structure these interactions intentionally, and provided we clearly communicate our expectations to both our PLAs and our students. During this time of uncertainty and social distance, PLAs can provide the human connection essential for learning that can get lost in the virtual classroom.

> *"The PLA helped create a sense of community and unity within the class which allowed the students to relax and feel comfortable engaging with the material and asking questions."*
>
> *Anonymous Physics Professor, Montgomery College*

LESSONS LEARNED

Among the many lessons learned over the last several months, the following four issues have had significant impact on the efficacy of PLAs in promoting student learning. While this list is far from comprehensive, it highlights some important information about the way we need to approach teaching and learning in hybrid and online spaces.

Zoom Fatigue: prolonged use of virtual communication platforms (e.g., Zoom) can lead to cognitive fatigue that can result in decreased attention and retention, and more difficulty engaging in effective decision-making processes. Students may therefore need more direction and support as they navigate their courses (e.g., more frequent reminders of due dates).

Technological Constraints: virtual engagement in instruction is not the same as the face-to-face classroom experience. With this in mind, we need to re-envision group work, in-class interaction, and (importantly) the role of PLAs.

Need for Connection: A recent survey by the Association for Psychological Science about instructor and student attitudes about teaching and learning during COVID found that students are missing and craving connection with instructors and other students (Nunes, 2020). The challenge, then, is about how to re-create these connections in the virtual space.

> *"The main drawback to an online course experience is the missing solidarity of being adjacent to peers during demanding work,"*
>
> *Tracy Lamar-Ray (Harvard University).*

Structure

Regardless of prior experience, facilitating peer-learning as a PLA during Spring 2021 involves using new or different communication platforms, activities, and instructional strategies. It is critical that PLAs understand their role in this new environment in concrete terms. For example, "answer questions and facilitate discussion during in-class group work" does not provide a PLA with the structure necessary to perform this task effectively. Instead, think through how the in-class group work will take place when part of the class is meeting face-to-face and part is attending remotely. Then establish the technological platform that will enable PLAs to engage with all students safely and equitably, regardless of the mode of attendance. Next, provide PLAs with detailed instructions for PLA-student interaction (e.g., "during lecture, if you see a question on the discussion wall, please feel free to answer it or flag it for my attention").

Frequent Communication

A critical part of working with PLAs is meeting with them regularly to check-in and ensure everyone is on the same page. Given what we have learned about cognitive overload and teaching and learning in a remote classroom over the last 10 months, PLAs will benefit from more frequent communication and reminders about each week's content, activities, and their specific responsibilities. This communication does not necessarily have to happen via videocall. Email reminders are just as effective. These emails, however, are not a replacement for the weekly hour-long preparatory meetings you have with your PLAs.

Clear Expectations and Boundaries

It has always been important for instructors to provide their PLAs and students with clearly articulated expectations of the role of PLAs in their classroom. The continued disruption to teaching and learning as 'usual' due to the pandemic has changed some of the boundaries for instructors, TAs, and our PLAs. We all want to help our students succeed and support both their learning and wellbeing. However, the stress and insecurity of the pandemic have created a student population that craves contact and, as a result, sends more email and makes more demands on our time than usual. Because PLAs are peers as well as 'instructors,' students may feel more comfortable approaching them with questions, anxieties, and complaints. And, like us, they may want to help everyone, at the expense of their own wellbeing. Therefore, it is important that we provide them with clear guidelines and boundaries for interacting with students, and that we communicate and enforce these boundaries with students.

Community

PLAs need community, now more than ever. They are balancing the frustrations of both teaching and learning during a pandemic. This can lead to feelings of isolation, especially if they are the only PLA in a class. Spend some time just 'hanging out' with your PLAs and/or create a space for them to engage with each other. As a result of the rapid transition to remote instruction, one PLA program director started hosting a Friday afternoon "Happy/Community/Therapy Hour" in which PLAs could share struggles, successes, surprises, and support (Emenike et. al. 2020). Creating a similar informal supportive space for your PLAs can help them maintain their boundaries with students and personal well-being.

STRUCTURING EFFECTIVE PLA-STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

	Technology	Structure	Training/Communication
Group Work & Problem Sets	**eLC:** discussion, feedback **Padlet & Google docs**: problems, discussion, feedback, whiteboard **Zoom:** breakout rooms, discussion, feedback, whiteboard	* Pods of 3-5 students * Give pods names * Keep pods consistent * Establish processes for PLAs: responding to posts; providing feedback; facilitating discussion	* Students & PLAs know how to use the technology * PLAs know how to host and co-host Zoom meetings * Guidelines for managing groups in a virtual space
Recitation & Review Sessions	**Padlet & Google docs**: problems, discussion, feedback, whiteboard **Zoom:** breakout rooms, discussion, feedback, whiteboard **Other:** allow students and PLAs to decide on a platform that works best for them	* Establish regular times for PLA-led group meetings * Provide clear deliverables and activities for the meeting * Assign pre-work for students prior to meeting * Establish clear and well communicated policies for PLAs: attendance; students who are unprepared; students who are disruptive; questions they don't know how to answer	* PLAs know how to schedule and host a Zoom meeting * PLAs and students know their expected roles, responsibilities, and expectations for participating in the PLA-led session
Office Hours	**eLC:** course email, discussion **Zoom:** breakout rooms, discussion, feedback, whiteboard **Other:** allow students and PLAs to decide on a platform that works best for them	* Establish regular times for PLA office hours * Provide PLAs with a list of topics and/or questions that should be forwarded to you * Establish a policy that general course and content questions be sent to the course eLC email * Establish clear guidelines for how often PLAs respond to email	* PLAs know how to schedule and host a Zoom meeting * PLAs and students know their expected roles, responsibilities, and expectations for participating in Office Hours * PLAs and students know how to use the email feature in eLC

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

Avena, J., Sabella, M., Barker, A., Hendrickson, S., Langdon, L., Van Duzor, A., and Otero, V. (2020) Leveraging the experience and expertise of learning assistants in remote learning spaces. APS Forum on Education Newsletter.
https://engage.aps.org/fed/resources/newsletters/summer-2020#Leveraging

Emenike, M., Schick, C., Van Duzor, A., Sabella, M., Hendrickson, S. and Langdon, L. (2020) Leveraging Undergraduate Learning Assistants to Engage Students during Remote Instruction: Strategies and Lessons Learned from Four Institutions. *Journal of Chemical Education 97* (9), 2502-2511 DOI: 10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00779

Nunes, L. (2020) Working Around the Distance. Observer Magazine, September. Association for Psychological Science. https://www.psychologicalscience.org/observer/covid-19-remote-learning-teaching-research

Peigneux, P. and Lorist, M. (2017) Cognitive Fatigue: Underlying Mechanisms and Impact on Performance. Frontiers in Psychology. https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/5824/cognitive-fatigue-underlying-mechanisms-and-impact-on-performance#overview

Wolf CR. Virtual platforms are helpful tools but can add to our stress. Psychology Today. May 14, 2020. Accessed October 19, 2020. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-desk-the-mental-health-lawyer/202005/virtual-platforms-are-helpful-tools-can-add-our-stress

Remote LAing Resources (University of Colorado Boulder)

LAs in eLearning (Learning Assistant Alliance)