

Advice to PALS Instructors: Moving Projects Online During COVID-19

Originally created by Bill Kules (iSchool) - Adapted by PALS Staff

The university has a number of resources available to help you move your courses online. These suggestions focus on issues particularly relevant to project-based like Capstones, but may also be useful for others with projects, teams, and external clients.

Key issues to address when moving Capstone courses online include:

- Robust technology
- Good work spaces - both individuals' and online
- Effective and efficient distributed team work practices
- Clear client communication

PALS recommends the following steps when moving your course projects online:

1. Identify your key technologies for online operation. This might include:

- ELMS/Canvas
- WebEx or Zoom
- Slack
- Team Google drive folders

2. Make and share a plan with students

- Create a draft and share it with students quickly, so they know you are managing the transition.
- Invite students to review and make any comments. Using a Google doc and sharing it in Suggesting mode is a good way to do this.

3. Communicate with clients

- We have included below a sample email for initial communication.
- Have the teams assess, and promptly communicate to clients.
- Follow up as needed, recognizing that it is better to over-communicate a bit in these situations.

4. Prepare physical space and technology (this applies to students, too!):

1. Make sure you have a quiet workspace, with space for your materials, and where you won't be distracted.

2. Make sure you have reliable high-speed internet access, and an up-to-date computer with a good video camera, microphone and speakers.
3. Test your synchronous tools (eg. WebEx or Zoom) with your TA or a student. If there is any feedback, echo or keyboard sounds when you type, get a headset.
4. Practice setting up, entering/leaving a meeting, muting/unmuting, turning video on/off, sharing your screen, etc. until you it is comfortable, quick and reliable.
5. Set up and announce a public practice session 1-2 days before class, so students can practice the same thing.
6. If you have a TA, have them do the same, so they can manage the session (see below).
7. Require your students to confirm they have taken the relevant steps, using an online Google form, a dedicated Slack channel, or an ELMS assignment. This is important because otherwise students will assume that the tech will just work, which we know is rarely true.

5. Prepare online work spaces:

1. Confirm that all materials are in the right places online, e.g. ELMS, Google drive, etc. Communicate these locations to students. Even if you told them before, remind them. It will reduce anxiety.
2. Digitize any needed paper documents. As a quick & dirty approach, most of the time a hi-res picture will work, but make sure that the smallest details are perfectly clear, no fuzziness.
3. Check whether any teams are using or plan to use **any** technology beyond the key technologies. Confirm that you have access to it, and set the expectation that the team will assist you in using it. You can't be an expert in every online tool.
4. If teams have their own work spaces, require each team to confirm they have taken the corresponding steps to prepare them.

6. For online synchronous meetings:

1. Open your WebEx or Zoom room at least 10 minutes before class and check your audio and video connection with your TA or a student.
2. WebEx has a chat window. When a student has a question, have them type it in, and then you can allow them to ask it when applicable. It also has a hand-raising feature, but it is helpful to have the students write their questions first.
3. Use a separate tool to monitor for technical issues during the class meeting. That way you or your TA can walk them through restarting the tool, etc. without losing them.
4. Have all your materials and tools open and ready to screenshare.
5. If you have a TA, get them trained in the tool, and assign them to monitor the chat channel(s) and manage the technical aspects, so that you can focus on the content.
6. Additional tips (from Brianna Blaser, PhD at University of Washington, DO-IT):
 - a. Encourage participants to state their name and institution each time they speak.



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- b. Ask participants to limit the background noise as much as possible and mute themselves when not speaking.
- c. When URLs or other resources are mentioned, have someone designated to type them into the chat window - or follow up with participants after the meeting.
- d. Encourage folks to look at their name in the participant list and change it to their First Last if it defaulted to something else.

Sample email for initial client communication

Subject: UMD project adjustments due to COVID-19

Dear _____,

I am writing to let you know of a development that will impact our projects during the next few weeks. In [response to COVID-19](#), the University of Maryland will extend Spring Break one week, and then move all classes online as of March 30. Our project teams have primarily been meeting face-to-face up to this point, so we are transitioning to a distributed team model. With a few modifications and some flexibility, I am confident that the students will complete your project successfully.

One step that each team will take is to review their work plan to identify any needed adjustments. For example, they might need to convert in-person interviews to online interviews. The team will contact you to share their plan, and check to see if your organization is considering any steps that should be accounted for. Because of the extended Spring Break (March 16-29), you can expect to hear back from the team by Friday, April 3.

The university continues to monitor and respond to the COVID-19 issue. If any new issues arise, we will update you. In the meantime, if you have any questions or concerns, please contact PALS Director, Kim Fisher (kmfisher@umd.edu), or PALS Graduate Assistants, Lily Murnen and Kenny Turscak (lmurnen@umd.edu, kturscak@umd.edu).

Sincerely,

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