Pivoting to Online Instruction in Biblical Studies
Jessica Tinklenberg
jessicat@claremont.edu

Colleges and universities across the country are "pivoting" to remote instruction in order to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect our campuses and communities. For religious and biblical studies instructors, the rapid switch to an online platform can be daunting; in the midst of our concerns for the well-being of our students and families, we are also worried about what such a sudden change will mean for classes that have traditionally involved face-to-face discussion, analysis of physical texts, and paper assignments neatly stapled in the corner.

As the director of a Center for Teaching and Learning and a former professor of biblical studies, I want to offer our membership four key principles that can help any of us, even tech neophytes and hard-core Socratic dialogists, finish the semester strong and assured that our students are learning.

1. **Start with your learning goals, not the tech**. Just like people hoard toilet paper in a time of crisis, we faculty can hoard teaching tech tools out of fear in such an unfamiliar situation. It turns out, though, that the tools you are trying desperately to master in two days might be a waste of time and effort because they just aren't the things that help your students learn in your class context. Instead, look back at your learning goals from the beginning of the semester / quarter. Which ones are critical to student success? Which can be let go (because some will have to be let go)? For *only* those you've identified as crucial, move on to step two.

2. **Go as low tech as you can**. Sure, your IT department has some amazing synchronous whiteboard sharing tools available and that's great. But, how many of your students have the bandwidth at home for that? Does your institution? Do you? What if that group discussion with 60 students you've set up in Zoom crashes? Consider the limitations and possible disruptions to an already fragile classroom community that synchronous and video-intensive tech might cause, and then choose the simplest solution to your problem that still meets your learning goals. For example, if you want your students to continue to discuss texts in your class consider making a google doc or setting up an asynchronous chat in your learning management system (LMS). You can even use a Twitter hashtag or closed Facebook group for easy access. Let students respond as they are able to a question you pose, and then invite them to comment on each others' posts with what they are gaining from the conversation. The point is the learning, after all. Which brings me to step three.

3. **Communicate with your students and let them have some say in how to succeed in this new environment.** Communication, and especially communication that says you care about student well-being and success, is critical in this chaotic time. Send an email or an LMS message that communicates your belief that your students *will* succeed, that you have thought a lot about what is critical and accessible for their success, and that now you want them to tell you how they are going to get there. For example, if you previously had a 15-page paper due at the end of the course you might want to break

down the key learning goals of that assignment and let students contract with you on how to still meet each of those goals in a way that is manageable given their access at home. Or, you might want to set a "Passing" bar (complete three of the five remaining assigned papers, for example) and then allow your students to take the course Pass/Fail instead of for a grade. Remember, the learning is the goal—not the assignment—and there can be many paths to success when students are challenged, supported, and trusted. Which is why the fourth principle is …

4. **Promote collaboration and trust.** I have heard from faculty that they thing they worry about most is cheating when exams move online, and I understand. As it turns out, though, several studies indicate that students don't cheat any more frequently online than they do face-to-face. So why do we worry? I think our cheating worries stem from our fear that our students don't value our content as much as we do, or that if we don't have eyes on them we won't have control over their work. Unfortunately, in this charged and panicked time an emphasis on surveillance and mistrust can only serve to raise student anxiety and inevitably decrease productivity—not what we want if we want our students to succeed. So, I want to suggest that you consider not giving that high-stakes final exam in any online format, in the LMS or otherwise. Instead, invite students to work together (virtually) on a final project, a video, a collaborative essay, or any other thing that reinforces community and collaboration and serves your learning goals. Our biggest fear about suddenly going online shouldn't be cheating; it *should* be that we lose the community we worked so hard to build all semester, and that our students didn't get a chance to show us what they learned. Our final assignments should give our students a way to prove those fears ungrounded.

I'm sure that when you clicked on this essay, you thought it would be full of tech tips and synchronous WebEx strategies. However, I am convinced by all we know about student learning that every tech tip in the world will do no good if we don't foreground student learning, recognize our (and their) limits and strengths, communicate effectively, and promote collaboration and trust. Anyone, anywhere, can do these things; you don't need an educational technologist's degree or even know how to log into Canvas (although you probably should think about learning that one at some point). Good luck.