Time on Task for Remote Courses: A Guide for Planning & Teaching Your Remote Course

The purpose of this guide is to help you make informed decisions about allocating student time and effort both during and outside the class periods. Determining how much work to provide to students in remote courses can be especially challenging due to balancing the students' desire for synchronous class sessions against concern of Zoom fatigue and its impact on learning. Questions faculty often ask are: Am I giving too much- or too little- work for students to complete? Can I give shorter lectures and assign more work outside of class without compromising the rigor of my course? With official university regulations as the guiding principle, we discuss the different ways you can break up your course into synchronous and asynchronous components so as to enhance both teaching and learning in remote environments while adhering to academic regulations.

Terminology

Asynchronous: Coursework that is completed without a specific meeting time.
Direct Instruction: Any time a student is interacting with the instructor or material in a meaningful way. This can include working on worksheets, group work, and other classroom activities that are parts of a synchronous class.
Modality: Delivery method of a course. Includes remote/hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous modalities.
Remote Course: An online course with synchronous sessions. Often referred to as a hybrid course.
Student Work Outside of Direct Instruction: Preparations, interactions with content and other students, and other content which contribute to a student's ability to complete the coursework and meaningfully contribute to the learning community in the course.
Synchronous: Coursework that is completed at a specific meeting time.
Time on Task: How long it takes a student to complete coursework.

University Guidance: Academic Rules and Regulations

At American University, guidance exists for allotting course time regardless of modality. As defined in the Academic Rules and Regulations for both undergraduate (1.0) and graduate (3.1) education:

> American University uses the Carnegie Classification definition of a credit hour. A credit hour is defined as at least 12.5 hours of direct instruction (synchronous or asynchronous) with at least 25 hours of student work outside of that direct instruction, usually spread over 15 weeks, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time. The definition covers all types of courses, disciplines, programs, degree levels, formats, and modalities of instruction (including hybrid and online).

Therefore, a three-credit course should include 37.5 hours of Direct Instruction and 75 hours of Student Work Outside of Direct Instruction over the course of the 15-week semester. This translates to, on average, 2.5 hours of direct instruction and 5 hours of student work per week. (Note that 2.5 hours of direct instruction is a requirement while 5 hours of student work is a recommendation). We recommend that you discuss your plans with your department chair or program director to ensure that there is consistency in how instructional requirements and recommendations are implemented within your unit.

Zoom Fatigue and Direct Instruction

Zoom fatigue is the "tiredness, worry or burnout associated with overusing virtual platforms of communication"[1]. This is a relatively new phenomenon, but one that is pervasive and growing among our students (and ourselves) as remote courses become the standard modality due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, when designing remote courses, it is important to offer different and multiple opportunities for students to interact and engage with the course content and you.

Direct instruction can take several forms and can be used interchangeably to make up the required 2.5 hours per week. Ideally, when including additional options for Direct Instruction, either the amount of Student Work Outside of Direct Instruction or synchronous class time on Zoom should decrease. The tasks students do should be balanced, realistic, and aligned with the Academic Rules and Regulations.

Below, we offer examples of "mixing things up". These examples are not meant to be prescriptive or replicated for the entire semester. Rather, our goal is to prompt thinking about the structure of your class in ways that promote student learning, satisfy students' desire to meet synchronously, and encourage engagement while reducing Zoom fatigue. If some of these instructional strategies are new to you, CTRL is ready to help you acquire the skills necessary to implement them.

Example Schedule of Instructional Activities for a Week

Example 1	Type of Task	Time on Task Minutes	Student Work (SW) or Direct Instruction (DI), Minutes
Pre-Class (Asynchronous)	Readings, 50 pages YouTube video, 10 minutes Open note quiz, 10 questions	140 15 60	SW = 215
During Class (Synchronous)	Lecture Group Work Large Group Discussion Lecture	25 60 45 20	DI = 150
Post-Class (Asynchronous)	Individual presentation	75	SW = 75

Example 2	Type of Task	Time on Task, Minutes	Student Work (SW) or Direct Instruction (DI), Minutes
Pre-Class (Asynchronous)	Readings, 25 pages Discussion board post, 250 words with citations	70 120	SW = 70 DI = 120
During Class (Synchronous)	Large group discussion	45	DI = 45
Post-Class (Asynchronous)	Discussion board post replies	72	DI = 72

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[1] https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/psychological-exploration-zoom-fatigue

Assigning Student Work in Remote Courses

A common challenge for faculty teaching remote courses is determining how much work to assign or conversely, estimating how long an assignment will take to complete (i.e., Time on Task). Indeed, our students have widely voiced concerns about the amount of work they are being asked to do. While this might reflect the incorrect notion that increasing workload adds rigor, more often, faculty are likely to underestimate the time it takes for students to complete a task. Also, it is important to remember that students have other classes to complete work for, have jobs, family obligations, internships, and a myriad of other commitments they need to attend to. Ultimately though, it is for you to decide how much work your students can reasonably complete for your course.

To assist in calibrating the amount of student work that should be assigned for both Direct Instruction and Student Work Outside of Direct Instruction, we have collated estimates for a variety of tasks and activities typically assigned in a course.

Please note though that these are averages: some students may take less time, while others may need more. Moreover, these suggestions do not consider accommodations that students need to complete their work. If you are unsure how to modify your expectations, please work the Academic Support and Access Center to ensure all of your students' needs are met.

Time on Task for Instructional Strategies and Assessments.[2] Below are examples of time on task recommendations for common activities. A Time on Task calculator is available from [Wake Forest University's Center for the Advancement of Teaching](#)

Task	Type of Task	Time on Task	Direct	Outside
Writing Assignment, Discussion Board	100 words (no citations / with citations)	25 / 50 minutes*	✔	✔
Writing assignment, Non-Discussion Board	100 words (no citations / with citations)	25 / 50 minutes*		✔
Content Review (completed prior to synchronous class session)	Text (articles, textbook, papers)	180 words per minute*		✔
	Pre-recorded lectures	Recording time + 15 minutes	✔	
	Video (YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)	Recording time + 15 minutes		✔
Content review (completed after synchronous class session)	Review of class notes / slide deck	50 minutes		✔
Group work	Answer 3-4 questions collaboratively, completed during synchronous class session	60 minutes	✔	
	Answer 3-4 questions collaboratively, completed outside synchronous class session	90 minutes¶	✔	✔
Assessments	10 multiple choice questions (closed book, emphasizes information recall of reviewed content)	15 minutes	✔	
	10 multiple choice questions (open book, emphasizes application and analysis of concepts)	60 minutes		✔
	250-word essay question (with citations, open book)	120 minutes*		✔
Presentations	Individual, 250 words in length (in class or pre-recorded; includes preparation time)	150 minutes		✔
	Group, 250 words in length (in class or pre-recorded; includes preparation time)	180 minutes		✔

* Time on task can be scaled based on assignment or reading length
¶ This includes time needed to set up meeting time, review and research questions, collate answers, etc.