As Gustavson continues with online learning into the fall term, many people may be wondering how this transition has been working so far. Our very own Mia Maki and Sara Elias gave us the inside scoop on the online classroom and shared what things look like from their side of the screen.

Assistant Teaching Professor Mia Maki

How have you been adapting to online learning?

I look at technology like Zoom and I say, “What does it do well? Let’s really, really push that to the limit and use every inch of it!” There can’t be a classroom experience and we’re given a different platform to work on, then I’m going to push it really hard. Breakout rooms—Zoom does those really well. I use breakouts extensively. Polls are another great tool. Allowing students to interact in a bunch of different formats...these are some of the ways that I’ve adapted my teaching. They are platform opportunities, but also ways of allowing the students to have more freedom and opportunity for expression than they would have in the classroom.

How have you been using Zoom to engage with your students?

One of my favourite ways of interacting with students is annotation. I’ll put up a slide that has something on it or a whiteboard that’s empty and maybe I’ll draw something on it, and then I’ll ask them to annotate it. We’ve had a lot of fun with that as far as exploring different ideas, the pros/cons of cases and theories, and as a way to blow off steam by creating “art” as a thank-you to a guest speaker at the end of a class.

One thing I do with almost all of my classes is an incoming poll. The students look at the poll, and they get to select all that applies. It’s just to check in—“How are you feeling today?”—and I think it’s a really great way to start the class.

What can students do to maximize their use of online learning platforms?

One of the things that I think students neglect to do is to tell us what you need. Be open in: don’t prejudge the experiences, come into the classroom, experience a few classes, and then by all means give us feedback on what’s working and not working.

Why do you teach?

I teach because I care. I want my students to learn; I want them to be successful, and not just within the four walls of the institution. It matters a lot to me that my students go on and are successful. It matters a lot to me that they know I care about that. That doesn’t change—it doesn’t matter if we’re in class or online.

What advice do you have for students starting online classes?

My advice for them would be to just be really open and also to tell us what you need. Be open in: don’t prejudge the experiences, come into the classroom, experience a few classes, and then by all means give us feedback on what’s working and not working.

Assistant Professor Sara Elias

How have you been adapted to online learning?

Our classes are usually three hours long [with] activities throughout. We had to adapt a bit to the online setting, so for the first weeks, we did a little bit of experimentation with different formats and we got a lot of feedback from students. The students have been amazing in providing feedback on what works, what doesn’t work and what could be improved. While teaching with Zoom, I still wanted to try to develop and nurture that connection that we typically have with students in the traditional classroom setting, and that is why I chose to go completely asynchronous for the classes I taught during the summer term. As we were learning through the process, we then decided to do shorter classes with a bit of an asynchronous component. So the students started doing more prep work, and then we would come to class together for about an hour and a half to two hours.

Are your connections with students different in an online classroom?

I think they are different. For example, one thing that I miss a lot from the traditional classroom setting is the informal conversations right after class—students sticking around to chat or me reaching out to the shy students who don’t speak up in class, talking to them and maybe just sitting with them for a bit. We don’t have that level of informality to connect with one another online, but the students do reach out and send emails, and I encourage them to do that. That’s one way they can also contribute and share their thoughts, if they’re a bit shy or nervous to do that in class. It’s not necessarily better or worse, it’s just different.

Why is it important to keep things fun in the classroom?

In my approach to teaching, I try to have a fun environment for learning. I think that’s important just generally, but also right now because we’re living through a pandemic. These times are hard for everyone and many people are struggling with mental health. I think fostering a certain lightness to the class environment, so that students feel excited about coming to class, and know that they have a place to come learn—but while they’re learning, they’re also connecting to others and learning from others—is definitely very important nowadays.

How would you address concerns or misconceptions around online teaching?

I don’t think it should be a concern that just because we’re doing online teaching, it’s going to be less than the traditional setting. It’s different, so we’re actually incorporating things that we couldn’t do in the traditional classroom to be there for students and to support them through the learning process. We’re trying to come up with different kinds of different ways to provide the unique experience that they’re expecting. I highly encourage students to keep enrolling in classes and take as many classes as possible. Especially during a pandemic, when you spend a lot more time at home, online classes are a great way of connecting with others.

Why do you teach?

For me, teaching is connecting; I love connecting with students, as well as facilitating connections and healthy discussions between them. We can all learn so much from one another, so it is important to connect with your professors and your colleagues. And it’s not necessarily any different just because it’s online or it’s during a pandemic. I think it’s important to create these connections, and it’s up to all of us to do this.