Teaching Reflections - CIS 201 Introduction to Computer Science

CIS 201 is a 4-credit course with 3 credits of lecture and 1 credit of lab. This is an introductory course and is a prerequisite for all other courses in computer science. The students have to get a minimum of 2.0 to move to the next class in the computer science degree program. This is a critical course for both recruiting and retaining computer science students. I have taught this course almost every semester during my time in SUNY Potsdam.

With the pandemic, offering this course over the past two semesters (Spring 2020 and Fall 2020) has posed significant challenges and a major effort to convert this course to an online one. This is because the course requires students to use a special software (Java) for their homeworks and labs and we had focused our effort in configuring the computer lab in Dunn Hall to handle this requirement. With the switch to online offering, the setup of the software on their personal laptops created several issues. Students had a variety of hardware (Chromebooks, old PCs, Macs, etc) and for many of them this was the first introduction to computers and they were unable to follow setup instructions on the Moodle page. I worked with many of them individually to solve this problem. Students with Chromebooks did not have an option to install the software and so I finally created an online version of the lab that was platform independent.

In Spring 2020, when we moved to online teaching on short notice, I offered the course as an asynchronous one. I posted recorded videos, associated quizzes, and related homeworks on a weekly basis. At the end of the semester, though the students had very positive feedback for the course, I was personally dissatisfied with the lack of direct interaction with students during the class. For Fall 2020, I moved to synchronous lectures and lab, with breakout rooms to ensure that I can provide personalized help during the lab. This revised organization of the class worked better for both me and the students.

I'm again teaching this course this semester and offering it synchronously. My experience from the past two offerings have helped in smooth conduct of this course so far.