Held Captive and Told to Play: Takeaways from Training for Online Modality in Higher Education

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated the need to prepare higher education faculty for transitioning from in-person to online modality. Researchers note the need to train faculty in course design, building classroom community, and establishing a teaching presence, among other things. This paper describes a professor's participation in a university-funded professional development programme that aimed to boost quality in instructional design and result in rapid deployment of online courses. The programme required the professor to enrol in a foundation course in online teaching during the Summer 2023 semester and to transition two doctoral courses to online modality in time for the Fall 2023 semester. The foundation course focused on course design, accessibility, instructional roles, community, and more. Keys to the successful transition were the incentive offered by the university, one-on-one support for assisting with building the course in the learning management system, the 10-week immersion with a focus on course design, and being given time to play with new technologies. Other important takeaways from the summer experience are described. These meaningful practices for professional development may be useful to universities as they consider how best to enhance online teaching and learning, especially faculty motivation and training.

 Keywords: online teaching; instructional design; faculty training; faculty incentive

Introduction

In Spring 2023, I applied for a professional development grant that aimed to help faculty transition in-person courses to fully online courses. The grant stipulated that participants would complete a 10-week foundation course in online teaching, plus three shorter electives, and go live with the new online course in either Fall 2023 or Spring 2024. As a grant recipient, I would receive a stipend, plus funds for travelling to present a paper about my work at a conference. The opportunity to learn something new, to get help with the transition to online modality, and to get paid for it all seemed too good to pass up. In fact, when I learned I could double the incentive by transitioning a second course, I submitted applications for converting two doctoral classes—one research and one literacy—to fully online courses.

What was I thinking? My summer was already packed. In addition to teaching two courses, I was buying a house, moving, and selling a house. What possessed me to take on such an arduous task—times two—in the summer? The answer was simple; the incentives, primarily the generous stipend, were irresistible. My applications were approved, and from the beginning of the experience I knew that I had significantly increased my summer workload. For certain, I did not anticipate the rigor of the coursework, nor did I take into consideration the unexpected challenges that accompanied moving and buying and selling homes. To further complicate matters, both courses that I chose to convert to online modality were being offered in the Fall

2023 semester, which meant I had committed not only to completing the 10-week course in online teaching but also to building two online courses by early August. Indeed, it was a short summer. But between the start of the project in late May and completing the redesign of both courses in August, I went from feeling frustrated and inundated by the tasks at hand to feeling accomplished and proud of not only the courses but also the depth of knowledge I had gained about online teaching and learning. A pay incentive, a 10-week immersion, support, and the time to play with technology were all key to my success. In the discussion that follows, I share some insights, tools, and strategies that I added to my professional toolbox during my busy immersion in the summer of 2023 into online teaching and learning. I conclude with recommendations for universities as they consider ways to enhance online teaching and learning.

Background

Scholars recognise the importance of professional development for quality online teaching and learning (Acosta et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2019; Online Learning Consortium, 2016; Sanga, 2018). Best practices for online teaching in higher education generally revolve around systematic design, assessment and evaluation, and instructor facilitation (Martin et al., 2018). Course design is described as the "instructional blueprint" when building online courses (Zimmerman et al., 2020, p. 149). Thus, research has demonstrated the need to prepare faculty in course design but also in facilitating online communication, time management, and the use of technology (Martin et al., 2019). Student interaction with peers and the instructor "is the heart and soul of effective asynchronous learning" (Pelz, 2010, p. 107), and much attention has been given to facilitating online collaborations and discussions (Baker, 2011; Brindley et al., 2009; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; So, 2019). The frequently-cited Community of Inquiry model for online teaching describes the importance of social, cognitive, and teaching presences (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The Online Learning Consortium (2016) further delineates key concerns for "quality course teaching and instructional practice," including course design, accessibility, outcomes, content, assignments, instructional role, engagement, community, communication, and continuous course improvement. All of these key concerns and more were addressed in my summer training programme.

My university established a professional development programme to encourage both quality in instructional design and rapid deployment of online courses. Training for the initiative's first grant recipients was facilitated by Online Learning Consortium, a community of post-secondary educators focused "on driving best practices for quality online learning" in higher education (Online Learning Consortium, 2023, para 1). My decision to transition two courses to online modality aligned with efforts by my university's College of Education to better meet the needs of its students and to continue to recruit from a broader base. Increasingly, the College of Education's PhD programme had attracted students living and working beyond the immediate university area and, in some instances, students struggled to balance full-time work schedules, lengthy commutes, and evening classes. The transition also aligned with the university's strategic plan to grow online programmes, increase accessibility, expand the university's reach, and enhance its impact and reputation.

My personal and professional career goals included improving my content knowledge and enhancing my teaching skills. I recognised that converting to an online format would require that I review my course content and seek new knowledge and sources related to the content. I expected this process of review and research to expand my content knowledge, benefitting both me and my students. As a social constructivist, I also knew the importance of communities of inquiry (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) and wanted to expand my skill set for engaging students in meaningful learning experiences in an online environment. Although I had been teaching online courses for a number of years, I was often dissatisfied with the level of student engagement and in some instances with student outcomes, and I recognised that I was ignoring proven tools and

strategies simply because I had not taken the time to learn more about them. I wanted to know more about how existing and new technologies could be harnessed for building communities of inquiry in an online setting. Finally, I wanted to incorporate more formative assessment in my courses. My aim was to locate new tools for assessing students' meaning-making and their understanding of key course concepts in order to provide feedback or additional resources when needed.

The project and the training

The professional development project involved two distinct yet related tasks. The first was to complete the training, for which I would be paid and certified as an online educator. The second was to build asynchronous online courses, which in my case would be offered to doctoral students in less than 3 months.

The 10-week training provided participating faculty with the opportunity to learn, as students, in an online course. The Online Learning Consortium used the Canvas platform to deliver the training, assigning participating faculty to learning groups for the duration of the course. The course was designed as a community of inquiry, and it modelled the best practices that faculty, as students, were expected to incorporate in their own online course designs. For each week of the course, participants were asked to access scholarly materials, complete assignments, and post discussions. The materials ranged from research and essays to videos and websites, all of which focused on some aspect of teaching and learning. Assignments varied from building elements of our course design to posting discussions in response to prompts related to the week's materials or in response to peers' posts. Assignment instructions were clear and included rubrics for evaluation and concise directions for success. A facilitator provided individual feedback and posted grades and announcements. By the end of the course, I was expected to complete a course design, the course syllabus, and one assignment with a rubric for evaluation. I also was expected to complete three additional elective workshops and provide a demonstration of my live online course, which would be evaluated by an Online Learning Consortium mentor, within a year.

Shortly after I started the training, I also began bi-weekly meetings with an instructional designer, from the university's teaching and learning centre, who assisted me in building the new online courses within my university's learning management system. The instructional designer was well trained in the learning management system tools and in online course design. The designer met with me weekly and responded promptly to emails or phone calls for assistance. With the instructional designer, I initially explored the tools and technologies that I wanted to incorporate in my courses, but, with the approaching deadline always on our minds, we soon began constructing the courses in the online platform. I completed construction of both courses by the start of August, slightly ahead of schedule.

Takeaways

During my packed summer of learning, I reaped more benefits than I had imagined possible. I discovered many news tools and strategies for sharing content, engaging students, and assessing their work, and I discovered a plethora of resources, both content and pedagogy, that helped me to grow as a professional. Important takeaways are shared in the discussion that follows.

Intense focus on course design and navigation

I was grateful for the time and attention given to the basics of course design, especially the intense focus on writing clear objectives and the intentional aligning of course activities and outcomes with those objectives. This attention to instructional design is a well-established best practice identified by award-winning online faculty and in other research (Martin et al., 2019). A course guided by clear and aligned learning objectives improves student retention, motivation,

and learning (Acosta et al., 2021). As a teacher of teachers, I am well aware of this pillar of teaching and learning, having repeatedly taught teacher candidates to write clear, focused objectives. Yet experience has shown that faculty often inherit courses from others or follow long-established practices for course materials and assignments, and they sometimes struggle to find or make time for intense review and revision. During the online training and follow-up with an Online Learning Consortium mentor, I wrote and revised course objectives three times, each time incorporating feedback. This part of the redesign was rewarding, and in the end, I felt my courses were more streamlined and focused, with more meaningful and engaging assignments that would strengthen cognitive presence in an online community. In other words, I got rid of a lot of fluff and busy work that had accumulated over the lifetime of the course and that presented barriers to learning potential. At the same time, I strengthened activities that promoted critical thinking and reflexivity.

Another takeaway from my discussions with my instructional designer was the idea of uploading course files to a central location and linking wherever possible to those files, so that students were not forced to search for the files. I have always provided students with course documents (such as schedules, rubrics, assignment instructions, and handouts) but in the past I had created a folder within each course and uploaded all the documents to that folder, repeating this action every semester. Then I would tell students where to find the folder if they wanted to access a rubric, a handout, or assignment instructions. This was inefficient, to say the least. A more efficient step, which I had seldom used, was to upload every file to a central location in my learning management system and then create links within the course to specific files. Now all course documents are uploaded to one location in the learning management system, and I create a link each time a document is mentioned within a course. For example, when I mention a rubric, the word "rubric" is a link to that file. When I mention an assignment or discussion, I link to the instructions for those activities. Not only does this make course navigation easier for students, but I expect the use of a central repository for all course materials will be an incredible time saver in future semesters when I prepare to teach the same courses again.

Time to play with technology

One benefit of the online training was its requirement that participating faculty try out new digital tools. The course facilitator provided an annotated list of many platforms and applications, and students were told to spend time learning about some of the new tools, then to evaluate and discuss their experience with two of the tools. This required "play" time was what I needed to increase my knowledge of new tools. For example, I discovered Padlet, a free and fairly simple-to-use digital bulletin board. I used Padlet for multiple purposes. First, I created a content board titled "Tips for Qualitative Researchers" and uploaded individual content posts on interviewing, observations, field notes, and transcribing, which were assigned reading at various points during my research course. Discussions were the second use of Padlet. Threaded discussions continued to dominate in online courses in 2017 (Anderson, 2017), and I was among those professors who always used threaded discussions. But Padlet provided a new way for students to both discuss course readings and comment on each other's posts. Besides being more aesthetically pleasing than a threaded, text-only discussion board, the Padlet board held everyone's posts in one place: students could easily review what others were posting without scrolling through multiple threads. A bonus was my ability to upload, as a backdrop to the Padlet board, a photograph of the previous year's research students attending a qualitative research conference with their professors. I knew this new cohort would recognise some of their peers and hoped they would be motivated to attend the next conference. I believe Padlet helped to increase my teaching presence, which is considered essential in online learning. Teaching presence involves instructor modelling, feedback, and active facilitation (Anderson, 2017).

I also learned to create an infographic, another type of visual tool for sharing information, because I was assigned to create one to introduce myself to my peer group in the training. Again, the application was simple, but I had never taken the time to "play" with an infographic. This tool, like the previous one, was used by me to share content and by students to share what they were learning. In the online literacy course, I replaced an academic paper with an infographic: students used the visual poster and a recorded voiceover to explain what they had learned about a theory used in literacy research. Providing students with opportunities to use multiple modes for demonstrating understanding aligns with the New London Group's call for giving students multiple ways of meaning-making (New London Group, 1996; Serafini & Gee, 2017). In the future, I plan to use an infographic to introduce myself to my students and will invite them to create their own infographics to introduce themselves to each other in class. Requiring students to introduce themselves and link up with their peers serves to create a more inviting atmosphere and helps establish critical social presence (Pelz, 2010; Morrison, 2014), which "opens the door to and makes possible cognitive presence" and leads to student success (Anderson, 2017).

Existing tools

My university uses a D2L Brightspace platform for learning management, and for 16 years I have been using this platform for posting assignments, collecting student work, and recording grades. I've also used it for quizzes and for sharing content. But many of its tools had gone unused simply because I was getting by, and did not set aside the time to learn to use them. Technology support is another essential pillar for an online modality (Acosta et al., 2021), and the grant provided this needed training and support. One assignment during the training was to familiarise myself with the tools in my university's learning management system. The first tool I checked out was YuJa Media, a platform for integrating video into coursework. Before starting the online training, I had attended a workshop on using film clips to teach qualitative research, so when my instructional designer suggested I check out YuJa, I was eager to get started. I have yet to master this tool, but already I have used it to share videos from guest qualitative researchers in my courses. Being able to embed pauses and discussion prompts so that students respond as they view the material will be useful for assessing their meaning-making and understanding, which helps me reach my goal of including in my courses more formative assessments and multimodal ways of demonstrating understanding. Using available tools in learning management systems helps faculty "gain real-time insight on how students are performing" (Acosta et al., 2021, p. 13).

Another tool already within my reach was the learning management system's rubric tool. I've long been an advocate of detailed rubrics, but in evaluating student papers, I created and scored rubrics in a word processing document and returned them, along with my marginal comments made in students' downloaded papers, by way of email. Regular feedback, another key pillar (Acosta et al., 2021), has long been a strength, based on my course evaluations, but it's also been a time-consuming process. I've now replaced that process with the learning management system's evaluation tools. The rubric is attached to the assignment in the online course, and I use it as I read the student's submission, inserting notes in the paper and comments in the rubric as needed to explain my scoring. This has saved time and eliminated the need for storing student documents on my computer.

Learning new and revisiting old strategies

One new strategy I developed during the online training was suggested by a peer during our exploration of open educational resources. The peer mentioned YouTube's Educraft as a source of feedback on student writing. I feel I should not be a grammar teacher in a doctoral-level research course, but sometimes students do need help with writing, especially if they plan to submit for publication. For example, I frequently find myself asking students to use parallel construction and trying to explain what that means. As I explored EduCraft, I found several videos that explained parallelism, so the next time I find this issue in a student's writing, I will

reference a short video to help the student understand parallel structure and devote the bulk of my time to evaluating the paper content.

Through course materials and my participation in a peer group during training, I learned some different options for enhancing student engagement in discussions. I was initially skeptical of the training's required discussions, especially the peer-to-peer feedback. In the past, my students have expressed a dislike of the requirement that they respond to peers' posts. Many students want to get the assignment done and move on. Yet social presence and student connection are essential to online learning (Acosta et al., 2021; Anderson, 2017; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Suddenly, as a student in the Online Learning Consortium course, I was among those who just wanted to do the assignments and move on. But I did receive some useful tips during the course for enhancing student discussions. I appreciated that discussions in the training were not required every week. In my online courses in the past, I've required discussions each week, and responses to peers' posts were always due the next week, at the same time that the new discussion post was due. Now I have a mid-week deadline instead for responding to peers' posts, and I don't require discussions every week. In addition to using the rubrics to evaluate their participation, I try to post a weekly summary of their discussions, using this to both reinforce and, if needed, to correct misunderstandings. I also try to mention every student by name in the summary. Perhaps more than any other takeaway from my summer training, this strategy helps me to facilitate discussion and to achieve my goal of establishing a strong teaching presence and thus strengthening the online community of inquiry (Anderson, 2017; Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Resources

One unexpected benefit from the summer training was the location of new sources of course content. One week of the course was spent discussing open educational resources, and our assignment for the week was to explore a list of websites (e.g., OER Commons and Merlot) for materials that might replace or supplement existing textbooks. One suggestion for potential resources was YouTube and, in my explorations, I was pleasantly surprised to find many videos by authors of textbooks used in my courses. While those videos are not substantial enough to replace the textbooks, they may help to strengthen student connections to the content. I have continued my search for zero-cost materials for other courses, and with the help of my research assistant and faculty at the university library, I have discovered required textbooks for other courses that are available as open educational resources.

Evaluation

Students evaluate university courses through an online survey near the end of each semester. As well as to standard questions for all courses, questions can be added to the evaluation by faculty. Participants in the online training were encouraged to use this tool for evaluation. For the first time in my 16 years at the university, I added questions to the online survey for each redesigned course. Among other things, I wanted to know students' thinking on teacher presence and course navigation.

Class sizes in the doctoral programme are small, and the evaluation survey is voluntary, often with poor response rates, so although I encouraged and reminded students to complete the survey, only four of nine students in the research course responded. All of those four indicated they "strongly agree" that a) "the course was easy to navigate" in the online platform, b) they "felt the professor was present during the course," and c) "assigned activities helped me meet course objectives". In response to a fourth question, three of the four students strongly agreed and the fourth student "somewhat" agreed that "Padlet was a useful tool for discussions". Only two students were enrolled in the literacy course, and only one answered the additional questions on the evaluation. That student strongly agreed that the course was easy to navigate and that the

teacher was present in the course. They strongly agreed that the "infographic was an appropriate way to present understanding" and somewhat agreed that "Padlet was a useful tool for demonstrating understanding". The student strongly disagreed that "weekly discussions increased my understanding of course materials".

Based on this limited feedback, I need to continue to find multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding, and I must continue to ensure that course discussions are meaningful for students. Fortunately, the online training provided access to a large bank of tools and resources to which I can turn for making such improvements.

Conclusions and next steps

Both of my newly-transitioned online courses went live in August, and I have been pleased with the results. That's not to say there have not been a few hiccups. For example, a couple of small-group assignments intended to promote intense peer review were logistically challenging for students due to a technical glitch. Yet students were patient, and I found a way around the problem; peer review was achieved. Otherwise, as I discovered, once the redesigned course was uploaded in the learning management system, it seemed to proceed with less effort from me for the remainder of the semester. I discovered that a well-designed online course can make me a more efficient and productive professor. By frontloading everything needed for the course from start to finish and by transitioning to evaluating student work within the learning management system, I had more time to focus on student understanding, and I found more time for my own research and writing. I also blocked time for redesigning other courses that I teach, using the tools provided in the training for online teaching and learning.

Apart from my own satisfaction with the experience, I feel it is worthwhile to consider why this process worked so well. Other universities seeking to similarly win faculty buy-in and achieve rapid delivery of enhanced online teaching and learning might benefit from a closer look at the elements that made this process so successful.

First, the university demonstrated that it valued my time, talent, and effort when it offered a generous faculty incentive for the training and course implementation. In addition to the faculty stipend and compensation for travel to conferences, the incentive included certification by a nationally recognised company in online teaching and learning and funds for creating course videos by guest lecturers. Universities may find faculty more willing to transition to online modality if they offer adequate compensation for the necessary work.

Second, the university recognised that to achieve fast delivery of redesigned online courses, I needed support beyond the 10-week course. By assigning each participating faculty member a professional, on-campus instructional designer, the university ensured that its investment in faculty training was not wasted. My reluctance to use tools that had long been available to me was negated by readily available support, and the support was instrumental in meeting the August deadline for course delivery. Universities would do well to plan not only training for faculty but also support that continues as faculty do the work that is required to deliver the finished product.

Third, the university understood the value in requiring faculty to step into the role of student and enlisted a recognised community of post-secondary educators that focus on quality design for online learning. The summer-long immersion was intense, but I immediately recognised the value in being required to do the kind of work I ask my students to do. Universities may find that faculty who are well compensated and supported when they are offered training in course redesign, are more likely to step out of their teaching comfort zone and into the role of student.

Finally, the university and the Online Learning Consortium recognised that faculty needed time to explore and try out new and existing tools. Without this time, my course might have been redesigned on the outside only, and I probably would have continued to ignore valuable tools that I have since put to use in multiple courses. Universities should recognise that providing technology, tools, and training are often not enough; time and space are also needed to play with those tools, even those that have long been available, with support close at hand for encouraging new possibilities.

Participation in my university's professional development programme helped me reach my personal and professional goals of improving course content and enhancing my teaching skills. It also resulted in rapid transition of two courses to online modality. Keys to the successful transition were the faculty incentive, support throughout the process, immersion as a student in intense, design-focused training, and time to play with tools and technologies. Universities hoping to transition more courses to online modality may benefit from such a model, which led to success for this faculty member.

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