

Bookends: Adventures in Undergraduate and Graduate Immersive and Intensive Course Delivery  
in a Brave New Online World

Abstract

In this presentation, three authors/instructors share experiences of preparing for, delivering, and then reflecting on the ‘success’ of the course, its delivery, and feedback from students on the cohort. Specifically, the choices made regarding synchronous/asynchronous delivery, how and what to communicate before and during the weekend, and how to organize ‘blocks’ to allow students time to step away from the class/their computers. An important aspect of the online/home course works design was the acknowledgment that students in their home environments with families close by and the possibility of technical challenges are likely to experience significant challenges to their engagement compared to the same students in a dedicated classroom with minimal distractions. We will reflect on the relative successes/failures we encountered and how we were able to share what went well/not so well with others teaching on the program to better prepare them for their success.

*Keywords: Online courses, Positioning Theory, Transitioning to Online*

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Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, academic instructors who taught in-person classes, had to quickly and radically adapt their mode of delivery to an online platform. This transition posed some unique challenges both instructors and students. In this presentation, three experienced professors will share their experiences of preparing for, delivering, and reflecting on the final outcomes of the course. Specifically, we will discuss course delivery, obstacles/challenges, collaboration among faculty and students, as well as student feedback. Lastly, we will discuss our real-life experiences in this endeavor, make recommendations for future course transitions, and engage in a round-table group discussion whereby participants may engage and share their experiences as well. This round table discussion is directed toward instructors/professors who are interested in learning and sharing best practices for transitioning from an in-person class to an online one.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Phillips (2013) argued that positioning theory may be used to provide a framework to explain how the first interactions between instructors and students are essential in setting the tone for student engagement during the term of an online class. Positioning theory combines social and cognitive psychological principles in order to explain the manner in which people interact through conversation and other speech acts (Harre & Langenhove, 1999). The authors of the presentation proposed within this paper have found positioning theory to be an important framework for the transitioning from an in-person class setting to an online one.

Moore and Hodges (2020) posited that online students require certain processes in order to ensure success. They need very clear instructions including feedback that is prompt.

Therefore, it is essential that online students receive specific instructions on what and how to submit assignments. An important benefit to using an LMS is that specific instructions and due dates may be provided very clearly within the platform.

Bakia, Shear, Toyama, Lasseter (2012) argued that in order for an online class to be viewed as a success, such online classes must provide access to material that otherwise may otherwise be unavailable, need to ultimately be as effective, if not more so, than traditional methods of delivery. In essence, in the absence of face-to-face, in-person interactions, it is imperative that online instruction provide equally effective instruction in an online environment. Therein lies the challenge instructors who must transition from in-person instruction to an online one often encounter.

Session Format: Roundtable Discussion

Session Description: This roundtable discussion will begin with each of the authors relating their experiences of transitioning their work and teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak and response. Participants are invited to ask questions and to share their own ‘adventures’ during this rapidly developing and frequently shifting time. Authors will bring the session to a close by discussing lessons learned and how best practices might be developed and assessed for the future. It is intended that the session should be highly interactive (high on discussion, low on presentation) with only a loosely imposed structure for time management purposes.

### The Presentation

The first course/experience is that of a graduate cohort course delivered in weekend blocks. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the second and final weekend of the course was delivered online using Zoom and the institution's LMS with less than two weeks' notice to convert the delivery and manage the students' expectations.

The Program: A Master's level Leadership & Organizational Change course delivered on a cohort model. Courses run two per semester (2 weekends per semester, per course with online interactions before and between classes) and are designed to be high-touch, experiential, reflective, and immersive. The focus is on providing a transformational experience that will allow students to develop their leadership skills and competencies. A summary of the context of the course and students is provided below:

The Cohort: First year (and inaugural) cohort. Thirteen students – early-mid career professionals with one semester of their two-year program completed the previous fall. The cohort is divided into three learning teams, which were organized at the beginning of the program (two teams of four, one of five). The cohort is engaged and enthusiastic with high expectations. Students come from public and private sectors, profit, and nonprofit with a wide variety of educational and employment experiences.

The Course: "High-Performance Organizations." Two weekends, each comprising two 8-hour days (9 am-5 pm). During weekend one, students are introduced to the literature on HPOs and some of the issues faced around measurement, categorization, and definition. A pre-selected project with a local firm is assigned to the team at weekend one with each group assigned a specific aspect of the organizational challenge. During weekend one and weekend, two students work on an analysis of the organization/challenge to bring to the class during weekend two.

Weekend two is planned around presentations (one per team per day) on assessment, analysis, and recommendations with opportunities for teams to feedback to each other during and between those presentations.

The Instructor: Full-time tenured associate professor. First time teaching a weekend/cohort model and a brand-new course on a brand-new program. Limited Zoom experience prior to the delivery of the weekend course. Considerable online teaching experience using primarily asynchronous methods (e.g., videos, readings, discussion forums, etc.)

The Brief: to use Zoom and the LMS to create an engaged, experiential, and synchronous second weekend under new and challenging circumstances for all concerned.

The second course/experience is that of an undergraduate cohort business course delivered over an eighteen-week semester in an in-person classroom setting. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the final seven weeks of the course were delivered online using Zoom and the institution's LMS with less than one weeks' notice to convert the delivery and manage the students' expectations.

The Program: An Undergraduate level First Experience course delivered on a cohort model. Courses run one per semester in a face-to-face classroom setting and are designed to be high-touch, experiential, reflective, and immersive. This part of the presentation will focus on how to utilize collaboration among faculty and students to transition classes from in-person to online within First-Year Seminar/Experience courses and how to link classes within a learning model that enhances the student experience, helps students choose a major, and facilitates student success and retention.

We will discuss the collaborative approach developed by one of the authors of this presentation that incorporates servant leadership within the framework of a shared community

service project. Attendees will learn about the program rationale, curriculum, objectives, how it works, how to gain buy-in, how it was executed, what went well, what could be improved, and overall outcomes. This presentation will be helpful to those stakeholders seeking ways to collaborate and enhance a transition from in-person classroom settings to online to maintain first-year student success and retention rates.

The instructor: Full-time tenure-track assistant professor with six years of experience teaching undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral level courses online. Instructor office hours were on campus then moved to online after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby facilitating face-to-face interactions with students.

The third course/experience is that of an undergraduate cohort business course delivered over an eighteen-week semester in an in-person classroom setting. In this segment, we discuss strategies designed to maintain an open line of communication with students and ways to create engaging learning experiences that allow both collaborative and independent work from a distance. Attendees will leave this presentation with a shared understanding of how to bring a human touch to their online communication strategy, create digital spaces for a community of learners to engage with each other, and employ an equity mindset that promotes culturally affirming interactions. This presentation is ideal for stakeholders who are seeking ways to reframe classroom-based activities and redesign assignments and assessments.

The instructor: Full-time tenure-track assistant professor and program coordinator. Three years of experience teaching undergraduate courses fully online and graduate level courses in hybrid mode in higher education and over a decade of facilitating online trainings for adult learners in government. Instructor office hours were on campus to provide face-to-face

interactions with local students but transitioned to fully online in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Conclusion: We seek to share our experiences with others who may have had similar (or even perhaps very different) experiences of moving courses where individual and group experience is an explicit driver of the course/program and where the challenges of moving online may have a more significant impact on students than regular courses (higher levels of investment/expectation etc.) We look to share our successes, our failures, and how we might learn from our experiences in innovating similar courses in the future.

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