

## **Toward Outdoor Online Learning**

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Even before COVID, field trips were a problematic part of the educational experience. For both learners and instructors, finding the time and resources to conduct meaningful field experiences has been a challenge. With COVID, traditional teaching moved abruptly online, and field trips largely disappeared. This left a critical gap in the educational experience. The value of experiential, place-based learning activities is well-established. Could the new educational experiences of online learning be adapted to support virtual, online field trips in the future?

Prior to the pandemic, my courses were conventional face-to-face interactions. My design studio courses were mostly face-to-face, one-on-one critiques at each student's desk in the studio, and my seminar courses combined lecture, discussions, and student presentations in a conventional classroom. At most, we took one field trip per semester. With COVID came what some have called emergency online teaching—the entire world of education thrown into an online learning environment foreign to so many of us. Like most of my colleagues, I struggled to make this work. New technologies, social norms, and interpersonal relationship structures and settings all conspired to make online teaching and learning a challenge. I used remote learning technologies like Zoom to keep my classes going, but they lacked the personal connections that can develop in face-to-face learning.

On the upside, students enjoyed the freedom to schedule one-on-one design critiques with me in half-hour segments throughout the week rather than spend a minimum of 12 hours in the studio behind a desk. Additionally, a one-on-one critique in an open classroom sometimes inhibited the frankness of conversation. In a private, online conversation, learner and instructor can discuss the work more openly. Our online learning environment also allowed me to bring in guest reviewers from anywhere in the world. My students greatly enjoyed speaking with reviewers from San Francisco to Madrid, and both sides learned from these global experiences. I was also able to spend more time with each student than the classroom schedule allowed. As time passed, and the pandemic dragged on, my students and I gradually improved our online learning and teaching skills. Scheduling and technical matters went more smoothly, interpersonal connections grew stronger, and we learned how to discuss and display online design work more effectively.

By 2021, I found myself wondering if we couldn't combine the benefits of online learning with the best of face-to-face learning once the pandemic lifted. I signed up for numerous online course improvement workshops and courses, such as those run by Quality Matters. Soon, I was certified in online teaching and became a Fellow of the University of North Carolina System's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Institute. These experiences improved

my online teaching exponentially. At the same time, I recalled some of my most intense face-to-face educational experiences and wondered if and how I could replicate them in an online environment. At a previous teaching job, I had taken my students on week-long field trips to extreme environments like Death Valley and the Northern Cascade Mountains. I began to wonder if there was a way to combine the energy and enthusiasm of those extreme experiences with the benefits of online learning.

Those initial ponderings about hybrid learning have grown into a full-blown pedagogical strategy I call Outdoor Online Learning. As the pandemic recedes, and online learning becomes commonplace in higher education, could the online learning experience be adapted to support virtual field trips? The answer may lie in Outdoor Online Learning that combines the benefits of online learning with the thrill of adventure education. These benefits include doing away with the logistical challenges of planning and operating conventional field trips such as cost, time, weather, and transportation. More importantly, Outdoor Online Learning makes these experiences available to all students regardless of ability.

Outdoor Online Learning is not about simply creating virtual field trips. It proposes a model for an integrated, semester-long learning experience weaving prerecorded video interviews and environments into a course combining the benefits of online learning and outdoor experience. To create such a model for an existing course, I have already established commitments from a dozen community leaders to conduct virtual office visits, interviews filmed on site that learners can observe online. These office visits will be augmented by virtual field trips created on site using 360-degree cameras, VR cameras, and drones. When possible, expert guidance and virtual tours will be combined, as at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, where I have already received commitment from park staff to lead virtual, onsite tours.

Outdoor Online Learning provides learners with the skills they need to address urgent 21st Century social and environmental problems. These skills include collaboration, creative problem solving, and experiential learning. Outdoor Online learners work together in teams, experiencing and analyzing remote environments and virtually meeting community experts and leaders. They engage in interactive experiences and apply their learning to the creative problem solving that is the foundation of design education. For example, virtual site visits will enable any student to experience the setting for a specific design problem, regardless of challenges due to cost, time, weather, transportation or ability. In another example, prerecorded virtual meetings with outside experts can be accessed anywhere, anytime, helping students to integrate diverse points of view with their own critical thinking.

In conclusion, Outdoor Online Learning not only addresses the challenges of higher education's digital transformation, it turns them into opportunities—resilient solutions to 21st Century challenges. It does so by merging the benefits of online learning such as asynchronous “anytime/anywhere” learning with interactive learning activities built on inclusive, engaging “real-world” experiences. Hopefully, the development of Outdoor Online Learning proves to be a silver lining to the COVID pandemic, one that helps my students make the most of their higher educational experience regardless of whether we are online or off.