"I Got This": Teaching Online During a Pandemic

Shannon Phelps

Berea College

With the rest of humanity, the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to adapt in many ways, including how I facilitated student engagement and learning — both in terms of course design and organization and with an innovative capstone assignment I had long envisioned but never taken on. Coming out of the blur of the disrupted yet somehow completed spring 2020, jumping into necessary, intensive, "tip of the iceberg" professional development for online course design during the following summer, I somehow, naively, imagined "I got this." But the discouraging remote teaching experiences of the fall shook my easy confidence. My novel approaches, unpreparedness, inexperience, and the personal and collective trauma we were experiencing made for a semester that felt mostly miserable. The remedy to the distress and unease over which I had some measure of control was to bring greater order and organization to my spring courses while also bringing back creativity to my process by designing a project that allowed students to demonstrate their learning in an innovative way.

Before the Big Shift, I had not *once* been interested in teaching online. I've always been energized, enlightened, excited, and sustained by the dynamic, intimate, and connective potential of in-person teaching and learning. My teaching style and strategies involve co-creating the learning experience with students by using discussion-based methodologies and going with the flow, even as I plan week-to-week and keep an eye on course objectives. Though this approach has always called for organization and forethought, I knew the way I historically designed courses and assignments had to change significantly for online delivery: I would need to exchange the organic unfolding and controlled chaos I had practiced face-to-face with greater frontloading and meticulous planning.

Fortunately, over the winter break, I was able to step back and reflect on the fall, taking stock of the positive and impactful strategies I used as well as the shortfalls. For the spring, I realized I needed to get an earlier start, engaging with a backward design course process to ensure the greatest alignment among objectives, content, and evaluation. I considered 1) how my assignments served to measure course objectives and would need to be revised for a distance learning model; 2) how course content and assignments related to each objective and could be arranged in weekly learning modules; and 3) how to sequence and scaffold content and assignments within and between modules.

For the spring, I also moved from the more traditional midterm formative course evaluation by students and instead requested feedback each week. With the College's abbreviated course timeline—7-week "mini-mesters"—doing so allowed me to respond to student feedback and adapt or modify assignments, activities, and structures accordingly. It became abundantly clear from student feedback early in the session, that my 4pm deadlines were unrealistic given increased student responsibilities at home during the pandemic, so I shifted to 11:59pm deadlines. Students expressed appreciation and showed an increased sense of engagement with and trust in me as well as a more positive attitude about the course. Reflecting weekly on the simple questions I posed provided students valuable practice for developing evaluative thinking and communication skills.

Finding it had worked well for students in my fall classes, I also used a weekly overview in Moodle, our learning management system, retaining that organizational strategy for the students AND me, as I used it as my anchor to task management and as a weekly checklist. At the suggestion of a colleague experienced with online teaching prior to the pandemic, I added weekly checklists for the students on Moodle. Like her students, mine were very appreciative of this tool, and I plan to keep it. In both formative and summative evaluations completed by students, a number cited course organization, including the weekly overviews and checklists, as being very helpful to their time and task management. Using a more structured style during these chaotic times and engaging with a new teaching approach helped to anchor me in my practice and reduce my anxiety and unease, which inevitably helped students be more productive in their learning without contributing further to their sense of ungroundedness and unease.

While these organizational and planning adjustments were all made due to the pandemic, prior to teaching online I was already moving away from the traditional research-oriented paper as a culminating product. I wanted to move towards more creative assignments that could foster critical thinking and composition skills, and the fall 2020 online experience and continued pandemic constraints provided impetus. To that end, I drew on one of our ongoing professional development sessions that highlighted creating opportunities for students to connect course content to their environments, physically and geographically, as way of grounding students during such an extraordinary and unsettling time. In the past, I had included a one-time homework activity inspired by Photovoice, a qualitative, visual-based methodology often used in community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Blumenthal, 2011). I decided it could hold potential for an intriguing, appealing, creative, and ongoing assignment for distance learning. As a research methodology, Photovoice works towards building the capacity of individuals and communities by asking them to capture images of the strengths and needs of their communities then to consider how the images reflect both. Participants come together to discuss their images and work together with researchers to analyze and interpret the meaning of the photos; codes and themes can then be identified using transcriptions of these discussions. Engaging in the creative work of crafting an assignment using this methodology alongside my embrace of more course structure brought a new sense of balance and fulfillment to the course preparation process.

Modified to serve as an educational tool, students would capture and submit at least five images each week. These images were to reflect something about the health of their community,

however they defined that community for themselves. Regularly submitting images with optional descriptions/narrative kept them thinking about the project, observing their environments, and broadening or shifting their perspectives. The final project involved them curating 10 photos and composing a written narrative for each that critically examined the course content in the context of their images and using an adapted SHOWED method often employed with Photovoice:

S: What do you **S**ee?
H: What is **H**appening?
O: What does this say about c**O**mmunity?
W: **W**hy does this "condition" exist; what are underlying factors?
E: How does this serve to **E**ducate others?
D: **D**o something about it. How does this image inspire change?

Students integrated and cited course material in their narratives. Prior to submission, I had virtual meetings with each student to discuss themes of their photos and ask probing questions that would drive deeper reflection and connections. For peer review, students examined assigned classmates' photos, identifying course themes from their own perspectives and relating the images to course objectives. This last step gave students an additional opportunity to circle back to course content and objectives and engage with their classmates' work.

I believe this project brought a richness to the experience of demonstrating learning well beyond that of a traditional research essay, while still requiring students to think critically, write coherently, collect, organize, and use supporting material, and practice using and formatting in-text and reference list citations. Many students commented in end of course surveys that they felt this assignment encouraged them to engage in critical thinking, develop their observation and evaluation skills, and grow more aware of how personal and community health are intertwined with social determinants and environments. Not only did students express that the project helped them feel more connected with the course material, it made them more aware of and connected to their communities, which I think served to help ground and center them during an unsettling time.

While my student evaluation numbers did not improve from the fall, the students' comments revealed that my changes and the adoption of new assignments were effective for student learning--and that felt really good as a degree of consolation for and sign of progress from the disastrous fall semester. That students gave me a strong rating for organization of the class and in their weekly feedback expressed appreciation for the thoughtfulness of assignment sequencing and creative assignments also signaled my progress with overall course planning and preparation. While a year of teaching online has affirmed my love for teaching in person, it has also allowed me to maximize the use of our course management system, and I will continue to build and keep more content and correspondence in this realm as well as to design courses more intentionally. Lastly, teaching online insisted that I move forward and take action to revise a cumulative course assignment to be more creative, engaging, and inspiring, and I will certainly continue to use it in my teaching. I now feel more justified in saying—at least with realistic reservations—"I got this."

Reference

Blumenthal, D. S. (2011). Is community-based participatory research possible? *American Journal of Preventative Medicine, 40*(3), 386 – 398. doi:10.1016/j.amepre.2010.11.011