In the Classroom 71
5 Things You Need to Do to Your Online Courses to Prepare for Fall 2020

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Speaker: Well, hello everyone. Welcome back. Thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. Certainly, it means a lot. You could do be doing a lot of other things on this Memorial Day weekend and you're hanging out with me, or at least that's when I recorded, it was Memorial Day weekend. This episode, as I record it, we have three months before the fall term begins, fall 2020. We have exactly 93 days from the day I record this. Because of the COVID-19 virus, the coronavirus, I predict that we would be offering a lot more classes in an online environment.

As I look around the nation, we have a mixed bag. Some folks are trying to get into face to face classes, and that's what they are pushing for. Others are going for a remote learning environment where they're going to be doing and offering classes in an online environment as well as synchronies, using Zoom and things like that. I predict that we're going to be doing a lot of online classes. Therefore, we got to do it right. When we made the shift to remote learning in the spring due to this coronavirus, basically, the move to online was thrown together. It was just keep on building the boat until we can make it to shore.

From there, we have an opportunity to build a good boat. A boat that's seaworthy. A boat that will do what it's supposed to do. We have time to really get it right. When we made that switch to remote, it was not online courses. It was not well-designed online courses. It was a contingency. It was throwing things together and let's make it work. Naturally, the individuals who threw things together, they may not have been happy with the result, and I can't blame them. But don't see that as that's what an online course is, because it's far from the truth. A well-designed online course is a thing of beauty.

We have 93 days to build some really good courses for the fall. We should be using this time to do exactly that. I want to help, because I think we can and should do much better than what we did in the spring. I have a list of five things that you should take into consideration when preparing your courses for fall 2020. Just for fun, I'm going to throw in a bonus. These recommendations are not step by step. Follow them in this order but rather concept and strategies. Although, probably the first one I will say you probably should attend to first. Let's get into what these five things are.

Number one, backward design. I have talked about this in episode 69 and 41. What I'm talking about is go back into your courses, take a look at course goals and objectives. From those course goals and objectives, you are then going to determine your assessments, the activities you're going to use in the course, and finally, the

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content to help students master those activities and assessment. It all start with your course goals and objectives. The goals are the broad topics that you want to cover, where the objectives are more fine-tuned. They are the things that a student should be able to do or demonstrate that they know. That's where you start.

List them, determine what is going to happen in your course, because this decides what's going to be included in your course and also what's going to be excluded from your course. It's a great place to start. From there, you're going to build your assessments, the evaluations that you're going to test your student. They are based on the objective. From there, you're going to build your activities. This is what they will do to practice so they can meet your objective. And then, finally, here's the content that you're going to provide them.

Once you have determined your objectives, your assessments, your activities and content, you will now sequence them so they build upon each other. That there's a logical flow from the beginning of your course all the way to the end. That will start. That will be basics of a solid course. Now, you already may have a course built and what I'm saying is, let's go take an inventory of it. Let's go look at your objectives. Do you, in fact, have good assessments, activities and content that address each of the objectives? Are you missing objectives? Do you have objectives that don't even apply anymore? Let's go fix all that.

Let's take a good inventory and figure out what that is. That's number one. Backward design. Number two, OER, Open Education Resources. Once you have identified your objectives and know what content you need to include so that students will learn the material in your course, I strongly recommend that you go look for open education resource. Basically, these are resources individuals have put together that are available, free that you can weave into your course. Good OER content allows you to adapt it, to localize it to fit your course.

That if you're talking about a specific region of the area that you live in, that you can modify the content so it meets the objective for your particular area. You can also build your own OER content. I talked a lot more about OER in episode three. I suggest you go check that out. I will put a link in the show notes to all the episodes that I'm referring to, because I have talked about these in the past. What I want to do here is give you five things that I think you should work on in the summer in the next 93 days to help you build the best course possible for fall 2020.

OER. OER is not only going to help keep the cost down for the students, but there's many other advantages. One is they have immediate access to your content. How many times have you walked into a class that you want to teach and students do not have the content available to them, because they are not sure if you're going to use that textbook or not? They want to make sure that you're really going to use it. Well, with OER, odds are that you're probably going to use it, because you spent the energy to put it into your course, specifically to meet specific objectives. The odds are that you're going to use that.

Now, it's available to your students. They have a median access. They are not waiting for their grant to come in, their financial aid to pay for the books. It is there immediately for them. The other thing is you can tailor it for your objectives so you can get rid of all the flaws. You can really hone in and focus on that specific content. With OER, you can also more easily meet accessibility guidelines, that you can control the shape of the content that you are providing to make sure that all students have access, that they can comprehend or they can see the content in their way and it is basically available to them.

You can meet those a lot easier when you control the content yourself. That's two. We started with backward design. We talked about OER. Now, let's talk about UDL, Universal Design for Learning. This is another area to explore. For me, UDL means providing support and choice. I will tell you what I mean by that. Based on your objectives, what you can do is you can weave in choice for what activities students can do in order to demonstrate their knowledge. Or by providing choice, you get to give them different ways that they can see the content or have the content presented to them in order for them to best grasp that information.

One way to do this is for your content-- Let's say your content, take an inventory of your content. Look at that piece of content. Determine, is it text base? If so, identify as text base. If it's multimedia, say an audio file or a video, or something of that nature, then you're going to put it under the multimedia column. Go through all your content that you're providing and identify whether it's text base or multimedia. Ideally, you want both text and multimedia for each of your objectives, for each of your pieces or content, you want basically two different paths going through your course.

This is something you can certainly spend time to work on. You don't have to do it all at once. If you think about it as you're working on your courses each term, keep an eye on that inventory and see if you can get a balanced approach. This allows students to have choice between whether they want to look at something that's text base or go with something that's multimedia. In that way, you're reaching all the students in your class. You want to have an equivalent path that's both text and that is both multimedia. For your activities, look at it the same way. How can they practice? What are all the different ways that you can offer them to practice?

Give them choice on which way that they can practice. Very often, we just narrow it down to one way. I was listening to a story the other day that was fascinating talking about this. I think it was on teaching in higher ed podcast, that the audience was given an important assignment to do. Basically, they had to write down what was their favorite way to relate information to students, for example. And then they had two minutes to do it, oh, and they had to do it with the left hand. You can imagine the results that happened in two minutes.

And then the criteria for evaluating this came out saying that penmanship and comprehensive content would be evaluated. They had that more than 40 words or whatever. Well, naturally, people thought it was unfair, but we do this in our classes all the time, that we hand out assessments that not everyone is going to excel at

because of different limitations, but yet we evaluate everyone on the same criteria. Maybe we need to provide more choice in the assignments that we provide to give equal opportunity to more students. That was just an example.

In terms of support, what I like to look for are pinch points. Pinch points are those places where students have stumbled. Maybe after class, they ask questions, they're not clear about something. That when they turn in the muddiest points, they have questions regarding something that you talked about in class. They may have gotten a question wrong, a commonly missed question on an exam or a quiz. Those are pinch points. You have an opportunity to go provide more supports in your class. This all falls under universal design for learning. I talk a lot more about this in episodes 8, 9, and 10. I encourage you to go check that out.

Universal design, for me, is about providing support and choice. How can I clarify some area that they're getting hung up on, and where can I provide choice in the content, the activities that they are getting, even in the ways that they're being assessed so I can reach more students and really focus on the understanding of their learning instead of some obscure criteria that is designed. Definitely, I'm a huge fan of universal design for learning. That's number three. We talk of backward design, OER, now UDL.

My next one, number four. I think this is absolutely critical. This is doing a quality review. Once you got your course pretty much prepared, I recommend that you conduct a self-review using a quality review rubric. Something like OSCQR, the Open SUNY Course Quality Rubric or Review, or Quality Matters. Both of them are robust review tools that you can look at your course. If you don't have time to do it, see if you have an instructional technologist available who would be willing to review your course. They can review it. They can give you feedback on where you can improve your course.

These quality reviews are standards-based. They will help you identify things you should do to make your course more engaging and useful. They help smooth out a path for your students that allows them to focus on the content. I talk about the OSCQR rubric specifically in episodes 19 through 24. The OSCQR rubric basically identify six major areas, overview and information, which is letting the student know, welcoming them to the course, but letting them know what the course consists of, how they can find things. Just smoothing out the path. Basically, providing the map and compass in front of them and putting them on the right path. That is the first part.

Next is technology and tools. This is to make sure that any tools that you introduce are necessary, but you also provide the support to help the students put those tools into action. That you point them to tutorials. You provide them with the information and where to get additional help, those kinds of things. The next piece is design and layout. I think this is critical because I've seen courses where, basically, all the content is thrown on the floor, basically dumped into the learning management system, and the students are told to go figure it out.

That is not an online course. Anyone who builds a course like that should be embarrassed. That is not what you are building in an online course. Design and layout is really controlling the flow through the content to help students easily access the material, and really just allow them to focus on the content that you have provided. Now, the next section deals with content and activities. When we're talking about content, naturally, this is tied back to your objectives, as well as the activities, but there should be a logical scaffolding of this content to help students build upon previous knowledge.

The content has to be accessible. Accessibility is certainly a key, and that is something that we're definitely going to talk about. The activities also are something that students need to be able to practice in order to develop the skills so they will do well on the assessment. The different activities that you provide there are going to be critical. If you look through previous episodes, I talked about master testing and also test pools. Those are strategies if you're trying to build knowledge. Making hands-on activities, those are other activities for skills that they need to demonstrate.

The fifth section deals with interaction. This has to do a lot with humanizing the course. We think about the community of inquiry that we have social presence, we have teacher presence, and we have cognitive presence. Content and activities, I would say pretty much is in the cognitive presence. The social presence and the teacher presence, you're certainly going to have an impact in the interactions. This is where discussion boards come into play. Other activities where students get to share knowledge and get feedback from others, from the class, or also from the instructor.

This is where the instructor let students know how accessible they are, how they can be reached in case there's questions or looking for additional clarification, how you're going to interact and responding to assignments, and also assessments, and those kinds of things. That's in the interaction. The last section deals with assessment and feedback. Assessment and feedback, this is where you're reaching back to the objective. Did the students meet the objectives that you set out for them? This is all tied in the assessment. Are you providing multiple ways, which is tied back to universal design for learning, where students can demonstrate their knowledge and skills?

Tied to this is feedback, how you provide feedback. Are you providing ample feedback? This is all tied into there. A good quality review will help identify these areas where you can improve your course. This is certainly what we want as we're heading into the fall of 2020. Now, you don't have to use the quality review at the end of developing your course. You can also use it while developing your course and allow this tool to shape it as you're building it. You can start right away after you have identified your objectives, assessments, activities, and content, and use the quality review to help guide and shape the course that you're building.

We have talked about backward design, OER, UDL, and quality review. Let's talk about the last piece, and that deals with accessibility. With the accessibility, although this is the last section, it should also be the first section. When you are developing content, you should apply accessibility principles from the beginning. It is a lot harder

to retrofit content than to design it correctly in the first place. I strongly encourage that you check out the faculty four for accessibility. I did an episode on that, and that was number 67. This is where these four elements that you really need to become pretty versed in, includes alternative texts.

When you have a multimedia object, you need some alternative text. If it's an image, you need to be able to describe that image. If it's an audio file, you need a transcript. If it's video, closed captions and a transcript are useful. That's also tied to element number two, which is captions, transcripts, and audio description, pulling those in. Number three, accessible documents. Where you're using the tools of your word processor, and it could be the content development that you do directly in your learning management system, but using those tools. I'm talking about using headers, using lists, using white space.

You're just using all those tools correctly because those are the tools that help somebody who is visually impaired to be able to go through your document. Also, it helps to create better documents that are more easily read and students can understand them much easier. I encourage you to use those particular tools. Then finally, any tools that you use in your class, like third-party tools, they just need to be accessible. Just knowing that upfront, that you're testing for accessibility, you're looking to make sure that they're accessible, those are key.

Very simply, if students cannot access your content, your content is worthless. If you want to teach and you give them junk, mainly that they can't understand the content, you have done them no service. It takes a little extra time, very little, but once you get used to these tools, it takes virtually no time. It just becomes part of your habit. Create the documents, create the content correctly right away. Now, we're fortunate to, for our learning management system using Blackboard, to have a tool called Ally. Ally will kick out a report, it'll identify content that's not meeting accessibility, and provides us with guidance on how we can improve that content.

If you're an instructor that has Blackboard and a tool like Ally, run the report, fix the content. The nice thing about is once the content is fixed, when you rollover the course, you have good content. Take the time to do that. Those are the five key things that I wanted to address. Backward design, OER, UDL, quality review and accessibility. Now, the bonus. To tie this all together, I would like you to develop a self-direct learning plan.

All the things that I mentioned have a compound effect. When you improve it, it typically stays improved even when you rollover a course. The other piece of this is by attending to these things, you get better at your craft. Your knowledge will improve while you are improving your course. You will be able to take that knowledge forward as you develop new courses and as you're fixing these courses. As you create documents in the future, you're going to create them correctly, because you are attending to these principles.

I would like you to develop a self-direct learning plan for yourself on at least one of these topic. One or more, okay. Therefore, I'm going to ask you, encourage you to

listen to previous episodes that I've put together, because a lot of the topics that I am referencing I have already talked about in great depth. The topics that I talk about will help you develop a better course. I would also encourage you to go out and pick up a book or two that is focused on how you can teach better in an online learning environment.

Now, I put out episode number 52, which is got 25 books that I would recommend for educators and instructional technologists. There's a couple of books specifically that I think you should pick up. One is *Smart Teaching Online* by Flower Darby and James Lang. And then also, *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone* by Thomas Tobin and Kirsten Behling. Those are definitely two books that I would encourage you. While you're picking up books, I want to make a plug for my book. Thanks for checking out this episode. I'm going to leave you with a plug for my book.