Teaching in a **Digital Age**

Introduction

Teaching is as central to higher education today as it has been for generations. But teaching is different in a digital age – both for those who teach in physical classrooms and those who teach online (and for the many who, officially or not, teach students in the same course both ways).

Students can use their devices to be more engaged or to goof off – or both. Faculty members have a range of new tools with which to present information, communicate with students and promote discussions, if they are trained and encouraged to use them effectively.

The articles in this compilation explore some of the issues associated with teaching in a digital age and the strategies professors and colleges are employing.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to track these issues. We welcome your comments on this compilation and your suggestions for future coverage.

--The Editors
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Teaching in a Digital Age

There's been a lot of talk about how teaching in the digital age is different than teaching was in centuries past. I agree — but not because I see the rapid rise in educational technology as making teaching more digitally driven. Instead, I believe technology is making education more human.

To really understand the opportunities of teaching in a digital age, there are two concepts we need to unpack: settled knowledge and study.

I first heard about settled knowledge from Robert Gibbs, a humanities professor and friend of mine. He defines "settled knowledge" as information about things like basic sciences, math, and language.

By contrast, "study" is much different. Most of us think of studying as trying to transfer settled knowledge into our memory. But if you go back to the Latin root of the word, it was originally about "zeal," "pursuit," and "affection" — in other words, about the desire, passion, and excitement of learning. We need to reclaim this definition of study.

A good education includes both: time devoted to settled knowledge and time devoted to study. Too often, though, education tips toward acquisition of settled knowledge. If we are going to do justice to an education that includes ample time for an enlightened version of study, we need more efficient and engaging ways to learn settled knowledge.

One method of learning that is helping us address that imbalance today is competency-based education (CBE) — a highly personalized form of learning that can be enabled by technology.

CBE recognizes what learners already know and helps them explore enrichment or remediation pathways to focus on what they don't. In CBE, educators don't have to move a class through the curriculum based on a set period of time; instead, they can personalize education for each student.
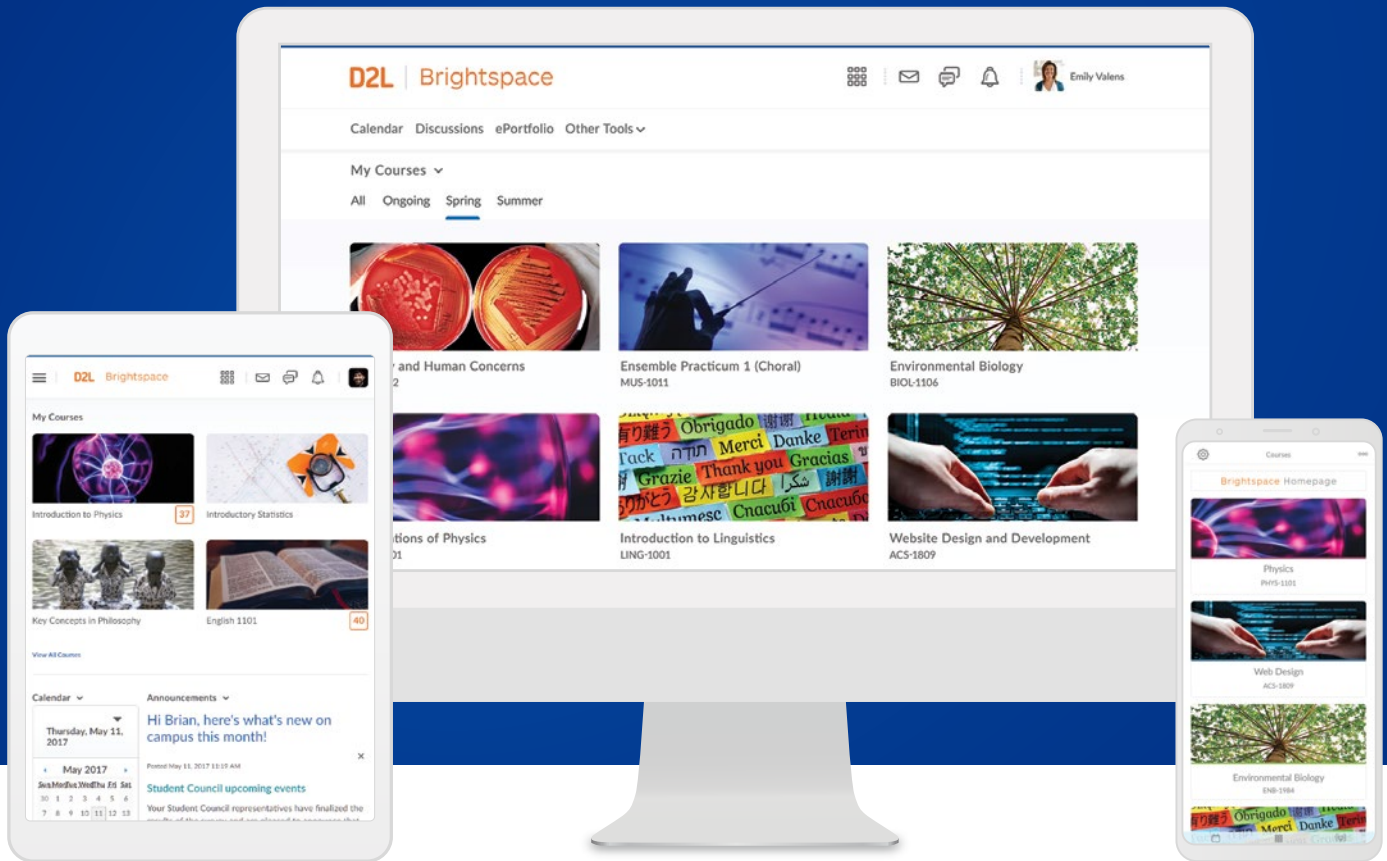
This makes learning more engaging and more efficient. The curriculum has less to do with the time it takes the whole class to understand the material and more to do with individual students mastering or becoming "competent" in those concepts.

Competency-based education is now easier to facilitate because we have the analytical tools to quickly align, measure, and adapt to the performance of individual students or whole classes.

CBE in all its different forms is just one of the ways technology can help free up time for enlightened study while — even more importantly — helping us realize the dream of reaching every learner. It's transforming how people learn and are enabled to learn. As an example, nurses and physicians are able to complete their acquisition of settled knowledge faster and with greater mastery, giving them time to pursue their passions, so they can help their patients sooner.

To me, education doesn't get much more human than that.

John Baker
President & CEO
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Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss.

Instructors and students alike are growing tired of the discussion board formula. Innovative approaches point to the potential for more meaningful online learning experiences.

By Mark Lieberman // March 27, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / POLYGRAPHUS

Discussion boards have been a staple of online courses for decades. But Carolyn Speer, manager of instructional design and access at Wichita State University, thinks many instructors default to using them incorrectly.

Instructors often kick off a discussion board assignment by asking each student to respond to an assigned reading. To prevent plagiarism, some learning management systems are set up, either by the platform or by policies of the institution or instructor, to only reveal the full contents of a discussion thread after a student has already posted.

"It sounds to me most of the time that what they want is a deep writing assignment done by each individual student on a topic with potentially an opportunity for students to comment on other students'

work," Speer said. "At least in our LMS, it's better to do that in a blog."

Though Speer questions the utility of discussion boards, she doesn't think they should be discarded. Lively discussions are among the hallmarks of face-to-face courses. Skeptics of online learning argue it's difficult to replicate their value online -- but Speer isn't a skeptic. "If two people can fall in love online, they can learn American history online," she said.

Speer isn't alone in seeking to refresh the discussion forum as the key source of person-to-person interaction in online courses. Educators are pursuing a variety of strategies for fostering student engagement. One approach is to emphasize quality and thoughtfulness of responses over quantity and frequency. Another puts the instructor in the driver's seat, steering conver-

sations to sharper insights as they might from the front of a classroom.

The goal that unifies all of these efforts? Constructing a learning experience around collaboration as a means to deeper understanding.

Discussion boards are likely familiar to the millions of students who have taken at least one online course, and to plenty of face-to-face students as well. Though many instructors place less grading weight on discussion board participation compared with exams or essays, the value of interaction between students can't be underestimated, according to Vanessa Dennen, professor of instructional systems and learning technologies at Florida State University.

"It is a place to keep them apace with other people, to see who the other people are in the class," Dennen said. "That ties into all sorts of

self-efficacy beliefs, along with a sense of community."

What Online Discussions Can Do

Learning management systems are the primary vessel for discussion forums in online courses. Designers at Blackboard, among the first major LMS providers to service higher education, initially drew on discussion forums that already existed in "technical circles," according to Phil Miller, Blackboard's chief learning and innovation officer.

At first, Miller said, many instructors used them primarily to allow students to introduce themselves at the beginning of a course. Over time, Blackboard started receiving requests for more innovative variations, like a "fishbowl" approach in which the instructor and a handful of students discuss a topic while the rest of the class observes.

That evolution mirrors the trajectory of many experienced online instructors. Charles Hodges, a professor of instructional technology at Georgia Southern University, spent the early years of his online teaching career requiring students to answer a discussion post inspired by that week's reading. Over a 16-week semester, this process became exhausting for him, and difficult at times for his students to navigate.

When Hodges noticed that most of his students were responding to the prompt within the last 30 minutes before the Sunday deadline, he decided to instead require students to make an initial post by Wednesday, allowing a few days for discussion to percolate. He also refined his prompts, asking probing questions like "What was the most challenging part of the chapter for you to grasp?" or "How could the reading material apply to your professional practice?" rather than simply requesting a bland recap of highlights from the chapter.

Still, though, "it felt a little rushed," Hodges said.

A few years ago, Hodges landed on two big fixes that proved successful. First, he cut in half the number of discussion posts per semester. Second, he now allows students to respond to discussion prompts with PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos and concept maps in addition to written text. For some discussions, he makes explicit suggestions for multimedia projects that would enhance students' understanding.

Students spend the first week of each two-week discussion module producing their response. Then they spend the second week evaluating each other's work using prompts from Hodges like "Compare your concept map to the rest of the class. What's missing? What's different?"

"They are doing fewer discussions, but hopefully those discussions are more meaningful, more in-depth," Hodges said.

How to Make Discussion Boards Inclusive

Tips from Jesse Stommel, executive director of the Division of Teaching and Learning Technologies at the University of Mary Washington.

■ Build a community of care.

■ Ask genuine, open-ended questions.

■ Wait for answers.

■ Let conversation wander.

■ Model what it looks like to be wrong and to acknowledge when you're wrong.

■ Recognize that the right to speak isn't distributed equally.

■ Make listening visible.

No matter how much Hodges experiments, some students will only want to use the discussion boards the minimum amount for credit, he admits. But motivated students in his class, many of whom are practicing teachers, form relationships that extend beyond the class itself.

"They do develop a little bit of a rapport between themselves … They notice somebody that's teaching in the same grade or content area," Hodges said. "They make those connections pretty fast."

Dennen thinks discussion boards can help students who might feel overwhelmed by the material get a firsthand look at what they can gain from their peers.

"Twenty-five percent of my class is going to feel uncertain about a topic initially. But then the 25 percent of my class that feels quite confident about it and very gung-ho is going to go ahead with the discussion activity," Dennen said. "They're providing a model for the rest of the students of what to do. Their model feels a lot more achievable than mine."

Rote online discussions also put students in marginalized groups at a disadvantage, according to Sean Michael Morris, director of digital learning at the University of Mary Washington. He's concerned that formulaic discussion prompts prevent students from adequately expressing themselves or even forming their identity -- particularly if every student, regardless of background or identity, is expected to weigh in with roughly similar reactions.

"By asking open-ended questions, by giving students the opportunity for dialogue in an unassessed or ungraded space, the discussion forum can become a

site within online learning for 'college' to happen," Morris said.

The Instructor's Role

The ultimate goal of a discussion board assignment is to get students talking to each other. But instructors rethinking their discussion boards emphasize that they play an active role throughout the process.

Some students might be shy or reluctant to participate early on. In the first couple weeks of her courses, Dennen makes a point to privately send emails to students who haven't contributed much. Students sometimes assume that they're far behind their classmates whose discussion board posts make them seem like "experts"; Dennen helps assure them that students often feel that way and they shouldn't let it deter them from engaging.

"That's the most important time to give students super-timely feedback and grades on their discussion performance, to let them know if their performance was on track or not," Dennen said. "It sets the tone for the whole rest of the course."

Another Experiment

Alexander Laskin, professor of strategic communication at Quinnipiac University, told students to introduce themselves to each other using only emoji. Students had to guess what each other's emoji chains meant.

At Wichita State, Speer has developed a discussion board model that would seem to be far more time-consuming than average -- but she's not complaining.

She teaches quantitative methods and research methods classes in the institution's criminal justice program, as well as an introductory course in American government. For each course, she starts the semester by creating five or so discussion threads, each on a pre-estab-lished topic. Students must respond to at least one thread, but they can respond to as many as they want. Later in the semester, she offers students the option to start their own threads, warning them not to duplicate someone else's.

Instead of assigning a grade based on whether or not a student posted, or the number of words in a response, Speer gives high marks to posts that "advance the discussion." Each student who posts is building on what other students said, as in a face-to-face conversation.

"You can restate and affirm all day if you want to," Speer said. "I'm not giving credit for that."

Over time, grading has become more efficient as Speer has developed a routine of steering conversations toward certain topics that generate discussion. Speer also marks down for "cluster posting" on any day, and even more so for cluster posting on the last day before posts are due. She says she's never received a negative comment about her discussion board approach on a student evaluation.

"I don't dread my discussion boards. They don't feel like they're work for me," Speer said. "They're not heavy. They're not my discussion boards."

New Variations

The popular video-creation tool Voicethread has been a boon to innovators of online discussions. At Bryant University, discussion boards consist of a mix of written "essay-like" responses, usually informed by research, with "experiential" video posts that express an opinion or tell a story, according to Bonnie Budd, Bryant's director of online learning.

"These students are all over the country, different time zones," Budd said. "They become an actual con-versation and not just an assignment."

Budd has also helped introduce to the university a discussion post format known as 3CQ, developed by Jennifer Stewart-Mitchell, a K-12 teacher who frequently publishes curriculum ideas. Each student's response must include a compliment, a comment, a connection (3C) and a question (Q).

"It gives them a framework to get away from 'I agree,' " Budd said.

Regular and Substantive Interaction

Federal rule makers this year have been striving to refine the federal standard for interaction in online courses. Follow along with "Inside Digital Learning" here.

Enthusiasm for online discussions varies, even among instructors who use them. Patrick Lowenthal, associate professor of educational technology at Boise State University, believes the federal requirement that online courses include "regular and substantive interaction" between students and teachers sets the tone for an emphasis on discussion boards that sometimes lacks necessary context.

"Sometimes we overuse online discussions," Lowenthal said. He thinks instructors get concerned, for instance, about letting students work on a project for a week without posting on a discussion board prompt.

Lowenthal encourages instructors to be more flexible -- an online course in programming might lend itself less to online discussions than a course in English literature, for instance. Sometimes discussions are more effective if students in the class are split into groups

Discussion Boards: Valuable? Overused? Discuss.

who then report back to the whole group after conversing privately.

In some cases, discussion boards function along the lines of social networks students are already using. The learning management system provider D2L, for instance, for instance, offers instructors the option for a "single thread of conversation" that extends through the entire semester. The company is also looking closely at the functionality of the workplace chat application Slack, according to Kenneth Chapman, vice president of market strategy for D2L.

"I'm seeing much more of an understanding that the online space needs to feel more like a campus," Chapman said.

Learning management system providers are also working on automating certain aspects of the discussion board process to ease the burden of time and effort on instructors, particularly in high-enrollment courses with dozens of posts to parse. Blackboard has developed and is currently piloting algorithms that can assess the

> By asking open-ended questions, by giving students the opportunity for dialogue in an unassessed or ungraded space, the discussion forum can become a site within online learning for 'college' to happen.

level of critical thinking that students use when answering questions. Instructors can receive readouts that help inform the grades they assign.

"What we are not doing is we are not judging the subject matter of the post," Miller said. "We're not trying to say is this right or wrong. We are just evaluating the depth and the writing structure of the post." That function draws on the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Index, a military-approved readability standard.

That feature, particularly as it gets closer to evaluating the content of a student's response, has gotten "a little pushback" from instructors who "aren't ready for that," Miller admits.

But discussion boards aren't going away any time soon. Nor is the impulse to improve them.

"You might hear in a workshop on how to design your online class, you have to have discussions," Hodges said. "But you really have to figure out on your own what's going to work for your students in terms of best practices for how to facilitate those discussions." ■

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Going Digital by Knowing Digital

College and universities ramp up initiatives to help students think critically and learn more about digital tools -- but faculty members and administrators don't always agree on the approach.

By Mark Lieberman // March 13, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / EXDEZ

No student will pass through higher education without seeing or using digital technology. A few years ago at Keuka College, in New York, administrators decided their students needed more than just exposure.

"Of course our colleges are using technology in the classroom, and it's great," said Tim Sellers, Keuka's associate provost of academic innovation. "We want to take it a little deeper and provide a middle ground between simply using technology and becoming a computer scientist."

By way of analogy, Sellers says not everyone who drives a car needs to also be an auto mechanic -- but "if you can understand a little bit about how the car works, you can be a lot more creative with the car in ways that inspire your own passion."

Keuka is one of several institutions using digital literacy as a frame for a stronger focus on using technology tools in classrooms. Such initiatives require support from faculty members, who can be reluctant to rethink their approach to teaching or incorporate new material into their learning objectives. They also require investment of time and resources to figure out how best to integrate digital literacy concepts into curricula.

Leaders of these initiatives see those challenges as vital to overcome. Sellers said he believes many students arrive at college without a sophisticated critical perspective on tools they'll be using for the rest of their lives.

"They're incredibly good at using technology and incredibly poor at understanding how it can be used," Sellers said. "We've essentially given them a Ferrari and they're driving it around a parking lot at 12 miles per hour."

'An Evolving Beast'

Keuka's ongoing flirtation with the concept of digital literacy has taken several different forms, illustrating the challenge of figuring out where this aspect of an academic experience belongs.

The process at Keuka started almost half a decade ago with the

now former president Jorge Diaz-Herrera, a former computer science professor who saw value in teaching students problem solving through the lens of computational thinking. He urged Sellers and a team of administrators to infuse a philosophy of digital literacy into the academic culture at Keuka.

"Being in New York State, where there's a liberal arts college everywhere you can throw a stone, we thought this was a great opportunity for us" to stand out, Sellers said.

Getting faculty members on board has been a lengthy effort that's still ongoing. At first, Sellers often found himself challenging faculty members who asked when the institution would be done updating its technology infrastructure. Sellers replied to them that "constant upgrades [aren't] a flaw but a feature." Instead of waiting to take action until the pace of changes slowed down, he said, it's always time to try something new.

Some institutions approach technology initiatives with a goal of creating a consistent digital experience for students campuswide -- "we're a Mac school, we're a PC school," as Sellers put it. But with conviction, he convinced the college's IT staff to abandon that mind-set.

"Biodiversity makes an ecosystem more stable over all," Sellers said. "We don't want monoculture."

Early on, the institution offered small learning grants -- up to $2,500 per year -- to faculty members interested in exploring how digital literacy might play a role in their disciplines. One faculty member purchased software to supplement her teaching; another collaborated with a colleague on creating a curricular pathway that included digital literacy elements. Funding support helped build momentum for faculty buy-in, Sellers said.

If Sellers could start over laying the groundwork, he would come to faculty members with a less "prescriptive" tone. Some instructors didn't -- and still don't -- understand the definition of the term "digital learning" and resisted being told how to revamp their courses.

"We would go out there and say, 'Here's what we're going to do. Let's go in and change the gen eds, let's go in and change programs, let's be very prescriptive from the very beginning and we'll tell you how,' " Sellers said.

Keuka's approach to digital literacy is still evolving. Between 2015 and 2018, the institution offered a digital learning minor -- six courses that instruct students on the basics of analytics, coding, digital storytelling and data visualization, culminating in a capstone course in which students exercise the skills they've gained in a semester-long project related to their major.

But last fall amid major administrative changes at the institution, the digital learning strategy changed. The six courses still exist, but now they're offered standalone, or as part of other degree programs. Fewer than 10 students completed the minor, though some classes generated more interest than others.

The institution's broader focus, meanwhile, has shifted to training students on using digital tools during their introductory courses at the institution, in hopes that the skills will inform their upper-level work.

"We're spreading it around a little more," Sellers said.

Serving Diverse Students

Digital literacy efforts can have particular impact at a historically black college, according to Eli Collins-Brown, who just wrapped a two-year stint as director of the Center for Transformative and Innovative Instruction at Winston-Salem State University, part of the University of North Carolina system. Many of her students there come from underprivileged backgrounds and lack basic competencies that could be essential in the professional world, she said.

Last summer, administrators at the institution spearheaded a systemwide contract with Adobe to provide the company's Creative Cloud services free to all faculty, staff and students. Collins-Brown believed the tools could lay a foun-

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We want to take it a little deeper and provide a middle ground between simply using technology and becoming a computer scientist.

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dation for a strong digital literacy push that wouldn't be overly expensive.

Administrators last June hosted an Adobe-sponsored boot camp for staffers in the institution's teaching and learning center, IT department, and media services lab. The broader goal is to encourage faculty members to think about more dynamic ways to engage students, and for students to become proficient using digital tools in ways that will serve them beyond graduation.

First-year students at the institution are now in the second semester of a required first-year experience course, which includes digital literacy assignments during the first semester and a "signature project" during the second semester in which students present a principle of social justice using Adobe Spark pages.

"We're really trying to get people to realize nobody reads 10-page research papers or 35-page white papers," Collins-Brown said. "We consume information in these sorts of snapshot ways."

Digital literacy is spreading throughout the Winston-Salem curriculum as well. Students in a general chemistry course assemble current events blogs that help them learn the intricacies of the Spark tool while beefing up their science knowledge. A writing instructor has transformed her course into a project-based format that examines the digital-print divide and its effect on how information is transmitted and perceived.

As with the Keuka initiative, the Winston-Salem experiment has received mixed reviews from faculty members. Many view it as "a distraction," Collins-Brown said. Still, more than two dozen instructors

requested access to the Adobe license last fall, and several ended up revamping assignments and incorporating more tools into their pedagogy. One instructor incentivizes students to use an app called Flipd to limit recreational activities on smartphones during class time.

"Our goal is every single student will be exposed to some sort of digital literacy assignment by the time they completed their bachelor's degree," said Collins-Brown, who started this month as director of a faculty development team at Western Carolina University.

Administrators at Winston-Salem took inspiration from Todd Taylor, Eliason Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for whom digital literacy initiatives have become a specialty. He defines digital literacy as "not just the ability to operate the machines, but to be able to effect change in your world by leveraging these powerful technologies."

A decade ago, Taylor pitched to his supervisors the idea of requiring digital literacy skills to be mandatory in the curriculum for his department's writing program. He got

buy-in fairly easily from his institution's CIO, who shortly thereafter partnered with Adobe for licenses to its Creative Cloud suite. Taylor has been assigning students tasks on Adobe software ever since, and he's currently on leave from teaching to consult with Adobe as a traveling fellow.

Initiatives like this cost money and require administrative support, but they're crucial to students' future success, according to Taylor.

"There isn't a single industry that digital transformation isn't redefining," he said. "I want my students to be prepared to play a role in that and to have other people tell them what to do."

Who's Driving?

Instructional designers and academic support staff can play a critical role in creating interest around digital literacy, according to Jenae Cohn, academic technology specialist at Stanford University. At last month's Educause Learning Initiative conference in Anaheim, Calif., she presented, alongside her colleague Renee Hewitt, an instructional designer at the University of Kansas, on the importance of rejecting the narrative that students are "digital natives."

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Going Digital by Knowing Digital

"Students coming into college have increasingly diverse ranges of experiences with navigating different sets of digital environments," Hewitt said. "Just because you can do one kind of web application well doesn't mean you can do a different kind of web application well."

Cohn likes to use the term "digital fluencies" to describe the difference between the ability to use technology and the ability to critique it. Turning on a computer and opening an internet browser is using technology. Understanding the domain of the website and assessing the design require a deeper understanding.
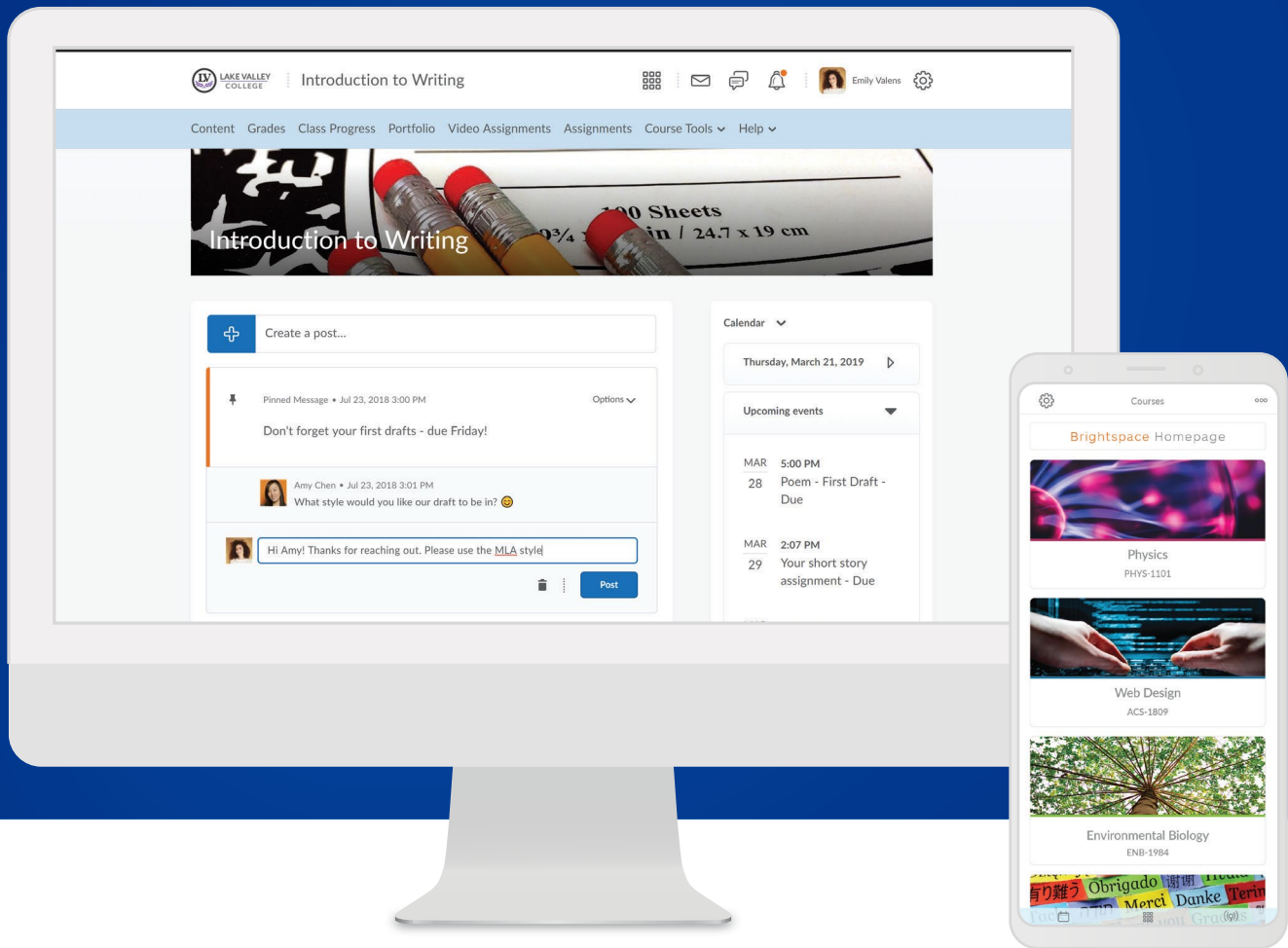
Librarians do some work to educate students along these lines, particularly when teaching them how to search for legitimate research materials, Cohn said. But she wants to see more open discussion in classrooms about how students use certain search engines and when they should and shouldn't rely on them.

Cohn envisions writing instructors asking students to construct essays about how and from where they consume information, and science instructors urging students to interrogate the difference between looking at a virtual-reality model of a human body and a hand-drawn sketch. At her own institution, Cohn has been teaming up with faculty members to offer in-class workshops on these topics.

"A question we can help them think through is 'Why?' " Cohn said.∎

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'Students Are Using Mobile Even If You Aren't'

Smartphones and tablets are changing how teachers teach
and students learn. It's not always a smooth or simple transition.

By Mark Lieberman // February 27, 2019

Two years ago, four instructional designers in the University of California System decided to undertake a research project on "mobile learning." Their first order of business: figure out what that is.

"It's just so new that the researchers who have been trying to define it have found it so dynamic," said Mindy Colin, an instructional consultant at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

They eventually settled on a definition from Educause: "Using portable computing devices (such as iPads, laptops, tablet PCs, PDAs and smartphones) with wireless networks enables mobility and mobile variation related to instructional approaches, disciplines, learning goals and technological tools." But they still struggled to define for themselves the parameters of their investigation.

One professor they interviewed helped them accept the ambiguity of their research subject. His students use iPads in the classroom because, unlike computers, they allow students to interact while working on assignments without a bulky desktop or laptop screen blocking their view of those around them. "He used this device not necessarily for the mobility," said Margaret Merrill, instructional design consultant and educational technologist at the University of California, Davis, but because it's "less disruptive to the look and feel of the classroom."

This anecdote underscored for them that mobile learning means different things to different groups across higher education. Some instructors ask students to answer poll questions during face-to-face class sessions. Social media plat-

forms like Twitter and Facebook can serve as hubs of information and dialogue among students and instructors. Smartphones and tablets can also be used as platforms for creating projects integral to the learning objectives of a course -- graphic design on an iPad or journalistic interviews on a smartphone recorder.

Continue the Conversation

What's your definition of mobile learning? Do smartphones and tablets help or hurt teaching? Share your thoughts in our comments section below.

Professors and administrators at recent conferences report that some students write entire essays on their smartphones or complete homework assignments on the bus

commute to campus. Increasingly, students expect course materials to be accessible to them on their mobile devices just as they would be on a laptop.

Beyond its function as a classroom tool, mobile technology is the primary conduit for some students' learning experiences. Broad data on the different permutations of mobile learning are hard to come by. In a 2018 survey by Learning House and Aslanian Market Research of 1,500 exclusively online students, nearly 80 percent said they complete some, if not all, of their course work using a mobile device. More than half of respondents said they access course readings and communicate with professors from their smartphones, and more than 40 percent said they conduct research for reports and access the learning management system on mobile devices.

Meanwhile, a 2017 Educause survey on face-to-face experiences paints a different picture: 70 percent of nearly 44,000 students reported that instructors banned or discouraged the use of smartphones in the classroom -- but more than a third of respondents did report using smartphones in the classroom "to make other connections with the material."

"Students are using mobile even if you aren't," said Ryan Seilhamer, program director of mobile strategy and innovation at the University of Central Florida. "It's something you should be at least aware of."

This new paradigm of teaching and learning also raises plenty of challenges new and old, from developing robust technology infrastructure to supporting skeptical faculty members, ensuring accessibility for all students and keeping up with the increasingly rapid pace of technological advancement.

It's enough to make some professors skeptical or dismissive of digital technology, banning it from their classroom or at least frowning upon students using it. Proponents of mobile learning, like Meghan Sullivan, a professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, don't see much value in retrenchment.

"Finding ways to meet [students] halfway, using what feels normal for them and feels exciting can make your teaching that much more effective, rather than sticking your head in the sand," Sullivan said.

Growing Interest in Tracking

Since becoming an instructional designer at UCF, Seilhamer has been paying close attention to students' relationships to mobile devices. On the strength of his work developing the university's mobile app, Seilhamer in 2017 was promoted to a new position overseeing the university's mobile strategy. Few other universities in the country have someone in this role.

Seilhamer's Tips for Mobile-Friendly Courses

- Use LMS tools

- Keep file sizes small

- Inform students if a piece of content won't be available on mobile

- Include sample videos

A 2013 survey of 1,000 students at the university found that only four didn't own smartphones, according to Seilhamer. In many cases, the survey found, students were more inclined to pay for a data plan and a smartphone than to invest in a laptop.

Seilhamer helps design mo-

bile-friendly learning experiences and encourages instructors to adopt practices like "content chunking" that work for students in that format. According to Seilhamer's research, students spend an average of five minutes continuously logged in to Canvas on their phones, compared with 14 minutes on laptops.

"If an assignment doesn't work for 10 percent of the students, that's a big headache," Seilhamer said.

Students remain reluctant to take quizzes and exams on smartphones because they're concerned about losing access in the middle, Seilhamer said. But 20 percent of institutionwide Canvas traffic from students comes via smartphones. When developing course strategies with instructors, he often asks, "Is this how you want to be represented to 20 percent of your students?"

Challenges

For courses that involve providing students with mobile devices, cost and resources can be prohibitive, according to the University of California research team.

Six years ago, Shahra Meshkaty, senior director of Academic Technology Services at the University of San Diego, forged a partnership with Apple that brought 50 iPads to the institution. Each semester, Meshkaty solicits proposals from faculty members who want to use them in their classrooms. Even now, with the institution's iPad stock up to 200, demand always exceeds supply, Meshkaty said.

"The potential for creativity, we're now touching the tip of it," Meshkaty said.

An instructor who incorporates digital tools into teaching has to be prepared to change the activities in subsequent semesters, as technol-

ogy loses its novelty and in some cases gets outmoded by new inventions.

A few years ago, Jenny Wakefield, an instructional designer and adjunct professor of learning technologies in the Dallas County Community College District, started using the PollEverywhere tool in her classroom, offering multiple-choice questions and posting the results to keep students engaged. But once the novelty of using the tool wore off, Wakefield realized she needed to try harder. In future classes, she split students into groups and had them compete.

"I didn't like the idea that they were just sitting in their seats," Wakefield said.

For campus-based experiences, building a Wi-Fi network with enough capacity to support an expanding number of devices per student and per classroom can be a costly and time-consuming investment.

Meshkaty said the information technology team at her institution had to overcome numerous troubleshooting and network issues to project students' mobile device screens on a classroom Apple TV screen.

"There were challenges to start out with the deployment," Meshkaty said. "It was frustrating in the beginning, but we worked around it." The increasing interest in mobile from the tech team has facilitated more interest among faculty members in mobile tools, she said.

Administrators and instructors in the California system also encounter difficulty at times keeping track of classroom devices provided by the university.

Opportunities

At best, mobile technology can facilitate broader improvements to learning experiences. At Notre Dame, Sullivan revamped a general education Introduction to Philosophy lecture course, which used to be geared toward philosophy majors even though few students in the course planned to pursue philosophy afterward.

Instead of subjecting students to "14 weeks going through the intellectual history of Europe," Sullivan wanted to emphasize the importance of leading an ethical life and the social value of philosophical inquiry. Digital tools played several key roles in making that shift.

More From "Inside Digital Learning"

Online students multitask more.

The implications of smartphone ubiquity on low-income students.

A campuswide ban on laptops and smartphones in classrooms.

Now, instead of perusing dense texts, students engage with philosophy writing via "interactive digital essays" -- mobile-accessible web pages attached to the online syllabus, with supplemental materials and clarifications embedded in the prose. Sullivan still offers a traditional PDF, but students "really prefer this method."

Sullivan also introduced a live poll at the end of each lecture, in an effort to see whether students had grasped the lesson. A student then gave her the idea of offering the same poll at the beginning of class as well.

Not all attempts at facilitating mobile learning prove equally successful. Sullivan created a "dare" assignment in which students try out new activities with a philosophical dimension. She encouraged them to post their experiences on an Instagram account she created for the course. But results were mixed: some students weren't particularly adept at taking dynamic photos for the platform, while a handful of others didn't want to get involved with a proprietary social media platform.

The California researchers uncovered myriad examples of instructors innovating with mobile tools, from Pokémon Go for collecting samples in an ecology class to Snapchat as a flash-card tool to help students identify rare species of birds.

The value of mobile learning may differ from one context to the next. But one path to making a meaningful impact on student learning is to see the classroom experience from their perspective. The instructor who deployed Snapchat for bird-watching did so after noticing some of her students using Snapchat.

"She said, 'I don't know how to use Snapchat -- this is what I want to do,' " Colin said. "They showed her how, they set it up and she did it." ∎

Read Original Article ▸▸   https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/02/27/mobile-devices-transform-classroom-experiences-and

Lecture Halls for Learning, Not Watching Netflix

A Purdue University pilot program that blocked access to Netflix and other streaming sites in lecture halls is being rolled out across all academic spaces on campus.

By Lindsay McKenzie // March 4, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / WUTWHANFOTO

Purdue University students planning to use university Wi-Fi to watch videos, play games or listen to music will soon have to find a new way to stay awake during class.

When students return from spring break on March 18, they will find access to Netflix, Hulu, HBO, Steam, iTunes and Pandora blocked in all academic spaces on campus. System updates to Apple devices will also be barred.

Purdue tested blocking access to five streaming sites in four lecture halls at the beginning of fall semester 2018. The pilot program has run continuously since then and has been extended to more spaces on campus. The list of streaming sites that are banned has also grown.

Access to streaming sites over Wi-Fi in lecture halls, classrooms and labs across campus will now be restricted from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Residence halls, hallways and other areas where students congregate will not be affected. Access to streaming services via computers with wired internet access also will not be affected. Students will continue to be able to access the streaming sites in lecture halls or anywhere on campus using their cellular data.

Mark Sonstein, executive director of IT infrastructure at Purdue, said the ban was not driven by a desire to get students to pay more attention in class, although some professors said they hoped this would be an added benefit. Rather, the move was taken to prevent students from hogging bandwidth that others need to do their work.

In some lecture halls, professors were finding that it was not possible for students to participate in online class activities because a few people were streaming videos, music or games in class, Sonstein said.

"We expected that we were going to get a massive amount of pushback, but that never came to fruition," he said. "Students really didn't seem to care. They know that they're in a classroom to learn."

Faculty feedback to the pilot has been positive, said Sonstein. "The only complaint we had was, 'Why isn't it in my classroom yet?'"

The limited bandwidth in lecture halls is not a symptom of budget issues; Sonstein said the university is currently undergoing a major refresh of its wireless network. There are 55,000 devices using the university's wireless network at any one time, but only so many access points can be put in one location.

Putting an access point for every student in a lecture hall wouldn't work, as the signals would start to cancel each other out, said Sonstein. Updating the Wi-Fi network from its current 2.4 Ghz frequency band to a faster 5 Ghz band would help to alleviate this issue, but around 20 percent of devices used on campus

Lecture Halls for Learning, Not Watching Netflix

are not 5 Ghz band compatible. So the campus is sticking with the 2.4 Ghz band for now.

Steven Beaudoin, professor of chemical engineering and academic director of teaching and learning technology, said he was pleased to see the ban being extended across campus.

"Wi-Fi access hasn't been a problem in any of my classes, but I know there are professors who've felt very frustrated when they've tried to pull up a resource and can't access it."

Beaudoin said he hasn't noticed a significant change in his classes since the ban was introduced in his building last November. "I do a lot of active learning, so it's hard to be in my class and not be involved in what's happening," he said.

He also hasn't heard any complaints from students. He says they probably know it would be "difficult to win" an argument for having Netflix in class.

Sonstein knows there are many "smart students" at Purdue who may find workarounds to the ban, but he says there shouldn't be any problems as long as the majority of students stay off streaming sites. He noted there are legitimate aca-demic reasons why students might need access to streaming services in class and the ban can be temporarily lifted on request by professors.

Kelly Blanchard, an economics lecturer at Purdue, said the ban has helped some students focus and pay more attention in class because they're no longer being distracted by classmates watching movies or playing games.

Such distractions are a key reason why some professors have decided to ban laptops in their classrooms altogether -- a subject of heated debate among academics.

Trevon Logan, a professor of economics at Ohio State University, decided to ban all electronics from his classroom last year and saw students' midterm grades improve significantly as a result. He said the ban also helped students focus and take better notes.

Logan was inspired to implement the ban after reading a *New York Times* op-ed by Susan Dynarski, professor of public policy, education and economics at the University of Michigan. Dynarski, who banned laptops from her classes, wrote that a "growing body of evidence shows that overall, college students learn less when they use computers or tablets during lectures."

Blanchard said she would not support banning laptops in her classroom altogether. Laptops enable her students to take "excellent notes," she said, and Purdue's streaming ban means students pay attention without losing their devices.

From the front of a large lecture hall, it's difficult to tell whether students are focused on what she's saying or teaching, said Blanchard. Students who are determined to watch movies in class could still do so -- just not over the lecture room Wi-Fi, she said.
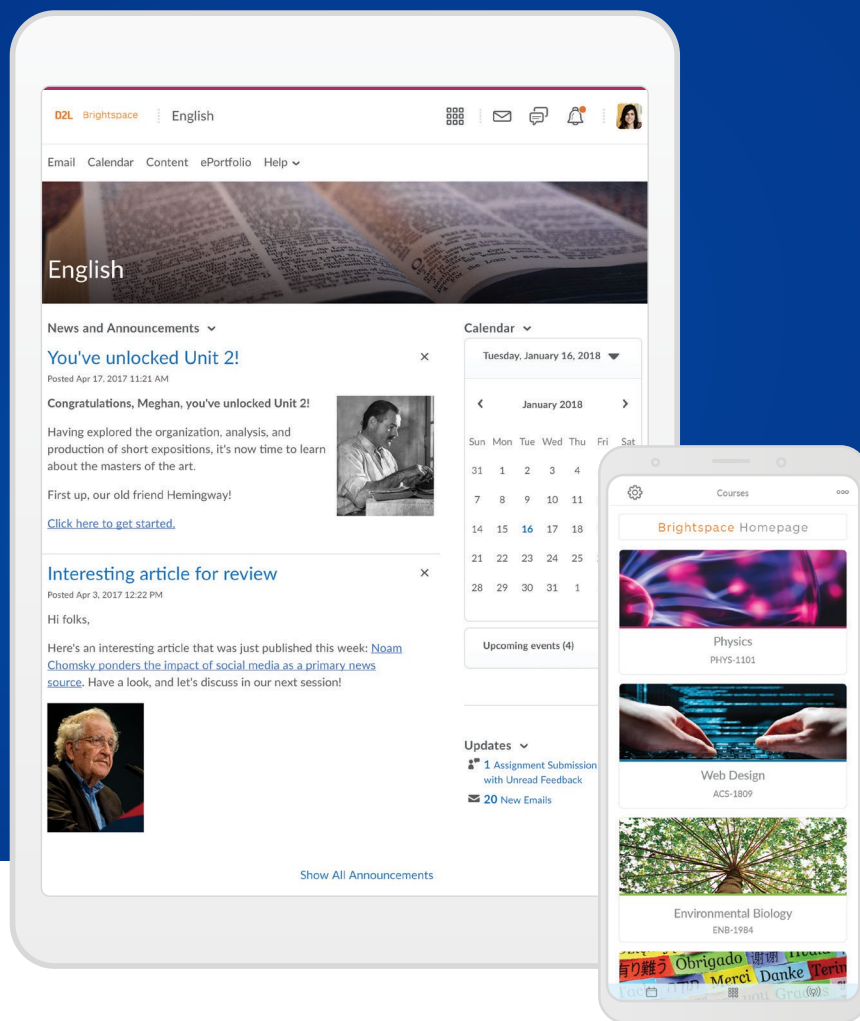
Some of Blanchard's students have grumbled that it would be "nice to have the option" to access streaming services in class, she said. But no one has been particularly upset.

Blanchard did initially worry that the ban might have some effect on class attendance, but that has not been the case so far.

"I was somewhat concerned that if students couldn't watch videos in class, they might just stay home and watch them there instead," she said.   ∎

Read Original Article ▸▸   https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/04/purdue-university-extends-streaming-website-ban

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Learn More

The Long and Short of Online Courses

Online education has spurred institutions to experiment with courses shorter than a full semester, weighing pedagogical and financial factors as they decide on the proper length.

By Mark Lieberman // January 30, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / NUTHAWUT SOMSUK

The University of Hawaii has been building its online education portfolios for more than two decades, now offering more than a dozen degree programs and many more individual courses.

But last year Hae Okimoto, the university's director of academic technology services, noticed something interesting in the outcomes data for online courses. Full-time students who took at least one online course persisted and graduated at higher rates than did those who took no online courses. Part-time students, though, performed less well in general, whether they took an online course or not.

"Because many of our part-time students are working two jobs and taking care of family, in the 15- or 16-week courses, life happens and they have to drop out," Okimoto

More From "Inside Digital Learning"

Keeping online courses fresh is valuable but can be costly.

States are looking for ways to reduce price burden on online students.

Federal rules governing state authorization of online programs might change.

said.

Okimoto surveyed the institution's online competitors, including Arizona's Rio Salado College, Southern New Hampshire University and the University of Maryland University College. All of them have "good online programs with good student success," she said, and all of them offer shorter courses that students can take one at a time, rather than loading up on several

semester-length online courses simultaneously.

This spring, the University of Hawaii will test that approach with the rollout of its accelerated online associate in arts degree program. Students will take one five-week course at a time from the Hawaii system's seven community colleges and earn their degree as early as December 2021. The system plans to expand the accelerated program next fall to several online bachelor's degrees from the university proper.

Hawaii is far from a pioneer in this regard. The proliferation of online education has prompted experimentation with widely established higher education traditions, including the concept of a season-long semester and enrolling simultaneously in several courses. Before traditional public and private col-

leges and universities leaped into the online market in large numbers, major for-profit institutions laid important groundwork for this experimentation, attracting students with start dates throughout the year and course schedules suited to their competing professional and personal obligations.

Institutions in recent years have increasingly tinkered with the length and structure of their course offerings to meet the scheduling needs of their diverse online students, as part of a broader acknowledgment of the increasing number of college students who are not traditional age and who attend part-time, among other things.

But trying new things also means confronting new and modern challenges: determining the appropriate balance of efficiency and rigor in the learning experience, crafting programs to target specific audiences amid an increasingly competitive education market, navigating federal rules that weren't written with experimental programs in mind. Institutions also have to contend with a widening array of nontraditional competitors, which in some cases explicitly reject the traditional semester model as part of their marketing pitch to students.

"We're trying to make education more accessible to students who have many roles in their lives and have many competing demands," said Dana Grossman Leeman, provost faculty fellow for online education at Simmons University, in Massachusetts. "The conversation about, do we really need to have a 12-, 13-, 14-week semester makes sense both pedagogically and operationally."

Engaging the Learner

According to several administrators, the primary consideration for the proper length of an online course is what will contribute to the most fruitful learning experience for students. Achieving that goal isn't always straightforward, though.

Conversations about course length often come as an institution develops a concrete vision for its online output. LIM College, a for-profit New York institution offering face-to-face and online degree programs in the business of fashion, has for years offered some courses in 15-week increments and others in half that time. All three of the institution's online programs currently consist of courses that last eight weeks apiece.

"We've had success in both models," said Mitchell Kase, LIM's director of faculty development. "Now we're thinking a little bit more strategically about where do we want to go from here."

The faculty experience also differs depending on the length of the course. Kase has taught eight-week courses at LIM and found them to be "a lot of work" -- offering timely feedback on student assignments, responding within 24 hours to student concerns, intervening with struggling students by the end of the second week. Instructors teaching an eight-week course at LIM rarely teach another one immediately afterward, Kase said, in part because they're often adjuncts juggling multiple commitments, and also because that pace can be difficult to sustain over an entire semester.

Kase and his colleagues want courses to be structured to best suit their content. Writing-intensive courses work better in 15-week increments, while some statistics-based courses can be more effective in eight weeks. Given the large number of part-time students looking to gain new skills and advance their careers, Kase hopes LIM can meet those populations with programs tailored to their needs.

Leeman at Simmons saw firsthand the perils of failing to match a course to its proper length of time. Her institution has eight, 11- and 14-week online courses. Nursing and social work courses have always run for 14 weeks, but the institution experimented in 2016 with the 11-week format for courses in behavioral analysis.

It didn't work. Within the first year, instructors and students reported they felt challenged synthesizing and applying information in the allotted time.

"

> Because many of our part-time students
> are working two jobs and taking care of family,
> in the 15- or 16-week courses, life happens
> and they have to drop out.

"

The Long and Short of Online Courses

"There are certain disciplines where you kind of need time to synthesize information before it becomes a skill," Leeman said. "You need to take in a theory and a concept. You need time to percolate a little bit, and then it starts converting with conversations and activity."

Administrators had been apprehensive from the start about the 11-week format, according to Leeman. To transition back to a 14-week model, every aspect of the program had to be revamped: course curricula, marketing materials, relationships with program mentors in the field.

"Once we agreed, let's look at how we could make this work, there was such an incredible commitment to actually making sure it did," Leeman said. "You can do that if you put your heads together and you're looking at every aspect of everything a student touches at the university."

The University of New England has been transitioning many of its face-to-face 14- or 16-week courses to eight-week online courses. "We are able to in an asynchronous model present and include all the same information and give the students the same experience in those weeks," said Jennifer O'Neil, director of online graduate social work programs at the institution.

Instructors work with designers to parse learning objectives and design assignments that help students achieve them in a compressed time frame. "It does mean that small things may get cut out, but it also means that" students can get their degree faster -- a worthwhile tradeoff, O'Neil said.

O'Neil believes her program's adult population "wants to feel like they're making progress through their degree at a rate that feels like it's attainable to them." Shorter courses also allow the institution to offer multiple start dates throughout the year.

There is a such thing as too short, though. O'Neil said she's taught courses in six and seven weeks and found them too rushed. "The eight-week model for the asynchronous piece keeps the students engaged, gives them more than enough work to keep students engaged," she said.

Balancing Pedagogy and Strategy

Instructional design and course development costs don't tend to vary according to the length of a course, administrators said.

But creating a new course length model can lead to other costs. At Hawaii, the financial aid office will have to work with students throughout the semester to monitor when they drop or add courses. The institution's registrar will have to log students' grades more frequently than once per semester. Advisers will meet with students as many as three times per semester instead of just one.

"I think because we're fitting kind of a nontraditional program into a traditional institution, our support services is going to feel the burden," Okimoto said.

At Simmons, abruptly transforming a program was costly, underscoring the importance of assigning the proper course length as early in the process as possible, according to Leeman. Instructors devoted extra time to revamping the curriculum and assignments. A team of deans and faculty members rebuilt courses one by one on the LMS. "That doesn't happen without financial impact -- both in terms of sweat equity and actual dollars," Leeman said.

Figuring out the length of an online course raises other questions as well. Accreditors expect institutions with online programs to demonstrate rigorous assessments of student progress, according to Michael Williams, dean of the School of Business at Thomas Edison State University, a majority-online New Jersey institution serving the state's adult population.

Getting faculty members on board can also require some finagling. At Hawaii, instructors initially resisted the idea of using a common course template to bring a degree of standardization to their new five-week courses. But by the end of

> We're trying to make education more accessible to students who have many roles in their lives and have many competing demands. The conversation about, do we really need to have a 12-, 13-, 14-week semester makes sense both pedagogically and operationally.

The Long and Short of Online Courses

an online faculty development program that mimicked the structure of a new five-week course, instructors began to realize that working from a template gave them more time to focus on teaching.

State policy can be a barrier to this kind of innovation. In California, institutions are prohibited from offering academic programs that cross calendar quarters or straddle fiscal years, according to Kate Jordahl, director of academic affairs and consortia at the California Virtual Campus Online Education Initiative, which supports online programs in California's community college system.

"Community colleges are very tied to schedules and rules and logs," Jordahl said. Her team has been working on creating cross-enroll-ment procedures within the system that allow students to pick and choose courses of different lengths from various institutions to meet their needs. The state's new online community college, launching this fall, will add new tools like competency-based education to the system's arsenal.

In that case and others, the government can also motivate experimentation. In addition to improving outcomes, the University of Hawaii's new five-week online courses could help contribute to the state-mandated goal of 55 percent of the state's population earning a higher education credential by 2025. Okimoto said administrators worry about falling short of that goal; shorter online courses could be enticing to students who left the institution partway through earning their degree.

They also might help students learn better: results from pilots last fall of the five-week courses indicated higher rates of completion and a larger share of A and B grades than in comparable 16-week online courses running simultaneously, according to Okimoto. Moreover, lessons learned from experimentation online might affect how the system's traditional campuses approach teaching, she said.

All of these decision-making processes, regardless of the institution or the type of program, aim for similar goals.

"You have to keep going back to the student learning outcomes," Jordahl said. "We have to meet the students where they are." ∎

https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2019/01/30/institutions-experiment-shorter-online-courses-audience

Extending the Conversation on Online Course Length

Our coverage of flexible lengths for online courses prompted lots of online discussion. Here's another look at related topics, including challenges for instructors and the value of winter sessions.

By Mark Lieberman // February 13, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / MAJAMITROVIC

Two weeks ago, "Inside Digital Learning" published an article exploring the decision-making process for institutions tweaking the length of their online courses. If you missed that piece, catch up before reading this one.

A significant volley of Twitter mentions of the article -- and a few email messages in our in-box -- left us thinking about additional angles to explore on this topic.

Teaching a short online course can be a learning experience for instructors.

Penelope Moon is the former director of online programs in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies at Arizona State University and is currently responsible for elearning planning and design with the Office of Digital Learning and Innovation at the University of Washington's Bothell campus. For eight years at Arizona

State, she taught 7.5-week-long online courses, and she continues to do so as an associate clinical professor. At another institution, she previously taught the same course online in a semester-length format.

At Arizona State, Moon adapted her half-semester online course from an existing semester-length course that's currently offered on ground. She realized during that process that her teaching strategy up to that point focused on "coverage" -- points A and Z, and everything in between, needed to be included in the curriculum.

In a shorter course, she's more focused on outcomes -- how to ensure that students leave the class having learned a set of knowledge and skills. "It really forces faculty to identify what's essential in a course, and to trim the fat," Moon said.

Moon never got training in instructional design, and she suspects many of her colleagues didn't, either. But developing a shorter course forced her to more intentionally structure the course around one piece of accumulated knowledge leading to the next, rather than, as Moon puts it, "a fire-hose of content."

"You really need to figure out, how am I going to make students … be prepared to take this next step?" Moon said. "The next step is two days from now, not two weeks from now."

… but there are some things short online courses simply can't accomplish.

For some institutions, shorter online courses help them appeal to new students who aren't in a position to enroll full-time at a residential program but want to gain new skills or advance in their ca-

reer while balancing existing professional and personal duties. In Moon's experience, though, an increasing proportion of students in her shorter online courses are students also enrolled in on-ground courses at Arizona State.

"The student motivation, by and large, they've kind of bought in to this idea that it's the degree, as quickly I can get to that degree, I need to take that path," Moon said.

While she understands why students see education through that perspective, and why universities sometimes act to encourage it, she has some misgivings about the trend toward acceleration and shorter courses. As an history teacher, she spends much of her grading time offering nuanced feedback on student writing, which often takes more time than a 7.5-week course allows.

Her online courses enroll 30 to 45 students apiece, with each enrollee producing 30 to 40 pages of writing throughout the course. Moon sometimes needs four days to return students' five-page papers. By that point, another five-page paper is on the verge of being due. She has lately required peer-review exercises that lessen the burden on her grading.

But she worries that students' learning experiences aren't as rich or meaningful in this format, and that much-ballyhooed technology tools won't resolve existing issues.

"I'm not sure that AI's going to get to a point where it can assess the veracity of an argument or the compelling nature of a statement," Moon said.

Teaching Tip

At times while at Arizona State, Moon taught several short online courses simultaneously. She sums up the experience concisely: "It was hell." She eventually requested to downshift to just one short course at a time, which proved more manageable.

For online math courses, even 12 weeks was too few for Robert Talbert, an associate professor of mathematics at Grand Valley State University. Students who lacked prerequisite knowledge struggled to keep pace as the concepts grew more complex.

Teaching Tip

At times while at Arizona State, Moon taught several short online courses simultaneously. She sums up the experience concisely: "It was hell." She eventually requested to downshift to just one short course at a time, which proved more manageable.

"It felt like driving 75 miles per hour in a 65-miles-per-hour zone -- just enough to feel like it was slightly too fast," Talbert said.

Even though the course he taught was 80 percent of a traditional course length, the amount of time for review "feels closer to 50 percent of what it normally is," Tal-

bert said. Students accustomed to loading up on credits and other responsibilities struggled in an asynchronous course that didn't give them the full semester to catch up.

Talbert believes calculus requires a level of "deep focus" that can be difficult for students to achieve, especially if they're also devoting energy to a job or raising a family. "Higher ed often markets online courses to 'working adults,' as if those courses can just fill in the cracks left over by all the other stuff students are doing, and it's just not true," he said.

Some online courses are *very* short.

For the last eight years, during the five weeks between fall and spring semesters, Kutztown University in Pennsylvania has offered as many as 100 of its regular-semester, face-to-face courses in an online, asynchronous format. Some students enroll in winter session courses to get ahead on their degree requirements, or to recover from low grades in prior courses. Other students simply prefer the opportunity to invest all of their academic energy in one course at a time, according to Joleen Green-

"

You really need to figure out, how am I going to make students … be prepared to take this next step? The next step is two days from now, not two weeks from now.

"

wood, chair of the anthropology and sociology departments.

Most winter-session students tend to be upperclassmen who already have some familiarity with online courses, Greenwood said. Many of them like the flexibility of spending time with family and friends at home, or working part-time to cover the upcoming semester of tuition, while making additional progress toward their degree.

Greenwood teaches winter-session courses and decides each fall which courses from her departments will be offered in that format. General education courses tend to fit well with the format, according to Greenwood, who sometimes includes a couple of high-demand courses required in specific majors.

Students in shorter courses have a much shorter add/drop period than do students in full-semester courses. Like Moon, Greenwood struggles with getting students' work back to them in a timely fashion. But the biggest challenge for her is "keeping students on task." In an asynchronous format, even with tight deadlines for assignments, students can easily lapse into slacking off without email reminders and check-ins.

Online courses also work bet-ter for some students than others, according to Greenwood. Over all, though, student outcomes from her winter-session courses have mirrored achievements in traditional courses, she said.

"It's very, very rewarding to look back and say that a student improved greatly from week one to week five," Greenwood said.

Offering shorter courses isn't new.

Institutions have been offering abbreviated summer courses for decades. And as mentioned in the first article, some institutions, including many from the for-profit sector, have been experimenting with flexible length since the early years of online education.

National University began offering the option for students to take one shorter course per month, rather than several at a time, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when many working adults returned to the U.S. with some competencies but no degree. Shorter courses went online at the institution in the early '90s, according to Michael R. Cunningham, chancellor of the nonprofit National University System.

From his experience overseeing innovation of online course formats, from synchronous to asyn-chronous and more recently to competency based, Cunningham advises institutions to think bigger than simply converting existing materials to a new format.

"If you approach it from a traditional standpoint and repackage courses you have to an online methodology and shortened time frame, that's much harder to do than when you start with a whiteboard and design think what the course should be from the outset," Cunningham said.

Shorter courses often work well for military students on active duty, particularly if they have the flexibility to drop off from their studies for weeks at a time when deployed, Cunningham said. Meanwhile, an early research study comparing the system's online and face-to-face short courses has thus far indicated that outcomes from each reflect "no really measurable difference," Cunningham said.

The status quo always benefits from interrogation.

From a philosophical perspective, many experimenters with classroom formats don't believe the traditional semester schedule has universal value. Rob Gibson, director of learning technologies at Emporia State University, offered a sarcastic perspective on LinkedIn:

Robert Gibson · 2nd
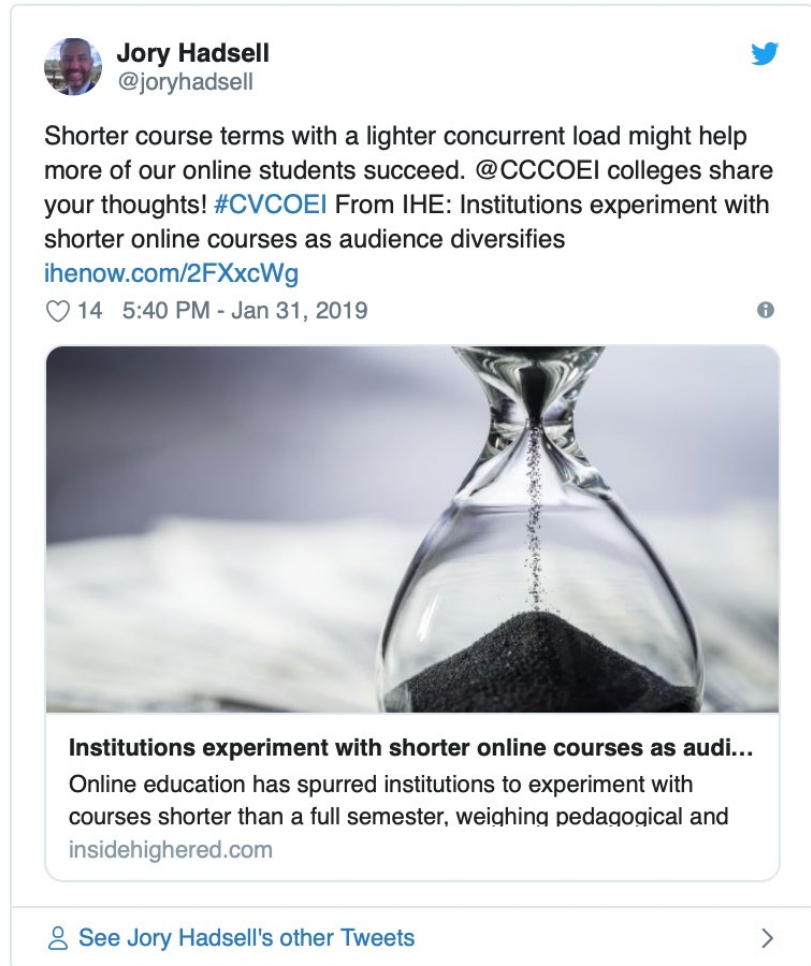Graduate Faculty, Instructional Design and Technology
1w · Edited

I challenge anyone to provide the genesis of the 16-week semester. Nobody seems to know. And why is it every course from every discipline fits nicely and neatly into that format? Nobody seems to know. Isn't it incredible that every major - from anthropology to zoology - can be taught in exactly the same calendar-based container. What an amazing stroke of luck. No matter if you're a nurse or an engineer, you'll learn all you need to know in 16 week blocks. Genius. Actually, we do know. It has more to do with a faculty load and compensation metric, and an arbitrary degree requirement than it does student learning. Is seat time good for student learning? Really what we need to do is ditch the calendar altogether. Rolling enrollment with multiple entry points. Short courses. Move to competency.

Extending the Conversation on Online Course Length

Jory Hadsell, executive director of the California Community Colleges Online Education Initiative, got some enthusiastic responses when he floated the possibility of more experimentation within his state's system.

Moon thinks decisions over course length often come down to financial factors instead of pedagogical ones. At her institution, 7.5-week courses offer an opportunity to generate more revenue from students. Ideally, form would follow function, she said.

"What's really the function of a course?" she said. "It should be to transform students." ∎

Jory Hadsell
@joryhadsell

Shorter course terms with a lighter concurrent load might help more of our online students succeed. @CCCOEI colleges share your thoughts! #CVCOEI From IHE: Institutions experiment with shorter online courses as audience diversifies
ihenow.com/2FXxcWg

♡ 14   5:40 PM - Jan 31, 2019

Institutions experiment with shorter online courses as audi...
Online education has spurred institutions to experiment with courses shorter than a full semester, weighing pedagogical and
insidehighered.com

⚇ See Jory Hadsell's other Tweets   ⟩

Sharing Courses Far and Wide

More institutions are signing up to share courses online. Some want to work together on concentrations and even majors -- but skeptics warn that too much collaboration can dilute the academic experience for students.

By Mark Lieberman // March 6, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / JONGHO SHIN

Ed Ericson, vice president for academic affairs at John Brown University in Arkansas, has big plans for collaborating with other institutions through online course-sharing consortia.

He's already begun working with provosts at a handful of other small, Christian colleges to bolster existing master's programs at John Brown and elsewhere with specializations or concentrations made up of courses from other colleges. He's also in the early stages of planning to create full degrees supplemented with other institutions' courses, and to contribute his own institution's courses to degree programs elsewhere.

John Brown administrators have been talking on and off for more than two decades to other colleges about similar arrangements, Ericson said. But the technology necessary to pull off collaborations only recently became available.

"These [course-sharing] efforts are some of the most exciting things I've seen in my 35 years being connected to higher education," Ericson said.

Ericson's institution is one of 12 small Christian colleges that have signed up in recent months to participate in an online course-sharing consortium overseen by the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities. More are likely to sign up soon, according to Rick Ostrander, CCCU's vice president for research and scholarship.

Six of that consortium's members, including John Brown, are also participating in a larger online course-sharing consortium organized by the Council of Independent Colleges. More than 50 colleges are in the process of joining, and 250 others have expressed interest, according to Richard Ekman, president of CIC.

Both agreements are made possible by College Consortium, a tech company that offers institutions an online course-sharing platform and services like transferring academic credit and disbursing revenue. As competition for enrollment grows steeper and news of closures, mergers and acquisitions ramps up, institutions that lack public funding or nationwide name recognition are striving for efficiency.

Sharing Courses Far and Wide

The arrangements are designed to help institutions pool resources and serve students a wider range of academic options.

Ekman believes CIC's course-sharing network -- the largest on the College Consortium platform -- should mainly help institutions fill course gaps and widen opportunities to supplement their schedules. Ostrander, meanwhile, believes the consortium can and should help facilitate ambitious collaboration like the ones Ericson and colleagues are undertaking. Even as they co-exist on the same interface, each consortium relationship serves a specific purpose that might differ from the others.

Current Members of CCCU's Online Consortium

- Bluefield College (also in CIC's Online Consortium)

- Central Christian College of Kansas

- Dordt College

- Houston Baptist University (also CIC)

- John Brown University (also CIC)

- Judson University

- King University (also CIC)

- Lee University (also CIC)

- MidAmerica Nazarene University

- Palm Beach Atlantic University (also CIC)

- Point University

- Southwest Assemblies of God University

Growing Interest

College Consortium currently has 72 different active consortium arrangements, according to Joshua Pierce, the company's co-founder. The majority of those agreements are between two institutions, often for delivering from one college to another a one-off course requested by a student.

Other agreements, like those with CIC and CCCU, bring together a wider network of institutions, creating more opportunities for offering and sharing courses. The CCCU online consortium establishes collaboration between colleges with a shared faith-based academic perspective, offering students who take courses from multiple members of the agreement a consistent academic experience.

"The more that private colleges and universities can learn to work together both in sharing resources but also in providing common programs or common curricula, I just think it's going to make the network over all healthier," Ostrander said.

"Teaching institutions" offer their courses on the platform to students at "home institutions," which charge students and contribute some of the revenue to the teaching institution and to College Consortium. Institutions can choose to enter a network as a teaching institution, a home institution or both.

To meet a growing need for graduates from programs like nursing and technology, institutions face daunting costs for faculty and resources, according to Janet Sommers, senior vice president for academic affairs at the University of Northwestern-St. Paul, a member of the online consortium of Christian colleges.

"Fostering relationships with other universities with whom we wouldn't be in direct competition would be a wonderful way to expand the opportunities we give our students in those academic disciplines and market need arenas where we see the greatest potential in growth," Sommers said.

CCCU plans to support and encourage members of the online consortium to strategically develop collaborative majors like the ones Ericson hopes to establish, according to Ostrander. Students at either institution could enroll and take courses at their home institution and supplement their schedules using the online platform.

"Thereby [each college in the agreement] is able to have a new major to build enrollment and attract students, but they are reducing the cost of actually developing the major," Ostrander said.

Sommers said her institution is also in the early stages of considering a project along those lines.

Implementation Challenges

Not everyone thinks the consortia ought to be tapped for that purpose. The CIC consortium will actively discourage institutions from developing degree programs together, according to Ekman. "The major needs to be grounded in the home institution where most of the instruction takes place," he said.

His organization and its online consortium operate on the assumption that effective teaching and learning takes place in a physical classroom and can be supplemented with online delivery when appropriate or necessary. "Our consortium is not intended for use by colleges that are very small and specialized and that hope to graft onto their own very limited offerings large chunks of general education or majors that are offered entirely online," Ekman said.

Indeed, the growth potential for these arrangements remains to be

seen. For the CIC consortium, Ekman hopes to see a wide range of disciplines represented in the consortium's course offerings. Otherwise, he said, the resource might not be reliable for a student who realizes shortly before graduation that he or she needs one more specific class the home institution doesn't offer.

Still, Ekman wants the CIC consortium to be flexible in other ways. He's currently negotiating with administrators at North Carolina Independent Colleges & Universities for the state's system to join the CIC network. Some of the system's institutions that aren't CIC members might pay a higher fee to join the arrangement, he said.

Even as course sharing expands opportunities, it also presents logistical challenges to institutions, according to Russell Poulin, senior director of policy, analysis and strategic alliances for the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies. Accreditors often restrict the percentage of an academic program that can be offered by an institution other than the originating one. Some institutions have policies that limit the number of transfer credits a student can count toward a degree. Navigating federal aid financial requirements and negotiating course prices for students can be cumbersome.

Administrators also have to be careful to establish partnerships that can outlast their own guidance, according to Poulin.

"Those who create the partnership often go to great lengths to form it," Poulin said. "When all those people are replaced, sometimes the altruism vanishes as well."

Interest in course sharing continues to grow, according to Pierce. He credits CIC's involvement with spurring a wider range of institutions to look at the company's model.

"The industry is talking to itself about this as opposed to us knocking on the door and talking to them about it," Pierce said. "We're pretty excited at the fact that industry leaders are starting to work with each other and we're just a player at the table." ∎

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Navigating the Never-Ending Online Course Cycle

Creating a system for developing and revamping online courses can be challenging -- but is increasingly essential -- for institutions with growing programs.

By Mark Lieberman // April 3, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / MISSTUNI

SEATTLE -- The Whiting School of Engineering at Johns Hopkins University has since 2008 launched 351 new online master's degree courses across 21 programs. Slightly more than 100 of those courses have been redeveloped or refreshed since their inception.

At first, the school planned to redevelop courses on a three-year cycle, according to Paul Huckett, assistant dean of learning design and innovation in the engineering school. During a session last Thursday at the University Professional and Continuing Education Association's annual conference here, Huckett jokingly called that approach, in retrospect, "an absolute lie."

"We were never going to complete that. It was impossible," Huckett said. "We've adjusted that a wee bit."

The new process involved establishing a comprehensive database that includes detailed information on each existing course: when it was first developed and launched, how many times it has been offered, who has taught it. The next step was a "redevelopment prioritization list." Older courses and core courses, as well as courses cross-listed within several programs, get bumped higher on the list. Department chairs can also propose courses that need another look.

Administrators assign instructional designers to redevelopment efforts and compensate them for their efforts according to four tiers, from a two-month touch-up to a full overhaul. Instructional designers collaborate with instructors, who submit their finished courses to administrators for a final round of tweaks.

"We worked previously with a sledgehammer approach," said Nathan Graham, director of the Center for Media and Digital Initiatives in the engineering school. "Now we use a scalpel."

As "Inside Digital Learning" has reported, institutions invest considerable resources in creating online courses and ensuring they don't get stale -- updating technology, refreshing content, adjusting activities, improving digital accessibility. As online programs grow, institutions have begun systematizing what used to be largely ad hoc efforts.

The engineering school at Johns Hopkins managed to find a model that worked. Not every institution is successful as quickly. When administrators at the University of Maryland University College de-

cided to implement a redevelopment process, they quickly realized they'd bitten off more than they could chew.

From a list of 120 courses with a low success rate and high enrollment, administrators selected 20. After six weeks of review, that list got narrowed again to 10. Even with the smaller scope, successfully revamping those courses with the process they've developed would have required 3,655 hours and eight and a half full-time staff members.

"We did this and said, 'No way,' " said Gretchen Jones, UMUC's associate dean of curriculum and programs. "This approach was just not scalable."

Since then, faculty members have gotten a little more involved in the "course discovery" process, as opposed to ceding responsibility to administrators or the accessibility team. Department chairs develop templates for new courses, and faculty members create within those.

Administrators there are still looking for ways to shorten the amount of time to develop a new course, which currently takes 23 weeks on average.

UMUC was founded to serve adult learners; online education has become a substantial component of its DNA. More traditional universities, in some ways, have a steeper hill to climb.

Until two years ago, Tulane University in Louisiana had a faculty-driven model for online course development, which meant "no one was leading or directing online education," according to Ilianna Kwaske, associate dean of academic affairs in Tulane's School of Professional Advancement.

Close to 70 courses emerged under that model, but their quality varied widely, Kwaske said.

Meanwhile, the school's dean pressed for more online programs to compete in a growing market. Kwaske hired David Dumonde, previously an instructional designer at the University of Houston, Clemson University and elsewhere, to impose some structure on the process.

Instructors now enroll in a 12-week hybrid course in which they develop an online course alongside and in collaboration with their peers and an instructional designer, who leads the course. Modules include a detailed look at the learning management system's capabilities and a primer on creating videos and other media.

Subject-matter experts took some time to adjust to learning new skills and getting guidance on how to teach, according to Dumonde. "The first program was really bloody," he admits. The interactions have been more pleasant with more "prework" developing learning objectives and a course framework with subject-matter experts, Kwaske said.

All of these efforts will likely morph again as relationships between departments change and the pace increases further. The biggest challenge, according to Beth Mulherrin, assistant vice provost at UMUC, is embracing uncertainty.

"You often have a mandate to accomplish something very quickly," Mulherrin said. "Sometimes you end up in a very different place than where you started." ∎

Helping Students Develop Competencies, Teachers Hone Their Own

In competency-based formats, instructors adjust to interacting regularly with students, directing students toward clear learning outcomes and other departures from their traditional practices.

By Mark Lieberman // February 6, 2019

SOURCE: ISTOCK / NATASAAVZIC

Many instructors begin the course-development process by asking themselves what they want students to have learned when the semester ends. Nina Morel, dean and professor of professional studies at Lipscomb University in Tennessee, said she used to plan her courses around topics she wanted to address.

Characteristics of Competency-Based Education

■ Students learn at their own pace until mastering objective

■ Learning materials split into discrete chunks, either on-ground or online

■ Often taught by "instructional teams" that divide tasks like grading and coaching

■ No formal definition or reference in existing Department of Education regulations

She's had to let go of that approach now that she's teaching courses in the emerging format known as competency-based education. Her main focus for those courses is preparing students to successfully complete the final assessment, whether it's an essay or a project.

Anything that doesn't directly connect to boosting the students' tangible skills gets cut from the curriculum. It's been humbling for Morel to rethink her priorities.

"There's a lot of stuff that I personally like and love to teach that isn't worth all that much," Morel said.

The increasing prominence of competency-based education in discussions of innovation has nudged instructors at a variety of institutions to question their long-held beliefs about their role in the academic experience. Some in-

stitutions dipping a toe into competency-based education have brought instructors accustomed to traditional classrooms along with them, often creating new professional development workshops in the process.

For instructors like Morel, it's a welcome opportunity to re-examine the higher education mission. Others have approached the diversifying landscape more tentatively.

"It is a very good and effective delivery system to implement, but it needs to have a lot of thought behind it, and the thought has to be about creating meaningful learning situations," said David Tan, a professor of higher education and learning technologies at Texas A&M University Commerce.

Competency-based education has been on the lips of policy makers as well, as the Department of Education ponders wide-rang-

ing regulatory changes that could open the door to more experimentation with short bursts of learning and new ways to measure student achievement.

Following a recent survey that indicated sustained interest in the format, "Inside Digital Learning" talked to instructors about how they transitioned to the new mode of instruction and what they've learned. Critics of CBE remain unconvinced that this new format facilitates meaningful learning experiences and worry that work-force industries will struggle to equitably define the value of competency achievements. Given uncertainty around this relatively new model, instructors often need time to grow accustomed to it, according to Charla Long, executive director of the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN).

"They're learning as students are learning," Long said. "That's a vulnerable place to be as they're developing their skill set."

More From "Inside Digital Learning"

Comparing and contrasting CBE programs.

Slow and steady growth for CBE, survey finds.

The future of research on new forms of teaching and learning remains uncertain.

How Teaching Can Change

Tan has been teaching for more than 30 years but got started with CBE just a year ago, when administrators at Texas A&M asked him to take over the CBE program.

He oversaw the redevelopment of close to 50 syllabi for traditional face-to-face courses now offered in a CBE format as well. In the new

version, students at the start of the semester get a list of expected competencies, which they complete at their own pace. Students can participate in virtual discussions, and get timely feedback on assignments from their instructors. Everything students turn in, from exams to term papers and interviews with practitioners, must demonstrate competency, Tan said.

Developing learning outcomes and assignments designed to help students achieve them was difficult at times because predictions of what students will accomplish in a course don't always come true. But he came around to the value of the format for preparing students for specific sectors of the work force.

His own teaching changed as well. "As a faculty member, it really forces you into being a little bit more concise, a little bit more strategic on what it is that you're hoping to accomplish," Tan said.

Working with students in CBE courses has made Kim Kostka, professor of chemistry at the University of Wisconsin Whitewater at Rock County, more wary of measuring learning through exams and quizzes. She points out that one-time assessments don't reward students for learning that might happen over the course of participating in the exams.

"I don't feel confident that students who didn't do well on an exam didn't learn -- I can't tell, actually," Kostka said. "It just might be they didn't perform well on this assessment."

Kostka now teaches courses in both formats, and she said she's more attuned in general to what students are learning.

Thanks to a federal requirement that competency-based programs include a nebulously defined "reg-

ular and substantive interaction," Kostka thinks she spends more time engaging with every individual student from her CBE courses than from her traditional face-to-face and online courses, in which some students form closer relationships with instructors than others. During mandated monthly check-ins, Kostka updates students on their progress and opens a dialogue with them about their own impressions of the experience.

"They can reveal quite a bit of themselves in those moments," Kostka said. "It's really fun to respond to them and hear more about how this is affecting their everyday life."

Instructors often have to adjust their long-held beliefs about teaching before they're ready to teach CBE courses. Shonda Gibson, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs at the Texas A&M University System, spent a couple decades in the didactic world of corporate training before shifting to higher education and, eventually, to CBE. When she recruited and trained teams at several apparel manufacturing companies, Gibson said, instruction was often centered around the idea that the teacher has all of the knowledge and the student needs merely to sit passively and absorb it. The same was true in traditional higher ed classrooms, she found, making for a natural transition. CBE is different altogether, she said.

"If you want it to be all about you as an instructor, you're going to hate CBE," Gibson said.

Gibson used to avoid handing out sample worksheets or offering students rubrics because she worried those materials would make assignments "too easy." But she now sees the value of making clear to students up front what they're ex-

pected to learn and how they'll accomplish those goals.

Time and Effort

Some public narratives around competency-based education question whether instructors in that format play an active enough role in their students' experiences. Instructors who teach CBE courses dispute that characterization.

Scott Mehall, a senior instructional designer and work-force development coordinator at Carlow University, helped in 2017 to convert an existing graduate certificate program for instructional designers into a competency-based mode. Getting it off the ground took more time and effort than expected, Mehall said.

In addition to his duties developing the program, Mehall teaches as well. Unlike with traditional courses, Mehall doesn't have to spend time at points throughout the semester preparing lecture materials for an upcoming session. "But the semester before it is an incredible amount of work," he said. Learning experiences and activities have to be carefully designed and clearly explained.

According to Mehall, concerns about whether the instructor is sticking to a predetermined schedule for the course don't matter in competency-based courses, in which students proceed at their own pace.

"In a face-to-face class, we're always kind of looking at where are we supposed to be on whatever the preconceived notion is of how long the class is taking," Mehall said. "In CBE we're not so worried about catching up or being behind."

Having hired traditional instructors to teach CBE, Gibson has witnessed rocky transitions firsthand. Some faculty members just aren't suited to the format, she said.

"You have to allow them time to shift and learn and to get in it and really feel how much of a difference you're making in people's lives," Gibson said.

Instructors new to CBE often express anxiety about whether they're capable of embodying the role of an instructional coach, Long said. On the other hand, the transition can be reinvigorating for instructors who feel stuck in a teaching rut, she said.

Even instructors who have grown accustomed to CBE acknowledge that it's not going to solve all of higher education's problems in one fell swoop -- or overnight. Texas A&M Commerce launched its CBE program in 2013, but according to Tan, instructors and administrators there have just recently gotten a handle on it.

"It's not a panacea for everything, but if done correctly and properly given the right context and situation in what you hope to accomplish, it has a lot of strengths," Tan said. ∎

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