Creating your course roadmap in uncertain territory

In a world of uncertainty, I hope my course is not uncertain for my students. As many other professors and teachers around the world, I spent my summer trying to make sure that I was going to prepare courses that would allow my students to succeed. I listened to podcasts, I reviewed material that had been provided at previous conferences and I read Small Teaching Online (Darby and Lang, 2019). This summer made me feel like I was back at square one in my teaching career. However, this is just one part of my life, I am a mother of two, a wife, and going up for tenure at the same time as my partner. We are all navigating somewhat blindly trying to take care of our families, while also taking care of our students and our classrooms. So how can we set up a course roadmap, so that we can manage the material, while we also make the material accessible to students who may not be able to come to class in person?

Determine how to divide the content. The main idea here, is to decide how you want to split up your modules in the LMS. Are you going to have daily, weekly, or modules based on each chapter? In my course, I had used daily modules before, but content gets overwhelming. Not only for the students but for the instructor as well. In my case, I was able to merge the chapter content into a weekly structure. This provided the ability to have one day a week as the quiz and homework submission day. One of the number one complaints I have heard from students this year is that they never know when assignments are due. This can be easily solved if you select one day of the week that will be the submission day for your course.

Determine how you are going to deliver your material. Are you going to lecture all material live? Will you be flipping your course? Are you going hybrid? Once you determine this piece, you can start to work on content. In my case I have a hybrid course this semester that I have flipped. My students are only scheduled to be synchronous one day out of a three day course. So, I review material nine times a week for my three sections of a MWF course. This was my decision due to the fact that students are only required one synchronous day due to class size, and I didn't believe that it was going to be effective for students to have to watch two asynchronous 50 minute lecture videos in addition to the synchronous day. My version of flipping the course consists of short lecture videos that are no longer than 11 minutes, combined with discussion during their synchronous day.

Determine how you will have check points for the students. Exams are stressful in a normal semester, so determine how you might be able to add in some low stakes assessments during the semester. One technique is to use short quizzes that match up with the short lecture videos. This may result in two-three quizzes each week. With each

quiz covering material for 3-5 videos. This also allows students to break up the material into smaller pieces and then take the quiz associated before moving to the new material.

Determine how you will provide interaction for the students. Right now, with social distancing and a mix of how students are attending, it is very difficult for students to find classmates. One potential solution is to use the group function in a LMS. The size of the groups will be dependent on the class/section size. My sections range from 80-140 students. I split my students into groups that range from 8-13 students depending on the class size. In Canvas, this provides students with an area that they can ask questions to a smaller group of students while not being intimidated by posting a question to 140 classmates. This might seem minor, but intimidation is a hard hurdle to jump for many students.

Listen. That is all, one word, just listen to the students. Everything they have to offer is probably not criticism either. I have had many students that have offered positive comments. We all want to know that our opinion is valued and that is just as important for student to know that their instructor is approachable and open to comments from anyone.

Consistency. This is one of the most important points that students bring up with online content delivery. Even if you are teaching the course in-person and online, students need to know where to find the content. This could be very basic with separate modules for lecture material, quizzes, and homework. The next step would be to separate the modules based on how you chose to divide the content. By dividing content based on days, weeks, or chapters students know where to find the quizzes, and any homework assignments for that time period. For this same reason of trying to make things easier for students to find, I would turn off the ability to see any file system for the course. If your LMS allows students to see all of the quizzes in one spot, turn it off. Why? It is once again overwhelming. As the instructor, we know what quiz should be next, but not all of the systems organize the quizzes based on due date, so they can appear scrambled.

All of these steps are not going to happen overnight, and it takes time to fully map out how your course will be set up. This is especially difficult when we may not have been intending to ever teach a course online.

If you make the decision to use short lecture videos to break up the content, then it is going to take dedicating your time to record and edit each video. There were some weeks that I have been tempted to record a long lecture and post that to the class, and I am so glad that I haven't.

This week, for the first time in 5 years of teaching, I had someone stop me in the hall and say thank you for my course. I wasn't sure for what, but they proceeded to tell me that the way that I had my course set up online was helping them and they loved the short videos. The videos that I have spent countless hours recording and editing, and

wanted to stop using many times. The short videos, that at every conference you attend we hear that information should be less than 15 minutes to hold our students attention. The same short videos, that when I talk to some colleagues they can't imagine having to break up their lecture into small pieces. All I know, is they work.

It is amazing that in a field of education, where we base our decisions on science and research, that we sometimes ignore the science and research behind teaching. Like most field scientists, I wasn't "trained" to teach. I was personally trained how to conduct soils research and dig a soil pit very quickly. Those skills are not ones that translate easily into a classroom. I can't dig my way out of a boring lecture. However, in five minutes I can record part of the most exciting lecture about tillage and soil conservation.

If you are starting to work on the spring semester and haven't started mapping out your content, try breaking material up into smaller pieces. Talk with your colleagues, see what is working for them, and go find some podcasts. Right now, Teaching in Higher Ed with Bonni Stachowiak is my favorite. Most of all, if you are teaching right now, ask your students if there are any formats that are working well for them. We may not all switch to hybrid courses after the pandemic, but hopefully we can start to pull the best parts of online teaching together and find what works in our course.

References
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