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How to Prepare Professors Who Thought They'd Never Teach Online

By Jeffrey R. Young | JUNE 21, 2016

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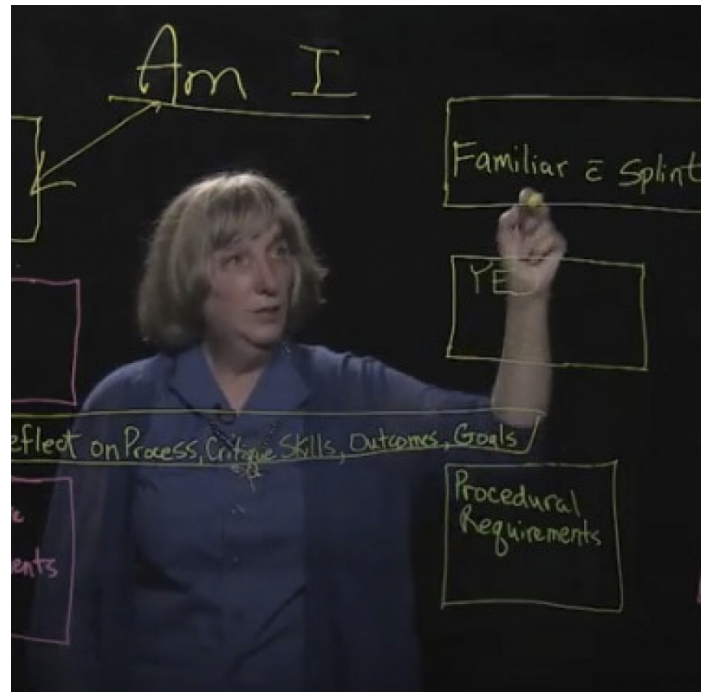
Mark Bradbury has brought along plenty of apprehension to a summer workshop here on how to teach an online course.

Mr. Bradbury, who directs a master's program in public administration at Appalachian State University, prides himself on drawing out students in his face-to-face courses and feeding off their questions and interests. He worries that he won't be able to replicate that spirit if he's making lecture videos and posting on discussion boards.

"My strength as an instructor is being spontaneous," he says. "I don't always know what I'm going to say next, so the notion of a script, the notion of storyboarding, that's foreign. I know we've had a good class when we've only gone through one-third of my teaching notes, because I know we had a dialogue and a discussion."

Despite his doubts, Mr. Bradbury is scheduled to teach his first online course this fall. He is typical of the 36 professors at this workshop, put on by the University of North Carolina system for faculty members throughout its 17 campuses. It is designed primarily for those in the midst of planning their first online or hybrid course, and it is a marathon session by faculty-development standards, lasting eight days. The goal of the intensive training, billed as an "incubator," is to offer enough time and support so that the professors finish a good portion of their online courses during the event, and leave with enough knowledge to tackle the rest on their own or with the help of their campus's support staff.

It's a new breed of training designed for the growing ubiquity of online education. Not long ago, few instructors at traditional colleges taught on the web, and those who did were usually early adopters eager to try new technologies. Today, nearly half of the UNC system's students — 46 percent — take an online course at least once during their college career, and 11 percent take courses fully online. That means the online courses involve plenty of professors who have no particular love or interest in instructional technologies.



UNC-TV

Elizabeth Fain draws on a lightboard during the taping of a lecture, part of an online-education workshop the U. of North Carolina system provides to professors. "I feel like now it's, Get on board that education train, or get lost," she says.

Often the professors are motivated by feedback from their students, who want or need the convenience of not having to come to the campus as often. Still, many of the professors, like Mr. Bradbury, secretly wonder whether their material can actually be taught well online. And they sense that shifting to online is a fundamental change in what it means to teach.

On the second day of the workshop, Mr. Bradbury had an aha! moment. Stace Carter, a freelance instructional designer, told the group the story of a philosophy professor who insisted on bringing his dog along to a video shoot for his course. Mr. Carter showed a clip in which the professor, Mitchell Green, reads a passage from a book while sitting by a stream. The dog distractingly digs around on the ground and then licks the professor's face, all while Mr. Green continues reading aloud, unfazed. The roomful of professors at the teaching workshop erupted into laughter.

Mr. Carter admitted his first instinct was to reshoot the video. Instead, he and the professor just went with it. "People loved it. They begged for more, saying they can't wait for next week," Mr. Carter told the group. What comes through in the video, imperfect as it surely is, is a sense of authenticity.

Mr. Green is an outdoorsy person who loves his dog, and the setting of the video makes that plain. And in online forums for the course, students made a connection between the dog's behavior and the passage, which was about Zen archery and how to find a way to "just be."

"Think about the dog as a hook," continued Mr. Carter. "It gave people something to talk about." And, sure, the dog was distracting, so much so that many students probably had to watch the clip twice to fully take in what was being said. But watching a clip repeatedly isn't a bad thing when it comes to learning.

To Mr. Bradbury, this was a revelation. He had been worried about making his lecture videos perfect — thinking that he had to give a command performance every time the camera was rolling, as if he were in a Hollywood production. But he realized he actually doesn't think the same way about his time behind the lectern in the traditional classroom. As he put it, "I don't expect hyper-efficiency when I teach face to face." That put him more at ease. "I see that the anxieties of adding online instruction to my teaching responsibilities — OK, they're valid — but I can't allow those anxieties to get out of proportion," he said in an interview.

Studio Time

The professors arrived at the incubator ready to work. To win a slot at the workshop, called the i3@UNC Program, with the i's standing for Instructional Innovation Incubator, participants had to submit proposals describing the courses they planned to build. They brought laptops and teaching notes, and most of the time here was spent in small-group discussions or working one-on-one with instructional designers from campuses across the state.

A highlight of the week for many participants was time in a studio to produce a video for their course. The organizers even brought in special gear for the event — a rig called a "lightboard," designed a few years ago by a professor at Northwestern University. The board functions as a regular whiteboard, except that it is made of clear plexiglass, so the professor can stand behind and write on it while looking into a camera positioned on the other side. The result looks like something out of science fiction, and it is designed to let professors do the kind of teaching they're used to in the classroom, but in a way that translates to the video format.

"It puts them in a much more comfortable setting than just being a talking head in front of a camera, which is very awkward for most people," said Matthew Z. Rascoff, founding organizer of the incubator and the UNC system's vice president for technology-based learning and innovation. "It's not just that it looks cool, it actually works better."

Elizabeth Fain, an assistant professor of occupational therapy at Winston-Salem State University, enters the studio eager but feeling "pressure" to perform. She carries a bag of props — several wrist splints she plans to hold up as she describes a clinician's thought processes when treating a patient with carpal tunnel or a similar disorder.

Three staff members are in the studio to help with the technical details of the video shoot and to coach Ms. Fain through the process. One is Cathy Dobbins, director of educational services and grants at UNC-TV, who cautions the professor not to write so much on the board that it blocks her face. "Let's position you here," Ms. Dobbins suggests.

After 20 minutes of "pre-draw," writing an outline of a flowchart on the board that the professor will connect with arrows as she talks, Ms. Fain is ready to rehearse. She goes through her five-minute lecture twice, each time noting how long it takes and how well she stays focused on the points she wants to emphasize. The goal is to shoot the video in one take, so there is no room for flubs.

"Maybe smile at the end," Ms. Dobbins advises after the second practice run. She explains that they need to let the camera linger on the professor for a few seconds after her lecture so that the video doesn't appear to end abruptly.

"OK, I think we've got it," Ms. Fain says. "I'm feeling pretty good."

Ms. Dobbins uses a cloth to carefully remove several stray marks from the board. An assistant from UNC-TV, Rusty Knott, moves a stool that is casting a distracting shadow. "All right, let's try recording," Ms. Dobbins says.

Ms. Fain straightens up and looks directly into the camera, waiting for her cue. She tries to think about the students who will be out there watching, eventually. But for now she is bathed in harsh light in a windowless concrete box, remembering to smile.

A few minutes later, it's over. The three technicians clap. "You did it," says Ms. Dobbins, smiling.

It took well over an hour to produce the five-minute clip, but Ms. Fain says the effort was worth it. "It's either pay upfront, or pay later," she jokes, a reference to how much time it takes to teach. The video, she notes, can be played over and over again. She says she particularly liked how using the lightboard made her face visible as she wrote out notes. She has a hearing impairment, and it bothers her that she can't see the professor's lips when a traditional chalkboard is used.

Although Ms. Fain once taught an online course six or seven years ago, it was low-tech, she says. She is far more excited to teach online now, especially since she recently earned a Ph.D. through a program that blends online and in-person teaching. Now she better understands the benefits from the student's perspective.

"I feel like that's the direction that education is going," she says. "And I feel like now it's, Get on board that education train, or get lost."

Key to Growth

Across the country, plenty of other colleges are rethinking how they prepare professors for the online classroom as well.

Many professional-development programs previously focused on the technologies — labeling a session as "How to Use Blackboard," for instance. Today more colleges are stressing how different teaching online is, even philosophically, and talking more about teaching practices than tools, says Deb Adair, executive director of Quality Matters, a group that certifies the quality of online courses.

"There's much greater openness about how this is a whole different medium, and how being an effective online instructor requires a different framework," she says. Colleges are seeing the move to online classrooms as a moment to try to improve teaching quality in general.

That has been the case in North Carolina, says Mr. Rascoff, as many participants say they learned techniques and approaches they'll use in their face-to-face courses as well.

Changing demographics have driven North Carolina's increase in online offerings. For years universities in the system relied on graduate programs as a source of enrollment (and thus, revenue) growth. Today the biggest enrollment growth is in its online programs, and more offerings are in the works.

By the end of the workshop, several professors said they felt more confident that they could adapt their material to the online format.

Kate B. Nooner, an associate professor of psychology at UNC-Wilmington, for instance, had initially worried that moving her "Introductory Statistics for Behavioral Science" course online would make it easier for students to cheat on assignments. But in talking with one of the instructional designers at the workshop, she came up with the idea of a project-based approach, requiring individual students to tackle a unique project that they will add to throughout the semester. So for each week's assignment, students will be asked to apply the latest statistical techniques to their own project — which will make it difficult to share answers with classmates.

"I think it will be really neat," she said. "I'm excited."

Even after the eight-day training, though, going completely online still gives her pause. The first time she offers the course, she might try a hybrid format — holding some in-person meetings and doing some work online — so that she can work out any kinks before going fully online.

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Correction (6/21/2016, 1:45 p.m.): This article originally referred inconsistently to the length of the workshop. It was eight days, not 10 days. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.

This article is part of:

Mapping the New Education Landscape

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