Basic Guide for Transforming Your Course for Distance Learning

The Challenge

The Covid-19 outbreak has forced professors and teachers to adapt to a distance learning environment. APTPUO members have widely different experiences and feelings about distance learning techniques and technologies. One barrier to achieving this transition at an institutional level is that most professors are experienced professionals that are emotionally tied to their courses the way they are. Another underappreciated challenge is that many of your students will have no experience with online learning either. Finally, the current support infrastructure will be challenged to meet the demand from professors for help during the coming semester(s).

Purpose of This Guide

As opposed to a *best practices* approach that encourages professors to try new methods and adopt new technologies, this guide focuses on helping members to bridging distance learning tools with their existing course materials. Building an online course from scratch is very time-consuming. This guide tries to outline a simplified approach to transform your course within a short window of time, while telegraphing the primary pitfalls that you need to avoid. It is important to remember that you have academic freedom for all of your teaching activities and this provides you with the flexibility you need to determine how best to deliver the course through distance learning.

We also recommend that you take full advantage of the services provided through the university's Teaching and Learning Support Service (TLSS), including those for Brightspace. Remember that it is the Employer's responsibility to provide you with all of the required technology to teach, whether online or through distance learning, as per the collective agreement. This includes compensation for completing training at an hourly rate of $71.94.

> 5.1.4 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
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> 5.1.4.2 * Where a Member is assigned an online course, the Employer shall ensure that the Member has access to the technology capable of handling the required mode of delivery.
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> 5.1.4.3 * To assist Members and to facilitate technological innovation within the University community, the Employer shall inform Members of technology training programs at the University, and shall make these programs available to Members free of charge. With the prior approval of the appropriate authority, Members who participate in such program shall be paid for their time according to the applicable rate.

Remember, however, that TLSS works for the administration and their mission is to promote student satisfaction. In advocating for certain 'best practices' or technologies their agents are

unlikely to consider the workload of APTPUO professors. It would behoove you to factor workload into the equation as nearly all professors discover that preparing a course for distance learning takes considerably more time.

Revamping Strategy

Instead of *building* a distance course, think about this challenge as a *revamping* exercise. You are not starting from scratch, but focused upon adapting your existing syllabus, readings, lectures, Brightspace shell and assignments for distance learning. It might also be useful to consider the differences between a 'distance learning' and fully 'online' course. Depending on your discipline, your pedagogy and student population one format may prove more appealing.

Format	Traditional in person lecture	Discussion Section/Seminar	Performance (music/theatre)	Hybrid Course	Distance Learning	Online Course
Student population	Large	Small	Small to independent study	Either	Either	Either
Sequencing	In-class	Synchronous	Synchronous	Synchronous and Asynchronous	Synchronous and asynchronous	synchronous and asynchronous
Learning Mode	Primarily passive learning	Primarily active learning	Active	Active and passive learning	Probably passive	Probably active
Medium of Instruction	Lecture presentation	Leading Discussion	Tutoring/evaluating	Video modules and in class discussions	Lectures mediated through technology	Learning activities specifically designed for the virtual environment

Note: This is an idealized table for illustration purposes

Three Initial Decisions

- **Synchronous or Asynchronous Structure?** In revamping your course one big decision you have to make is whether you will retain the live lecture format through a platform like Adobe Connect (synchronous), or whether you will post your lecture materials online and allow students to access them on their own time (asynchronous).
  Many professors teaching lower level surveys will opt for an asynchronous structure because it provides more quality control and freedom to students who may be living in different time zones with spotty Internet. However, even with an asynchronous structure, professors can still hold elements of their class live, like office hours or class discussions slated for set times.
- **Class Level and Student Cohort?** An important element in course design is the level of your class and the student population. An online discussion forum could prove quite effective in simulating discussion in a 4000-level seminar, but is more difficult to manage with a class population of 100 first year students. In adapting your course to the online environment you need to determine how your lectures, assignments, and participation are changed.
- **What works best?** Significant differences among faculties, departments, course material and professor status, means that one size cannot fit all. Every professor must determine the best formula to revamp their course for distance learning. 'Best practices' need to be reconciled with actual workload and rate of pay.

Reconcile Yourself to Some Hard Truths: Much of the literature on best practices invokes case studies with highly motivated students and top universities. You will be teaching in less ideal conditions. Without a realistic picture of the student body there is a risk that your workload could balloon and elements of your course could fall flat.

- **Dispelling a Myth**: Generation Z students may not be as tech savvy as we might assume. Training students how to use Brightspace and perform simple tasks like turning in an assignment takes longer than you may expect and this will increase your workload. So, while there is a universe of technology available, you are better off sticking to the basics: Brightspace and Microsoft Office. The more platforms and technologies that you introduce, the steeper the learning curve for you and/or your students. *Simplicity is key; you want the students to learn the course material not how to manipulate different online platforms.*
- **Teaching your Students**: Many students will assume that their professor is their personal tech support person, and will send you an email if something 'does not

work' for them and expect an answer back within an hour so they can keep working. A good practice is to set up a communication protocol for how and when students should contact you, explaining what you can control (Bright Space) and what you do not (their Internet, the library data base), along with links to troubleshooting and the university help desk.

- **Tending the Flock**: A number of students may have learning disabilities and emotional issues that will make it difficult for them to remain focused and/or wary of participating in an online discussion forum. Although distance teaching seems very impersonal, many students are highly self-conscious, particularly in terms of their peers, and may be worried about embarrassing themselves. Some good strategies are to establish a nurturing culture from the start (building a community of learning) and to use the Track Progress function on Brightspace to periodically check up on those falling behind.

- **Don't be left holding the bag**: Creating a distance learning course requires a significant upfront investment, but you should not assume that distance learning will save a professor any time teaching. This is because online learning is a form of independent study, but the technology enables you to scale up enrollments. A lecture feels personal even in a lecture hall holding 150 students, but to retain this interaction online would require a professor to respond to every student's post in an online forum. In revamping your course be careful not to commit to structures that increase your workload exponentially. Try to structure assignments so that the grading load does not exceed that of a traditional lecture course.

Transforming your Course for Distance Learning

1) **Revising your Syllabus**

   If you had time and a course release, TLSS might recommend that you reconceptualize your course by defining your learning objectives and build content and learning activities specifically tailored to the online environment and guaranteeing these outcomes. To save time, you might consider a simpler default strategy of keeping the sequence of lectures and readings in your syllabus intact. Instead, focus particularly on adapting your assignments to maximize 'engagement.' In particular, consider creating short assignments due each week to prevent students from procrastinating and falling behind.

2) Transitioning Your Materials

Online	Traditional	Formatting
Blogs	essay	300-word reflection essay that incorporates all lecture materials and readings and is graded according to the plus, check, minus system.
Virtual Meeting	Seminar Discussion	Use a platform like Google Hangouts or Adobe Connect that will enable you to replicate a small group discussion virtually.
Link to Stream	Show Documentary	The library now streams some documentaries and you can contact them ares@uottawa.ca to try and get the streaming rights for documentaries. If they already own them they might put them online for you.
Digital Content	Textbook	The University Bookstore can still manage textbook orders and mail them to students. Please submit your adoption requests to textbook@uOttawa.ca, including your course and section, textbook with ISBN and any other materials you will need.
Get library to purchase digital rights	Library Course Reserve	Professors can request that course materials be placed on reserve, simply email your course syllabus or reading list to ares@uottawa.ca. Their staff will even manage the delicate and time-consuming application of copyright and licensing agreements.
Online assignment	Paper assignments	Use this feature to create assignments so that your students can upload and submit assignments directly in Brightspace, eliminating the need to email their work to you and saving processing time.
Discussion Forum	Participation	Create multiple questions around a lecture's theme and require students to respond to one question and at a later date post a rebuttal to a post from one of their peers.
Review Quiz	Midterm	Instead of one midterm, have shorter weekly multiple-choice quizzes to ensure students are completing their readings.
Take-Home, open book or online timed final exam	In-class Final Exam	In most cases you should be able to keep your final exam format the same. In taking a comprehensive final exam online you have to be mindful that it is open-book and some students will be tempted to collaborate, but these are challenges which we are used to managing. You can also create an online timed final exam using the quiz feature on Brightspace. This would be a perfect option particularly for final exams with multiple-choice or fill-in the-blank questions.

3) Setting up Virtual Office Hours

It is not clear if in-person office hours will be allowed in the future, or desirable for safety reasons. The easiest fix is to simply use email to answer student queries. If video-conferencing is required for oral presentations or performances, consider using Skype or Whatsapp by creating a burner account like Professor Smith to retain your privacy. It is a good idea to communicate a protocol in your syllabus in terms of limiting your availability, specifying a format for student inquiries, directing them to contact the help desk for computer and account issues and explaining to them how you do your best to manage voluminous inquiries.

If you choose to complete the uOttawa-approved paid training for Adobe Connect, the software may be used for virtual drop-in office hours, or by appointment. Students enjoy the opportunity to communicate face-to-face with their professors. Time permitting, virtual office hours are a simple way to retain a "live" aspect to teaching.

4) Recording your Lectures

There are various software programs available to record your lectures. Given the situation, the university should license something that will become a campus standard. The TLSS page provides several options.

Digital Tool	Advantage	Disadvantage	Cost
Embed your audio into your PowerPoint slides	Software you already know and with which students are familiar.	Audio quality average and creates large file sizes that could be challenging for students to download	Free
Screen capture of PowerPoints slides using screen-cast-o-matic	Relatively easy to master screen capture technology that will convert PPT into MP4 videos that you post to Brightspace.	Records only up to 15 minutes per video. To record a 60-minute video, you would need to break it into 4 separate videos.	Free version, Deluxe plan (1.5 USD per month, and Premier plan 4 USD per month)
Open Broadcaster System (Windows, Mac, Linux) or Imovie (mac)	Higher quality video and you can edit recorded lectures and insert documentary	You will have to master new software and while various tools enable more sophisticated	Imovie often preinstalled on Macs or available for 15 USD.

	excerpts or songs. Lectures can be posted to YouTube using either a public or a private account.	production outcomes there will be a learning curve for mastery of software.	OBS is free.
Adobe Connect or Zoom record live lecture feature.	Adobe Connect: Free accounts offered by the TLSS. Zoom: simple to use; easy to hold real-time classes and meetings.	Adobe Connect: Difficult to edit and students may feel it is impersonal. Zoom: One of the biggest security issues facing Zoom is the surge in "Zoombombing," when uninvited attendees could break into and disrupt an ongoing meeting. Zoom is working on this issue to increase the security features of the tool.	Can register for Adobe Connect free accounts through TLSS. Zoom is 15 USD per month to host.

Want even more ideas about how to lecture live *and* record yourself at the same time? Check out Lifehacker.com's "Mega Guide to Video Chap Apps" to see some of the many (free!) options for a 10 *or* a 150-person class.

5) **Expanding your Brightspace Platform**

This guide cannot provide a tutorial for Brightspace. TLSS has created a cheat-sheet that helps with the basics. Under normal conditions, TLSS also maintained a walk-in laboratory in Vanier where professors could get access to one-on-one mentoring. All professors did get an email inviting them to join the Brightspace community with online tutorials and the ability for phone consultation for problem solving.

Brightspace is pretty intuitive, but there is a learning curve for both the basic course set up and mastering the more complex features like the grade book and quizzes. Many professors use Brightspace simply as a depository for notes. One basic way to think about adapting your course is that you are migrating your paper syllabus to Brightspace.

One simple approach is to simply make every week of the syllabus a module. Then within this module upload the relevant lectures and assignments. Brightspace also enables you to set the "start" and "end date" as well as the "due date" for modules and individual assignments. "Start" controls when the module is visible. "End" denotes when the module becomes invisible. The "due date" will record an assignment in the calendar and send students an automated warning as the deadline approaches.

TLSS Webinars and Cheat Sheets

TLSS has emailed current professors various guides and invitations to webinars on various software programs and pedagogical workshops. Most of these materials can now be found here (scroll down to the resources for professors section)

Final Note

This represents a challenging time as many professors are being assigned a course with only a few weeks- or in some cases mere days- to prepare along with an obligation to switch to distance learning. Additionally, professors will not have access to traditional support like the Vanier walk-in laboratory as long as the campus is closed during Covid-19.

Needless to say, the challenge is formidable and APTPUO members handled the emergency transition in March with aplomb. Indeed, the administration took note that this was your 'finest hour' and the heroic efforts to transform your courses to ensure students were able to learn and finish the Winter semester, thereby keeping the institution together during a time of crisis.

Questions or comments

Do not hesitate to contact us!

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