Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic: The Pivot to Online

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Abstract

The pivot to online learning was abrupt and unexpected for all of us, both faculty and students, in colleges and universities across the nation and around the world. Like most universities, Texas State adjusted. In the Digital Media Innovation (DMI) program, faculty are astute at digital tools and concepts, and we teach many topics in online and hybrid formats. However, the quick shift to online teaching and learning presented unique opportunities and challenges for each instructor and course. In this series, DMI faculty, who teach a range of mass communication courses, describe the ways in which they adapted and adjusted their classes during the second half of the Spring semester. Over the next several days, we will publish individual articles that will ultimately be organized into a single forum. This series ran on the MILab Journal website, June 8-15, 2020.

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Introduction

The pivot to online learning was abrupt and unexpected for all of us, both faculty and students, in colleges and universities across the nation and around the world. Like most universities, Texas State adjusted. In the Digital Media Innovation (DMI) program, faculty are astute at digital tools and concepts, and we teach many topics in online and hybrid formats. However the quick shift to online teaching and learning presented unique opportunities and challenges for each instructor and course.

Distance education is not a new area in journalism and mass communication programs (Reis et al,. 1999; Casteneda, 2011; Blankenship & Gibson, 2015; Smallwood & Brunner, 2017; Loizzo, et al., 2017). Many programs have delivered online and hybrid offerings in their programs and offered massively open online courses for professionals or the public (see the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas and Northwestern University's Medill School).

At Texas State, we have implemented distance education in courses that are completely online or hybrid before the pandemic shift occurred. Our Fundamentals of Digital and Online Media core course is regularly taught in a hybrid manner as a large class split with alternating in-person and online activities and often delivered completely online for some sections. We have implemented a short course series, in which many of these courses are introduced to students in several online

modules, culminating in an in-person workshop. The [PhDigital Bootcamp](), funded by the [Knight Foundation](), is an annual activity consisting of 10 weeks of online modules in preparation for a week in residence on our campus during the summer to prepare future faculty to lead innovative curriculum. We have had to adjust to online methods to substitute for the in-person aspect of that program this year, as well.

In addition, the courses we teach in digital tools, social media and multimedia provide us a strong background in which to launch an online course. So, we have a range of experiences that support a shift to online teaching. However, moving courses to an online scenario in a matter of days was a massive undertaking, occurring amidst fear of a global pandemic and anxiety about the effects on the economy into which students would be graduating. Our efforts resulted in a successful completion of the semester, and we felt our processes, techniques and lessons learned would be valuable to share.

In this series, DMI faculty, who teach a range of mass communication courses, describe the ways in which they adapted and adjusted their classes during the second half of the Spring semester. Over the next several days, we will publish individual articles that will ultimately be organized into a single forum.

Challenges for Hybrid and Lab Courses
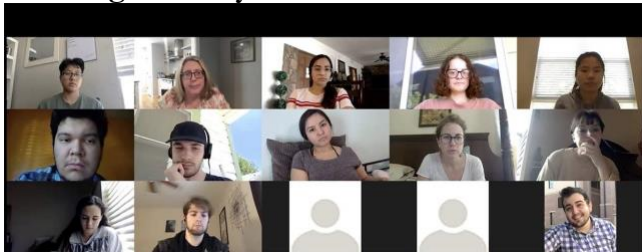
By Cindy Royal, Ph.D.
Professor & Director, Media Innovation Lab

In early March, having just returned from a trip to New York City and amid growing concern about the pandemic, I began to consider options for completing the semester. I kept thinking "just get to Spring Break, and we'll regroup." During that time, in Austin, the annual South By Southwest Conference and Festival was canceled, and this was the first realization that we were dealing with something bigger than we originally anticipated. As time went on, and more activities were canceled or postponed, we began to grasp the magnitude of a contagious disease run rampant across the U.S. and globe.

I was teaching two courses as a hybrid during the Spring semester: Digital Media Innovation Capstone and the Digital Media Design graduate course. While half of the sessions in those courses were originally planned to be taught online, the in-person segments were critical to the learning outcomes, as the course was initially conceived. A third course, Mobile Media Development, was meant as a completely in-person experience in a computer lab. I discuss the ways each course was adapted and re-conceived.

Digital Media Innovation Capstone

While the Digital Media Innovation Capstone class was originally developed as 50% online/50% in-person this semester, the in-person activities were the heart of the course. We have group work, brainstorming and other design-thinking exercises. Luckily, we had finished most of those activities during the first part of the semester. I wanted to maintain contact with the students, so I decided to have weekly Zoom check-ins with them, but moved all my lectures to pre-recorded videos. I wanted students to be able to access the materials when they could, and be able to manage whatever technology and Internet connection issues they may be having in the places in which they were isolating.

We were in the midst of group research projects when the semester was disrupted. Students used various tools, some that I set up (Basecamp) and some they adopted (messaging apps and emails) to maintain the necessary communication to assemble these projects. All instructors know that group projects rarely go without some conflict or discrepancy, but I was happy that these projects ran more smoothly than in the past, with virtually no complaints and all being turned in on deadline.

I am pleased that several students from this course have secured positions: marketing social media specialist for a personnel agency, social media brand ambassador for a law firm, audience development producer for a startup media organization and social media coordinator for a major social analytics platform company. Others are actively in the process of interviewing, so this is encouraging for the career prospects of our recent graduates.

Digital Media Design

The Digital Media Design course is a graduate-level class in introductory web design concepts. Our graduate program recently moved to offering most courses in a hybrid manner, so this was the first time this course was taught 50% online. The course covers HTML, CSS and JavaScript coding, responsive design, the Bootstrap frontend framework and basic multimedia editing.

This was a small class and all students had access to computers and the necessary software they needed. The university provided the Adobe Creative Suite for students, so they could access Photoshop and Premiere for image and video editing. All other tools were free, online coding tools (html editors like Brackets or Atom)

or tools to which they had free access (Fetch or FileZilla). I still met with the course during our regular time on a live Zoom, but tried to keep sessions to 30 minutes or less. That did not always happen, as some discussions of topics went longer than others. But because we had covered the foundational elements during the first part of the semester, most students had a good basis for completing the course. I did have to review code with students either on Zoom or separately and provide recommendations for solutions. I missed the opportunity to talk with them in the lab about the vision for their projects and provide direct assistance with problems, but all students were able to successfully complete the class and turn in good projects.

The final projects in the class were a multimedia reporting project, which also presented challenges for students in their reporting and dealing with sources. But students found ways to make sense out of their personal situations and tell unique stories about their or others' experiences dealing with the pandemic.

Mobile Media Development

The Mobile Media Development course uses the Apple program XCode and Swift programming language to create iPhone apps. Due to the focus on the Apple platform, the course requires the use of Mac computers, so we normally teach this course completely in person in a Mac lab. This was a big worry for moving online, but I quickly assessed that the majority of students owned Mac computers, and I was able to round up a few MacBook Pros and MacBook Airs to lend to the four who did not.

Still, this class was going to be a challenge without being able to help students directly in a lab. In a computer lab, it is a challenging course to teach, as the XCode and Swift platforms are more advanced coding concepts. The platform is unique in how it handles errors and troubleshooting. Once I knew all the students had computers they could use in their respective homes, I was still concerned about them being able to execute working projects. I decided to change the requirements for the final project to remove the third segment of lessons on using a cloud-based database as a requirement. I still exposed students to these topics, but made them optional for the final project, which none of the class tried. That is understandable, because there were many aspects of these lessons that really needed to be handled in a lab on consistent platforms and with readily available assistance.

Prior to Spring Break, I had covered most of what needed to be addressed in terms of creating a multi-screen app that passed data across scenes. I continued meeting with the students once a week on a Zoom for a check in, to be able to answer any questions and to help them understand issues and requirements for creating and turning in projects. I spent time working with students via Zoom and through email looking at their

projects, helping them troubleshoot error messages and figuring out functionality problems.

In a final wrap-up post for the course, students expressed the following sentiments about missing the in-person sessions during the final weeks of the course.

> "While using the borrowed Apple computer has certainly been helpful, trying to navigate the computer system without the help of teachers and peers sitting right next to me, who can help with not only Xcode, but Apple in general, certainly steepened the learning curve for me."

> "I'm sure I'm not alone in wishing we were able to continue instruction in class, as I feel we had to miss out on things we would have only gotten from being in-person."

> "I think the game app was the most enjoyable because we were in class and able to help each other and get ideas from each other, but I have still enjoyed the class in the online format."

These comments reflect the value that students in this course place on the in-person experience that includes both instructor assistance and learning from one's peers.

Reflections

In a survey by the Chronicle of Higher Education, 60% of faculty felt that Spring 2020 courses were inferior to face-to-face offerings (June, 2020). The results indicated that creating engagement with students was one of the most challenging aspect of moving online. However, many indicated confidence in teaching online in the future, with more time to develop online teaching skills and prepare courses.

Like others who have made the abrupt shift to online courses mid-semester (Radcliffe, 2020), I have had a chance to reflect on the experience. Here are some of the things I found in moving these courses online and supporting students in completing the semester:

Students rose to the occasion. In all courses, students did more than I expected, solved problems on their own and turned in excellent projects. I think this is the result of 1) not having as many normal distractions with bars, parties and friends; 2) their anxiety about career plans caused them to put more effort into developing strong portfolio elements. I am proud of the work students turned in this semester, some of the best projects I have seen.

Live Zoom sessions proved more valuable than I originally thought. When I first embarked on the online portion of the semester, my goal was to provide most of the lessons as pre-recorded videos, so students

could access them whenever they were able. But the weekly check-ins, guest speakers and Q&A sessions offered a return to a semblance of normalcy that most students seemed to crave. I recorded most sessions (unless the guest speaker wanted to be off the record), so students who were not able to make the live session could view it later. However, I was surprised that attendance was quite good for the live sessions, although participation was uneven.

Video on or off? I didn't require students to have video on during the live sessions. This didn't help the engagement of the class. But since students were possibly in less than ideal situations, I didn't require this. For future online courses, I plan to require (or strongly encourage) that students are present via video during live courses, but I will commit to keeping the live segments short.

Alumni to the rescue. In addition to the sessions I held with students during the live Zooms, I also recorded several more interviews with alumni who worked at Texas Tribune, New York Times, Texas Restaurant Association, H-E-B, USAA and more. They discussed work-from-home strategies and gave students advice. Every one responded instantly to my request and was more than willing to share their experiences with students. I encouraged students to connect with alumni via social media, as many expressed willingness to support students during this crisis.

Alumni who work in product and UX design roles at USAA speak to the DMI Capstone class.

One student commented in a final wrap up post:

"I felt the course went above and beyond to prepare us to start careers, which I am grateful for. In particular, I think the meetings with professionals over the last several weeks have been some of the most engaging and useful content I could have asked for."

Coding is hard to teach, online AND in person. The most difficult concept to emulate in an online environment was the personal assistance with coding that I am able to offer students in a lab. But most students were ready to embrace the idea of solving their own problems. For the ones I needed to assist, I was able to work with their code on my own or via Zoom and help them figure out what they needed to do. I reiterated, over and over again, some of the techniques for solving their own coding problems: reading the error messages, isolating the problem, checking for conflicts, testing their projects at each step. But these are the same techniques I have to emphasize when I teach the course in person. Being on their own encouraged some students to gain more tenacity than they would have if they had someone to instantly assist them and better prepared them for a future in which they will have to execute self-teaching over their career. Many technology and programming topics are taught in an online manner through other platforms and that is the main way that I update my own skills, so teaching these topics online is not that far-fetched or unusual.

Communication, as always, is key. Being clear about communication modes (email, Slack, a learning management system) and redundant in your messaging is the key to any successful educational environment. It is critical in an online situation, particularly one that was not necessarily planned as online at the outset.

Having held courses as normal for the first part of the semester was key to the successful completion in the Spring. In most cases, foundational elements were already covered, and during the last five weeks we were able to apply these concepts. This will be different in semesters when we will be teaching courses online from the beginning. But we'll have time to adjust to how we build the foundation and must consider how to best simulate the in-person experience in a virtual environment. There will always be new approaches and ways to consider improving online delivery, which means continuous learning for faculty.

Teaching online is just like the digital skills we teach students. It reflects a problem to be solved. It is difficult, but not impossible, and there are ways to teach more course topics online, if you are creative and willing to experiment with tools. You also need to be flexible and empathetic for students' situations. And you need to be careful with yourself. Mistakes will be made. You will work hard. You will learn things that you will improve the next time. These are skills that all faculty are going to need to develop as we move forward.

Moving Out and Going Mobile

By Kelly Kaufhold, Ph.D.
Associate Professor

My transition to online teaching was a bit more abrupt than most. I taught my usual Monday/Wednesday classes on Monday, March 9, the week just before Spring Break - hinting with my students that the University would likely move us online after the break – so we might want to practice a class via Zoom just to get used to the platform.

The next morning, I was in a meeting at another institution. But that evening, we were alerted someone in that meeting might have been exposed to COVID-19 at a conference the week before! I immediately decided to self-quarantine for 2 weeks – aided by our extended Spring Break. I also immediately arranged to hold my Wednesday class the very next day on Zoom. Every student attended and we were off and running.

The shift to online was abrupt, but wasn't nearly as disruptive as it might have been due to the design of the course. I was teaching Multimedia Journalism in spring of 2020, and my students already do a variety of practice exercises in different media, including photos, audio, video and social media. using just their phones. I've found that it's a good idea to get them to practice fundamentals of telling stories in these media without the distractions of new technology, like DSLR cameras. It's also an opportunity to get them used to doing real reporting with their smartphones, which is increasingly common and important in contemporary newsrooms and other industries. As it happened, their final phone practice assignment was due the week before we left for spring break.

Scholarship on teaching with mobile technology confirms its value. Flipping a classroom assigns concepts to the students on their own and saves classroom time for hands-on instruction and making smartphones the preferred delivery platform increased participation and improved student collaboration in group activities (Heflin, Shewmaker & Nguyen, 2017; Hwang, Lai & Wang, 2015). In this case, it was even more appropriate and convenient for students to watch a video demo on their phones about how to report with their phones.

Timing Was Dumb Luck… Planning Was Not

In a normal semester, they would do abbreviated assignments on their phones – which they did – building to more substantial reporting on legacy tools, like DSLR cameras and Adobe Creative Cloud tools. The big change this semester was to migrate to much more elaborate, complete storytelling using only smartphones. I spent our extended spring break crafting my own stories as examples and practicing with some new tools and techniques, so I'd be ready to get them up to speed when they returned remotely the last week in March. I shot a tutorial of how to add reporter narration, natural sound, and do more elaborate editing entirely on the phone, and produced my own stories, published on class social media, as examples.

Also, I knew it would be difficult for them to get access to the kind of video they traditionally would shoot to tell their stories. They needed some new techniques for doing remote interviews. I taught them how to set up their student Zoom accounts and how to record remote interviews; but I also made a tutorial video showing them how to use their smartphone to shoot cutaway shots of themselves doing interviews as a tool to use in editing. I had told them in February that they weren't rich or famous enough to use "cutaway" or "reversal" shots like the kind you see on 60 Minutes – but in my tutorial in March, I joked that they'd been promoted – now they were famous enough for cutaways, and here's how to shoot them!

I still needed to teach them some visual skills that were best served by a synchronous meeting, so some of our classes were live. I would begin the Zoom call on my computer but switch to my iPhone, then share that screen to demonstrate a technique. Other lectures worked fine asynchronously with lectures and examples. I scheduled student office hours each week when I would wait on Zoom. I was also available by appointment just about any hour of the day. On days when students had story deadlines, I would set my phone or computer to chime when I got an email, so I could reply instantly and jump on a call. A few students needed help with technology (and could share their screens for me to help) but most took to the editing tools I shared with them on their phones. Many still had access to Adobe Creative Cloud, but I taught all students phone alternatives, including Lightroom, PS Express, Fimora and iMovie.
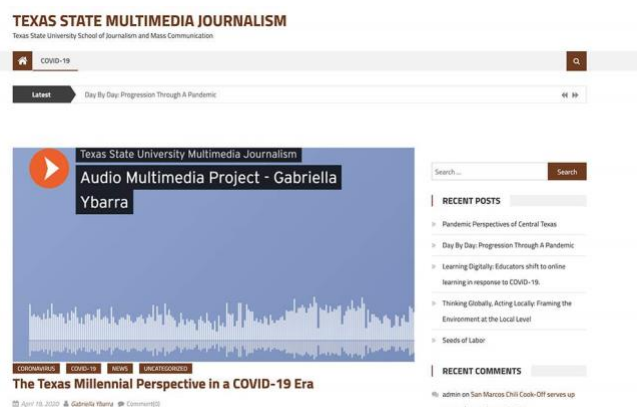
Coursework is published on a class WordPress site. I encourage students to look at each others' work, both to appreciate the excellent quality and to get inspiration for their own next round of stories. One of the techniques I learned in training to teach online was to create "on the fly" or "wrap-up" videos, which are produced quickly to address a very timely topic. I would produce one of these videos, or schedule a synchronous Zoom call at class time, so that I could highlight excellent student work just published on our website. Over the course of their multiple story deadlines, I was able to showcase items from every one of the students.

I've taught multimedia journalism using smartphones fairly extensively since 2012, but I've never needed students to do such complete, professional work using just their mobile phones as they did this semester. It forced me to stretch, which was a blessing, because I'll teach more robust use of smart phones in the future. I also arranged a synchronous Zoom visit from a former colleague – a reporter in California who shared how she actively uses her phone in her reporting – validating our class process. Another advantage of emphasizing smartphones in storytelling is that it levels societal inequity over access to broadband internet and adequate computing ability – a major concern at our institution, where nearly half of our students are first-generation college attendees.

Using mobile phones as the delivery platform has been shown to flatten the digital divide (Mayisela, 2013). I also migrated a detailed, in-person lecture on data visualization tools into an online lecture with an extensive demonstration video and practice assignment, helped by the fact that we were already using online tools from Google.

Prepare for a Future of Online Teaching

My advice to others would be to anticipate teaching online. The inertia to online education is obvious, regardless of the outcome of the current pandemic.

- As you prepare lectures, envision how they could be best migrated to an asynchronous online lectures and demonstrations.
- Research tools and techniques from existing resources, like the Online News Association, Poynter, Google News Lab and your instructional designers.
- Look for training opportunities and apply that expertise to your teaching.
- Immerse yourself deeper into your mobile phone; research new apps, experiment and use the ideas and tools that fit with your class.
- Keep researching and experimenting. I now have students recommend apps which they use for photos, video and social media. I'll check them out, then add some to the next class.

In April, all our faculty were asked to record a short video congratulating our grads for a virtual commencement. I singled out my students for the amazing multimedia reporting they did this spring using only their phones… shot with my smartphone, of course.

A Tale of Two Web Design Courses
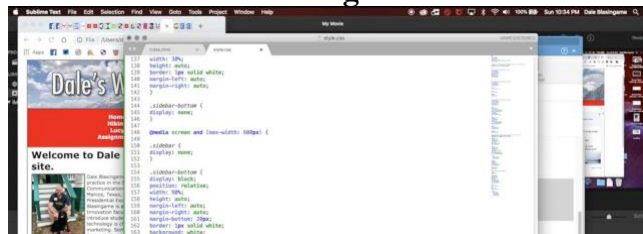
By Dale Blasingame
Assistant Professor of Practice

One of the most interesting things about teaching happens in just about every class, every semester. Somewhere along the way – usually toward the beginning – the class develops its own unique personality. This phenomenon was never more evident during the final five weeks of the Spring 2020 semester.

The move to remote learning affected all of our classes, of course. In my experience, remote learning

intensified the unique personalities of my classes – two of them, in particular.

This spring, I taught two sections of our Web Design and Publishing course. Students coming into the class should have a bit of coding experience from taking our Fundamentals of Digital and Online Media course, but this is the first deep dive into HTML, CSS and Bootstrap for the vast majority of them. Students are typically nervous and a bit apprehensive about what they're getting into – but most of them usually seem eager for the challenge.

How they tackle that challenge is where the class personalities come into play.

The web design course typically works this way: The professor demos a new idea or topic – and then pauses so the students can catch up. This happens over and over and over during class time. Tutorial videos for every topic are then made available so students can go back and watch again on their own time.

Section Personalities Emerge

My Monday-Wednesday section, from the very start of the semester, made it clear they needed/wanted an abundance of hands-on guidance. That's totally understandable, and I appreciated that the tone was set right away. It helped me know how to meet their needs and accomplish what we all wanted out the class.

My Tuesday-Thursday section could not have been more opposite. Despite 1-2 outliers in the class who came to just about every office hours availability, this group collectively set a vibe from the get-go that they were good with the material and wanted to, for the most part, figure things out with minimal 1-on-1 involvement.

Both models worked. I'm just always amazed when the class personality differences are so clearly defined.
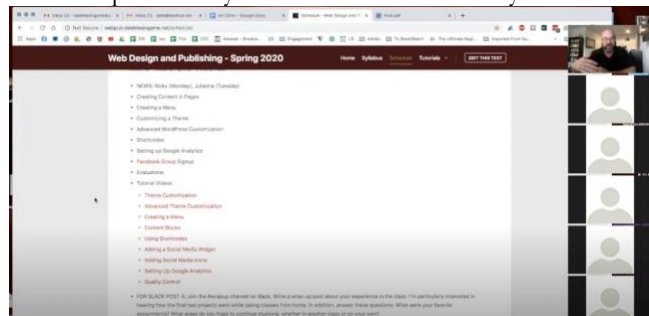

When we switched to remote learning, it became clear the Tuesday-Thursday section was thriving in this scenario. Sure, I was still getting office hour visits from those who were already doing so while meeting in-person, but the visits from Tuesday-Thursday students were typically short and precise. My Monday-Wednesday class, on the other hand, began to struggle without the face-to-face demos. Even though I had videos for everything we would have covered in class, they really missed that experience of watching me do something in

front of them and then standing over their shoulder as they did it themselves.

I tried a few adjustments to help remedy this situation, but I'm not sure if it was enough. For starters, I heavily increased office hours. I found my Monday-Wednesday students were coming in with more prolonged questions or issues to help troubleshoot, so I wanted to be there for them. (Their availability also scattered as they moved home or picked up extra shifts at work. I had an office hour appointment at 10 p.m. one day, because that was the only time the student was available.)

I increased the amount of tutorial videos. If a student had a question in office hours, especially one of the Monday-Wednesday students, I went ahead and recorded a video for everyone to see the answer. And, I extended deadlines as much as possible.

By the end of the semester, I was incredibly proud of both sections. The Monday-Wednesday students submitted some great final projects despite the circumstances. I don't want to insinuate the work was inferior – but, as a professor, I still felt bad that the needs established as part of the class personality couldn't be met because of a situation that was out of our hands. Here are a few examples of their multimedia reporting project using the Bootstrap front-end web development framework, making the best of their situations in isolation.
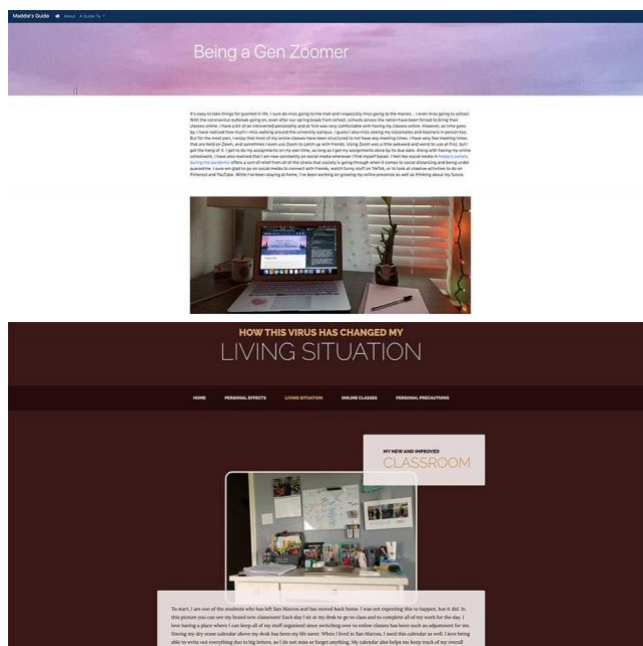
Student Reflections

I asked each section for honest feedback about the remote learning experience – and the distinct personalities were obvious. Here is a sample of some of

the feedback (with some slight editing for clarity) from the Monday-Wednesday section:

"Finishing the last half of this class was honestly an experience I never want to do again. While Dale did everything he could as a professor to help us where he could, the inability to not be able to say exactly what your issues were became a challenge to express. We got so used to coding while being able to ask him questions and have him look at the code to only being able to when our times coordinated. We also lost the ability to use help from our classmates. I also found this very challenging after it became online because I was not retaining the information he wanted us to use as quickly (this goes for all my classes) because I am a hands-on, active learner."

"This class has definitely been a rollercoaster ride for me. There were multiple times I contemplated giving up, because I didn't think I was going to last. I will say that I enjoyed the first half of this class more because it was easier for me to learn and retain the information. In a classroom setting, we were easily able to get hands-on help from the professor and other classmates, if we didn't understand something. Having to complete the second half of this class online caused me so much stress. I honestly had no confidence in myself that I could continue on alone. I'm actually shocked, but also happy, that I made it through to the end."

"While the Zoom meetings and the tutorials were SUPER helpful, it was not the same as being face-to-face. Luckily, I didn't have any major issues that seemed impossible to fix, but I was really having to figure everything out on my own."

"Wrapping up this class was honestly one of the hardest things I've had to do. Doing the projects at home by myself was hard, and it was also very stressful. The videos did help, but I am more of an in-class learner. I have to be present or else my attention span is not very good."

Here's a selection of feedback from the Tuesday-Thursday students. Pay attention to the difference in tone:

"The videos were everything I needed to complete the projects. I decided to start on each project considerably early. This made them enjoyable and not stressful. I was able to take my time to let my creativity show through. Without needing to go to campus or class, I was able to concentrate more efficiently (in all classes)."

"Having an extremely understanding professor, as well as helpful classmates, made the process easier. I also had to get myself on a strict schedule and ensure that I was allowing myself time to work overtime rather than waiting until the last minute. Overall, I can say that I have really enjoyed this class and plan to continue to expand my skills in web design."

"Although it was a little difficult doing the last two projects at home without someone there to help me troubleshoot, it was a nice challenge to try and figure it out on my own (or rely on YouTube, haha)."

"The two final projects were easier for me since I no longer had to commute to campus. It allowed me more time to focus on assignments and pay attention to detail."

"I have honestly really enjoyed this class. I feel like having to do the last two projects at home helped me learn about myself more and learn more about the way I learn and problem solve."

You're always going to have students who want more hands-on guidance than others, but I've never been in a situation where the difference in style was so starkly obvious between entire sections. As professors, I think we all learned quite a bit – both good and bad – during the emergency period of remote learning this past semester, and I know this dichotomy was my biggest professional challenge during that time. Like many other teachers at all levels, I'll be thinking about the things I could have done differently to reach every student if this ever happens again. I'll let the class personalities guide me to the solution.

Different Courses, Different Challenges

By Sara Shields
Lecturer

Like many instructors across the country, I had never taught an online course prior to Spring 2020. I had to quickly figure out how to ensure that students got a similar learning experience online. Luckily, our Digital Media Innovation faculty are very well equipped to accept the challenge to move online. I realized that some classes do not perform as well as they would have if classes would have continued in-person. Moving my Advanced Social Media course online was much easier than my Web Design and Publishing course. I've broken down each course transition below, as well as other findings from the mid-semester shift to online.

Advanced Social Media

My Advanced Social Media class transition to online went much smoother than I imagined. While this class is mainly lecture-based, we did have group workshops and exercises scattered throughout the semester that allowed students to practice what they were learning in class. Moving online made those group workshops a little more difficult. The replacement for lectures during regular class time was achieved by prerecording the material I would have originally gone over that week. Students said they liked this, because they were able to watch on their own time and go back to watch again if they needed. I was very proud of this class for being able to successfully finish final projects with their original groups. Students were able to practice working in a group setting virtually through social media, Slack, GroupMe or other methods they chose. This will benefit students in the future when they're in the workforce where these practices are used regularly.

Web Design and Publishing

My Web Design and Publishing classes were a bit more challenging. I was worried for the students who didn't grasp coding as well as others. I wondered how would they manage once we moved online. This class is already challenging for students to begin with and there

are many pros of having this course in person. In the classroom, students had immediate access to me for any questions, large iMacs to code on, in-class work time for projects, and a teaching method I've used that has worked well for almost five years. This is not your regular lecture-based class. This class functions best using brief lectures, live demonstration, practicing coding together and finally practicing coding on their own. This was a little bit harder to accomplish since students were watching tutorials at different paces, and we are not able to practice together in a classroom setting. Although the move online was challenging for this course, I was impressed with the rate in which everyone was learning through this new method and keeping up with the material. I was a little worried at first that students would just watch the tutorial videos and copy everything line by line, not truly grasping it. But I found that students applied the material they were learning in many different ways. Students explained that being able to go back and watch coding tutorials step-by-step was helpful in better understanding the material.

Here are some things I found among all my classes from the transition to online.

- **Student Engagement Decreased** - I found that engagement from students in all of my courses dropped significantly going from a classroom environment to virtual Zoom meetings. The amount of technical difficulties through Zoom was overwhelming. Between people accidentally leaving mics or cameras on and dropped calls from bad Internet, I found that Zoom is not an efficient way to deliver lectures for students. Instead, I prerecorded lectures each week that I put on the course site that students could watch on their own time. We used once-a-week Zoom meetings to address new projects, ask questions, and just sometimes chat about life.
- **In Depth Tutorial / Lecture Videos Were Helpful** - I realized that students benefited much more from having very detailed lecture or tutorial videos each week that replaced our regular in-class meetings. Students explained that they were able to go back and watch if they were struggling on the material. When classes were in-person, I had quick tutorial videos that students were able to watch in addition to in class lectures, but they were not as in depth as what I've produced for a now strictly online course.
- **One-On-One Meetings Increased Significantly** - I found that students took advantage of virtual one-on-one meetings in place of regular office hours. I had more students meet one-on-one via Zoom than I did when office hours were available in person on campus. This allowed

the student to reach out during the designated hours or setup another time that worked for them when they're needing some additional help. I felt this allowed me to help students more extensively than a quick chat after class or during campus office hours. There was no rush during these online meetings.

- **Organization Is More Important Than Ever** - Organization and structure are critical for an online course, especially for a class like Web Design and Publishing. I found that organizing the course material in smaller, easy-to-consume chunks, allowed students to grasp the content in a more manageable way. I take pride in my organization of course material and was happy to hear students validate that and mention how it helped their online course experience.

Moving Forward

Since this was my first time teaching online, there was a lot I learned from this experience. I'm excited to take the things I learned and give my students the best online experience moving forward. As I'm preparing my courses for Summer II, here are some things I plan on doing.

- **All course material will be delivered through Canvas, our learning management system, for completely online courses.** I always had course material on a publicly available WordPress-hosted course site, and will continue to do so for in-person sections. But for fully online courses, I plan to keep all the content strictly on Canvas. This will provide students with a one-stop shop for all things course related.
- **Modules will be setup with short, easy to consume, topics.** You can't just throw everything about HTML into one course page and call it a day. The material covered over HTML, or any topic for that matter, should be broken up strategically, in a way that students can learn the material best and take a breath.
- **Zoom meetings will be limited.** I've made my stance on Zoom apparent. I don't think holding lectures through Zoom is efficient, especially for a coding class. Instead, I'll use Zoom meetings once a week as check ins, project overviews and any other course related updates.
- **Collaboration and engagement will be supported.** I've been researching and learning effective ways to promote engagement through online courses. A few of the ways I will do this is through Discussions and Peer Reviews via Zoom.

Adapting is Vital for Both Large and Small Classes

By Jon Zmikly
Senior Lecturer

As a lecturer with a full load of four courses each semester, planning out a typical school year always requires careful scheduling and organizing. But having taught in higher education for more than 10 years, I have learned firsthand that part of that plan must include a healthy dose of adapting to change. Flexibility goes a long way, especially because no class, no semester and no student is exactly the same.

However, no one could have predicted the complete shift in all of our lives brought on by COVID-19 this past spring semester. The effects of this global and unforeseen pandemic were far-reaching, moving beyond just the classroom and deeply impacting our home lives, communities and our world economy. This brought many new challenges, but it also pushed me to experiment with new tools and teaching formats that I wouldn't normally have tried.

My Courses
Fundamentals of Digital and Online Media

My largest class, Fundamentals of Digital and Online Media (FDOM), is a required course for all mass communication majors, containing two sections of roughly 200 students each. It provides all of our students with a strong foundation on digital topics and skills from which to build upon during their time in our programs. Since its inception in 2012, this course has moved from being lecture-only to its current state as a hybrid class consisting of lecture, lab and online components. It is a beloved class and is often inspirational for incoming students who are still trying to find their path in the media industry.

With assignments incorporating web writing, coding in HTML and CSS, social media strategy, building an app prototype and digital multimedia, students gain a wide variety of digital skills. In addition, they learn about concepts such as digital media ethics, online business models, as well as emerging trends in media and technology.

Virtual Reality (VR) and 360º Video

Another course I typically teach each semester is called Virtual Reality & 360º Video and focuses on immersive media: virtual, augmented and mixed reality. This is much smaller in size (roughly 18 students per semester) and takes place in a computer lab, meeting twice per week for an hour and twenty minutes each period. This course usually hits the ground running, with students filming their first projects during the second week of classes. During the first half of the semester, students complete two 360º video stories, learning the nuances of recording, editing and publishing virtual reality videos. Then, students build their own immersive environment (and get to experience it in a headset), as well as create augmented reality projects. Not only do students learn how to use the equipment and editing software, but they get a chance to understand what makes immersive media so challenging and exciting though hands-on assignments, class discussion and group work.

Coding and Data Skills for Communicators
I also teach a course called Coding and Data Skills for Communicators. In this course, students learn advanced HTML, CSS and JavaScript skills to develop interactive websites for data storytelling and are introduced to other programming and data concepts relevant to communicators. We work with web frameworks such as Bootstrap, HTML forms and even dabble in Python, web scraping and APIs to gather, interpret and visualize data. This is a very challenging course for students. It is also

my most challenging course to teach. Unlike its prerequisite, Web Design and Publishing, students apply programming logic in this course, such as loops, if/else statements and variables to store information. They must wade through many hundreds of lines of HTML, CSS and JavaScript code to get each unique project to function. Though we do not need special software or equipment in this course, we make full use of our time in the computer lab to troubleshoot individual problems and discuss the most effective methods for interactive data, all culminating in a final data storytelling website on a topic of their choice.

The Pandemic
Before spring break, all of my courses had nicely wrapped up the first half of the semester. In FDOM, students had just taken their midterm exams and began getting the hang of the WordPress interface and honing their web writing skills. We had also just slogged through the ever-daunting HTML/CSS project. My other courses had both reached good stopping points as well. Students completed their second 360º videos in my VR class, and my coding students had finished their first project and were just beginning the second.

With stories of the coronavirus circulating in the news, as well as taking an abundance of caution, I spent the week before spring break preparing all of my classes for the possibility of an online-only semester. I remember students appearing visibly shocked that I would even bring up this prospect, but they kept their heads up as I overviewed the rest of the semester and described how future projects might change or adapt in an online environment.

As soon as our university announced an extended spring break, I sent out a Student Learning Insights survey via Google Forms to my FDOM class. This was my biggest concern since it was a required course for all mass communication students, it contained the most students and it had so many different components (lecture, lab and online modules). The survey asked students basic questions regarding their access to technology, as well as open-ended questions about their concerns regarding finishing the semester's coursework completely online. I was encouraged to see that all students had a smartphone or tablet, 97.8% had a personal computer, and 98.6% had reliable internet. This information greatly informed how I would handle online content and deliver the rest of the semester.
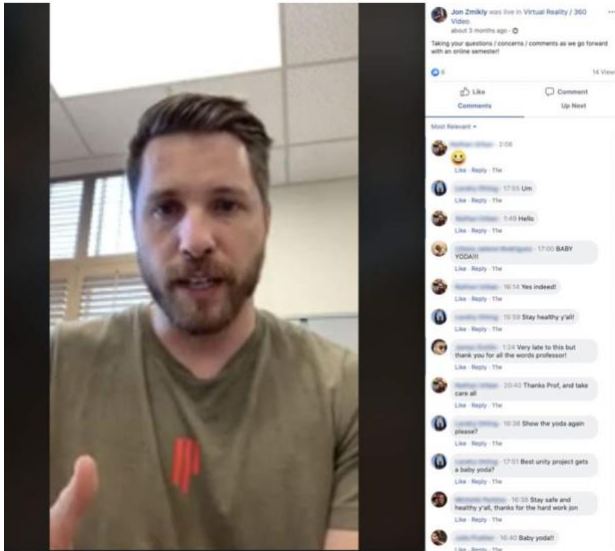
After receiving feedback from all of my students, I used the extra week of spring break to develop a plan of action for each class. I then held live video sessions for students to ask questions and voice their concerns. Since I had already created a Facebook Group for my Virtual Reality and 360º Video course, and we had a class Instagram for FDOM, it was natural to use social media to reach out and video chat in those classes. I also recorded a live Zoom call with my advanced coding class and uploaded it for anyone who was unable to attend. These live sessions were important in getting the word about course changes and updates, and students seemed to appreciate the different forms and platforms for communication.

What Changed?
Labs
Because each of my courses incorporated hands-on learning within a lab setting, this aspect of my courses presented the most dramatic shift to my semester. For FDOM, I worked with my team of nine lab assistants to continue to provide direct digital support, communication and guidance for our students through the rest of the semester. Instead of continuing synchronous lab sessions via video conferencing, we decided to pre-record video tutorials and open up a forum on our learning management system, TRACS, to replace in-class discussion. These forums also acted as lab checkpoints to ensure students were still participating and hitting certain milestones, such as beginning their Build-An-App project, or identifying b-roll footage they planned to use for their video interview assignment.

The transition to online "labs" truly could not have been done without my assistants' hard work and creative input. They communicated daily with their students and connected with them in ways I simply could not. Because of the prior face-to-face lab sessions, students felt comfortable sharing their struggles and needs with their lab instructor, which was of utmost importance during the pandemic.

One student commented, "You guys made me feel comfortable and personally appreciated and important. You guys worked with us through this pandemic in ways that my other professors didn't. You guys cared about each of us and in turn, I acknowledged that and respected y'all more for that. I failed many times, but y'all heard me out and gave me multiple chances to pick myself up."

Through the online tutorials and communication, students were able to finish out the semester strong, completing two major assignments and their final website review. I was impressed that many of the projects came out better than a typical semester because, in some cases, students had more time to work and were not limited by 50 minutes in a computer lab. We also modified our grading criteria, offered more credit/no credit options, as well as provided optional written assignments to accommodate students' technology and time limitations.

Initially, I was also quite worried about transitioning my VR and coding classes for online-only experiences because they require so much in-person communication and side-by-side assistance. Not only do students use high end cameras and computer software in my VR class, they physically need to capture footage and tell stories. And when the world is in lock-down, that becomes increasingly difficult. However, I soon realized the next few projects made use of free software (AR Spark, Unity 3D, Apple's Reality Composer) that had a plethora of professional and amateur tutorials on the web. After ensuring each student had a computer they could use to download the required software, we continued with course content, and our class calendar was nearly unaffected. Similarly, my coding class simply watched video tutorials each week, and participated in two optional check-ins via Zoom. These offerings allowed them to answer any questions or clarify course content. The only major change was that lab sessions were delivered via our online courses, and they became completely asynchronous.

Lecture
FDOM was my only course with a traditional lecture. In a typical semester, lectures are held in a teaching theater, seating over 400 students. It always feels like an event. Even in such a large room, students can interact with me and each other, participate in discussion and meet with their lab instructors for questions on projects. I often show videos, ask questions and even conduct a trivia game show on Kahoot. There is much energy.

But the transition to an online environment meant all of that would have to change. I knew that most students would have scheduling and technology conflicts.

And with so many students, it seemed impossible to continue meeting at our regularly scheduled time. Instead, I pre-recorded all of my lectures and released them on Monday mornings for students to watch at their own pace throughout the week.

Lectures became asynchronous and shorter. Because interaction was not as easy or organic, I shortened my lectures to the bare bones. I broke each topic up into condensed, digestible videos that never exceeded 15 minutes. And thanks to my own video editing skills, I could remove unwanted "um"s and "uh"s, as well as irrelevant information (sometimes lecturers go down rabbit trails). This made each topic succinct and to-the-point, maintaining student attention.

What I Learned

Over-Communication Is Key. When the news of online classes first broke, I recorded a video, sent out an email, and went live on Instagram to answer any questions. I continued to send out a video update each week, along with weekly emails and reminders. I reiterated deadlines as much as possible in the online modules. My lab assistants in FDOM did the same. This over-communication had two effects.

- Students were less likely to miss deadlines. In my initial Student Learning Insights survey, a vast majority of students voiced concerns about potentially missing deadlines and due dates. However, I was thrilled to see more students submitted their assignments online during the quarantine than before it.
- The more we communicated to students, the more comfortable they felt responding back to us. We learned about many personal situations, issues and concerns because of our constant outreach, and could more readily solve both technical and personal problems on a case-by-case basis.

Adapting Is Vital. The Digital Media Innovation (DMI) program is used to change. With new technology and digital issues popping up throughout the media industry, our faculty are constantly learning new skills and integrating them within our curriculum. For us, being flexible is par for the course. And it became an asset during the COVID-19 crisis. I was already immersed in a culture of adapting, so learning new platforms like Zoom were a breeze.

But beyond the technology, deadlines had to move. Expectations changed. It became vital to adapt our requirements and delivery because nothing was normal. Though most students had access to proper technology, many other factors were at play. Most students had to move back to their hometowns. Others lost their jobs. One student emailed me confessing that he was infected with the coronavirus and felt ashamed to tell anyone. Each situation had its own unique problems to overcome, and adaptation was crucial.

In terms of my classes, I canceled a website review altogether in FDOM. I even made the final exam optional (if they were happy with their midterm grade, I would just carry it over for the final). In my VR class, I excused one project for a small number of students because they simply did not have a working computer to install the free software. I video chatted with students at odd hours and helped troubleshoot projects via video chat. The "new normal" was "nothing is normal", and so we adapted daily. The uncertainty of everything made me appreciate the culture of change and adaptability within our department and faculty, and I will continue to embrace this spirit of agility within my curriculum on a normal basis.

Our Students Are Rock Stars. Above everything, I walked away from this semester with an incredible respect for our students. I was impressed with how each person handled the transition to an online environment, whether they struggled or thrived. The former never hesitated to reach out and get the help they needed; the latter spent extra time perfecting their work and being resourceful. Without skipping a beat, it seemed everyone dug in deeper, locked arms and finished the semester with greater solidarity and strength than they had before.

I also learned how resilient and creative our students can be. One student in the Fundamentals of Digital and Online Media even went so far as to learn a new coding language to begin developing her app prototype into an actual working smartphone application. Another student in my advanced coding class taught herself how to build a searchable database and incorporate it into her final project. I nearly cried at the detailed virtual environments my VR students produced, all on their own.

Despite the fears and anxieties associated with the pandemic, all of my students were communicative and walked out of this semester with highly professional work. Surely, this experience has taught them more than they could ever learn in a typical class in a typical semester, and I am excited to see that agility follow them through each of their digital media futures.

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