

TEACHING MATTERS – SPRING 2021

What We'll Take into the Future!

This past academic year, we have learned a lot as instructors: new tools, new techniques, maybe even a new appreciation for what goes into making lasting and transformative learning experiences. As we contemplate our return to in-person teaching in Fall 2021, we want to consider what we enjoyed and might preserve from our Alternate Delivery Method (ADM) adventures. What worked so well in the virtual world that we want to preserve or translate it into our future classes? What new assignment or teaching device worked so well it is worth repeating? What technology tool was most helpful? What will the future classroom look like and how can we prepare for it?

The submissions to this edition consider some of these ideas that are sure to be a starting point for what we will spend our time this summer conceiving, planning, scheming, and organizing our way back into the classroom. For those who are interested, details of upcoming Centre for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CETL) sessions this summer are given at the end.

Thank you to those who kindly submitted materials for this edition. As always, if you have a submission or a theme idea for a future issue, let us know.

Sincerely,

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FROM IN-PERSON CLASSES TO ADM AND BACK AGAIN

Sandra Bell, Humanities & Languages

The transition from in-person classroom teaching to alternate delivery methods was a challenge for me: very time-consuming, frequently frustrating, and lacking much of the spontaneity and thoughtfulness that comes from sitting in a room with my students. However, it was also a very good opportunity to rethink how I taught my English Literature classes, and I don't just mean how I might incorporate more technology into the mix—though there is that too. I will certainly be making broader use of D2L for marking and providing resources, as well as a venue for student discussion. I will also continue to use Teams for meetings, extra lectures, and snow days.

For me, however, it is my change in thought around tests and exams that is most surprising. For 25 years, I had included an exam and frequently a few brief reading tests in my course assessments. The tests were mainly quick comprehension answers to indicate that the students had read the texts; for the most part, the exams required short answer and essay responses, and provided an opportunity for students to reveal their understandings of different texts and ideas, and to work on their ability to synthesize and organize ideas. Combined, the tests and exams would cover anywhere from 20-40 percent of the term grade, and they had the added benefit of being relatively quick and easy to mark.

Facing the change to alternate delivery methods, I decided the easiest way to deal with all the complications around online tests and exams was not to have them. This meant I would need to make two major changes: the first would be to devise assessments to take their place, and the second was to let go of the worry that without the extrinsic motivation of tests and exams, students would have little intrinsic motivation to read all of the course material. Somehow I doubted they would read it for the love of it.

For my ADM courses in the Fall term, I developed short discussion responses to the larger texts; these were useful in gaging student understanding, but over two courses it resulted in marking more than 600 short assignments—on top of the longer assignments. Needless to say, I did not repeat this in the Winter term, but developed a couple of short assignments that demanded at least a display of students' skills if not their coverage of material.

More successfully, to replace exams I developed more extensive comparison essays for their final assignments, requiring students to synthesize their understanding across four or five texts or authors studied during the term. This required them to complete more coverage of the material and exercised their comprehension, research, and organizational skills; hopefully, it also kept them engaged with the readings throughout the term.

I am sure that some students are spending some of their energy figuring out what readings they can skip and still succeed in the course, but I am hoping that the switch from exams—and the stress that can accompany them—to these written assignments is serving the students better in the end.

When I return to in-person classes, I may also return to the short comprehension tests, since making sure the students have read the material is crucial for class discussions. I will be giving the students the choice of writing a shorter, more focused paper plus an exam (my traditional approach), or a longer comparative paper and no exam. This will ensure the coverage and development of skills I am looking for, and let the students decide for themselves what is less stressful.



STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Diana Dupont, Department of Nursing & Health Sciences

Teaching in an online environment posed many different challenges, one being student engagement. For my first-year health assessment course, I decided to use a flipped classroom approach. The course was 3 credit hours; therefore 3 hours of weekly class time was allotted. Each week students were responsible for viewing short, pre-recorded lectures, and attend a live 1.5-hour class. During the first 40 minutes or so of the live class students went into breakout rooms and collaboratively worked on a case study, which they submitted for grading. During the remainder of the class, I used Poll Everywhere to create a review competition. After each class students were asked to complete a short evaluation and they often commented on enjoying both the Poll Everywhere competition and the collaborative learning activities.

I have used case studies within my courses many times in the past, but this was the first time I incorporated Poll Everywhere into class for a review. Going forward, I plan to use Poll Everywhere competitions within the face-to-face learning environment as it was a fun, and interactive way to review content and engage the students.



Future teachers were encouraged to incorporate computational thinking practices into their classrooms, so they are prepared to teach students fundamental computing ideas that are an essential part of K-12 education in the 21st century.

<https://blogs.unb.ca/newsroom/2012/06/teaching-for-the-future-at-unb.php>

POST PANDEMIC: LOST LITERACY & SKILLS

Moira Law, Department of Psychology

As collateral damage accumulated over the past year across various domains within families, communities, and countries, I was saddened by what appeared to be a widespread loss of respect for “the science”. As social media experts rose in the ranks during prolonged confusion and mounting fear, a respect most would agree had existed the year before, was lost. So many appeared to “forget” that science is a “systematically organized body of knowledge on a particular subject”; not someone’s opinion, anecdotal evidence or even a single well-conducted study. Perhaps some never knew there was a scientific method that if followed, generates small shards of interlocking puzzle-like pieces of knowledge, that creates what we often refer to as the “evidence base” – one study at a time. So, when I think of teaching in the fall, I feel a deep desire to respond to this current, and hopefully transient, contempt for science. Exactly what is needed to address the damage done I’m not sure. For now, I will spend the summer months generating opportunities in my courses for students to generate questions on material they are reading, translate these into meaningful research questions, develop hypotheses, and consider how this could all be tested. In my post-pandemic classrooms, I will help students understand why correlations do not infer causation, why science doesn’t prove anything, and that science is more than a collection of facts. I will prioritize class time to think about thinking – think critically, think laterally, think methodically...think scientifically.



Questioning Forward

David Creelman, Humanities & Languages

I'm writing this on June 7th, 2021. That means that I'll be in my first class, teaching in-person, in 93 days. I can't help but wonder what that will be like. For years we moved, from season to season with a degree of continuity. In education, familiarity breeds content. We usually face September at ease that we understand (most of ... some of) the material we are about to teach, and we hope we understand the cohort of students with whom we will explore that body of knowledge. But, perhaps, this fall, we'll feel a little less secure. I still (I hope) understand my discipline and my courses, but who will greet me when I walk into Oland Hall 104? How can I best help them connect with the ideas in my field? I am recording here, some of the questions that are occupying me this summer. I'm not sure I'll have the answers I'll need when 93 days have passed, but by asking these questions I might be able to develop a few strategies to guide my fall courses.

Who will we be teaching?

The truth is we don't know exactly who we'll be teaching in September. We know what we hope they'll become. We want our graduates to be adventurous, informed, critical, disciplined, articulate citizens who can engage with their field of study and their community, and dare to move self-sufficiently toward their own determined purposes. That's where we want them to end up. But unless we know their starting point, its hard to help them map out their path.

I don't doubt that there are a host of studies underway analysing the impact of the COVID 19 period on secondary-school students. Most of those studies will not have moved through the peer-review process in time to assist us. So what can we surmise?

This fall we will have two years of students for whom September will be their first full-time in person education for nearly a year and half. Our first year students will have finished grade twelve, but they only attended classes twice or thrice a week and even then they were supposed to be socially distanced and wearing masks. For our second year students, their return to UNB will actually be, for most, their first extended time on campus. What will their previous eighteen months of alternate course delivery have produced?

What might be the deficits?

The classes I meet in September may be less academically prepared than normal. I might be wrong, but its hard to imagine how the last year of alternate course delivery, both at UNB and in our local high schools, could actually produce uniformly better prepared students. I am going to assume that some content and some lessons that were learned at home were not as completely absorbed or as effectively challenged as they might have been in the classroom. Some errors were likely not corrected. Some concepts may not have been conveyed. I also suspect that some scholarly skills were not fully practised. Did the students of 20-21 write as many papers, complete as many class presentations, or practise as many math formulas? I'm sure that some students who had great internet access, supportive parents, and effective tutoring hit all the

benchmarks we'd expect. But that only means that students from economically and emotionally privileged backgrounds have an even stronger than normal advantage over their peers; the economically or socially disadvantaged are further behind. Moreover, many of our incoming students have missed the musical, athletic, and social experiences that would have provided the training ground to develop communication and leadership skills. I think I better assume that my incoming students have gaps to fill and skills to hone.

What will be the surplus?

All our students will have passed through a unique experience before they reach us. What might be the benefits of their experiences? To an unprecedented degree, this cohort has been educated by medical updates, PSAs, and practical experience about the importance of collective action and personal responsibility. A year of wearing masks has been a daily personal education in the importance of stepping up and doing our part to protect neighbours and the wider society. When did a group of students ever have a more immediate or practical education in immunology, collective behaviour, the role of government, or the efficacy of vaccines? When did we ever have a group of students enter the classroom and be this hungry for personal connection and group experience? And, lest we forget, this is the cohort that experienced Black Lives Matters and learned new revelations about the horrors of settler-colonialism. I think I better assume that my students will have insights that will address some of my gaps and compel me to hone my skills.

Where will we go from here?

My fall courses will need to shift in a variety of ways. This is an incomplete list. Other concerns will likely emerge.

1) I will try integrate into my classes moments when we either discuss or practise the specific skills university students need. Study skills, note-taking skills, research skills, and effective essay writing practises will need to be moved into the foreground.

2) During the COVID-19 period, many profs were unusually generous regarding extensions and deadlines. I've heard from many profs motivated by the "Mercy Factor" of living in a pandemic, and few regret their moments of generosity toward students in need. I think I'll try replicating that attitude in a regular term and see if its effects are similarly positive.

3) I'm going to work at providing stronger contexts – in the courses that warrant them – about the impact of settler and colonial practises on the power structures that govern our assumptions today. Last week I read Rebecca Thomas's *I Place You into the Fire*, and was excited to find "Creature Canada." That poem will be the opening text in this fall's Canadian Literature course. Now, what else in the course needs to be reshaped?

4) I'll try to adopt more active-learning strategies that allow students to connect with each other. I may have to teach a little less over all content, but if online teaching taught us anything, its that lecturing into the void is not the same as really conveying course content. Students need to work with the concepts we want them to understand, and never have we had a cohort so eager for that work.

93 days (or less) to reentry?

When COVID-19 disrupted our lives in the winter of 2020, I heard many people say that when we returned, after a period of disruption, we would have a chance to revise and improve our practises. Did we hear someone say “build back better?” Now that we are returning to class, we face a challenge. In some ways I want to reset to 2019 and restart the processes with which I’m comfortable. Oh, how lovely to revel in the familiar. But I know that the “old-normal” fell short of my student’s potential. So, as much as I am looking forward to a returning to class, I guess I need to consider reforming my class. Maybe that’s not a binary. Maybe we can do both.

INTERESTED IN TRAINING FOR FALL TEACHING?

The Centre for Enhanced Teaching and Learning is running several sessions throughout the summer about course design, streaming stations, MS tools like Teams, Bookings, Sway, as well as D2L Brightspace tools.

To see the list of sessions and to register, visit: <https://www.unbtls.ca/events/#CETL>
For more information contact Nancy Fitzpatrick at nef@unb.ca.