

ALI ARYA:

Hello, everyone. Thank you for watching this presentation. My name is Ali Arya from the School of Information Technology. I would like to talk to you about my experience designing and using online courses.

Briefly talking about the highlights of this talking case, I will lose you in the middle. First of all, dress for the occasion. So even though title says education with pajamas, there are no pajamas. And it's really important to have the right frame of mind when we're talking about an online experience. Don't think that you're online and people are somewhere else.

The other thing, pandemics or not pandemic, online courses are going to help, but priorities may be different. Online courses are not less work. [INAUDIBLE] it's a misconception that some people may have. They actually neither have less work in designing or running them, and they still need interaction even though you may not be there with your students. And flexibility, clarity, and usability are the key things to remember in my experience. And last but not least definitely, you can do it no matter how hard it is.

So as far as what I have done, back in 2016, I received an eCampus Ontario grant to create two courses online, BIT-1400 and 2400, both about computer programming. And it was motivated by the need for summer courses, and they started in summer 2017 for students who during the year could not take the course or failed and needed to get the courses over summer so they're progress won't be jeopardized.

After that, I teach some other courses, which had online elements in them or use a hybrid element. I also developed a virtual environment, virtual reality based setting for running courses, which is a completely different subject, and I'm not going to talk about here although that is part of the online learning but maybe not a occasion we can discuss that to. It's an ongoing research of mine, too.

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Back to the courses that we talked about, BIT-1400, one of them, I think, is an example. This is the first thing that student would see some of the main elements that you see in it-- course announcement, discussions, online office hours, things like how to succeed in the course, and things like that, course's structure, some navigation information, and a structure of each module. Modules are the elements of the course that, as you can see, themselves, involve three different parts-- a brief introduction to the module, the actual lesson, and reflections. And

I will talk about them in more details later.

The lessons, which are the most important part of the course in each module, themselves, are three different parts-- summary and slides, tutorials, and self-assessment. This structure is really important, because it starts by giving a brief introduction to the lesson, the key points, the expectations, and also, the traditional lecture notes. The lecture notes, even though I don't do the lecture, I decided not to have video recording of myself. I still provided the lecture notes, because they provide a summary of things-- the topics that are important and are covered in the lesson.

And the topics themselves are divided into a series of tutorials, more than just one. So I follow the rule of not having long, so none of the tutorial videos were long. And each tutorial, which are the important practical aspect of the course, represented in three different ways-- a document, a video, and a piece of code, which is particular to this particular case, which is programming. And then, finally, each module would end with the self-assessment questions.

The reflection was the other part of the module after the lesson. It's really important, and I found it very helpful in online courses, but also in offline courses. The idea behind it is that students or, in general, we don't learn by just doing things. We also learn by making sense out of what we have done.

It's particularly important in online courses, because the need for interaction, and you need to replace that face-to-face interaction with other things. And I'll talk about interactions later on-- interaction with the instructor, interaction with the other student, and interaction with the course itself.

I have a short text from the reflection that talks about how the reflection was supposed to happen. It briefly tells people-- students what to do for the reflection and what are reflective questions and how to deal with them. The main point of it is for them to realize that reflection is an inward process. Because it's not a very intuitive process, I have provided them with some reflective questions that are divided based on what we call explicit story, the actual experience that they went through, implicit story, which means what they meant to them, how they felt about it, what they thought about it, and then what I will call upcoming stories, how it's going to be used later on. The reflections happen after each module, so they have to reflect on the experience of that module, including the assignments, if there were any assignments.

After the modules and reflections and assignments, we get to the exams. Exams are another

really important thing in the evaluation in general. And I learned a lot doing online courses. The way that I did it was that I basically used an assignment in [INAUDIBLE] and posted one single question, which was basically a Word document with all of my questions. They were downloaded, enter your answers, and uploaded.

There are different ways to do evaluation. My way was the least cumbersome, but probably not the most secure and safe way for some particular instructors. My idea was that I trust a student, because as you can see, they download, and they can do whatever you want. This is basically kind of a similar experience to an open book or even a take-home exam. There are other options that, throughout this presentation, I may talk about, but this was the way that I did.

In terms of communication, which is another important aspect of the course, the things that I used in my course was basically regular course announcement. That's really important, because you need to talk about what happened last week and what's going to happen this week and how is it going to be related to what's coming now for the remaining part of the course.

We had discussion boards, which was important to have quick turnaround. It had quick responses. And also participation marks to get people active in online office hours through whatever tool that you prefer, which is basically the only synchronous time that you are a student-- you and students are communicating right in real time.

Timely feedback on assignments and response to emails-- that's part of the communication. And also, an anonymous midterm survey-- that's another component that I had in my communication.

So what I learned from all of this-- online courses are not a face-to-face course uploaded to a website. It's basically the notion that I call digitized design versus a digital design. So we are not just digitizing the course that we have already talked face to face. You need to rethink many things, starting with your learning outcomes.

What is it that the student is going to get out of this? How are you going to assess that? What content do you use to make it happen? And finally, how to deliver. All of these things need to be rethought before you can teach your online course.

Another very important thing that I learned-- Murphy's law. Anything that can go wrong will go

wrong. Now this doesn't mean to sit down and spend infinite amount of time trying to fix every possible error. Actually, it means embrace the possibility of problems and prepare to deal with them when they happen. One thing that is really helpful, though, to make sure that you don't have serious problems-- involve students in your design and testing process. So don't just sit down and make something and post it online.

Technical support is really important. If you remember one of my slides, I had the navigation thing. It's not enough. Student can run into so many different problems, so you need to think about technical support and how the students are going to be supported.

Student engagement is a very important thing. If you thought engagement in physical face-to-face classes were difficult, just wait and see how it is online. You have to be proactive, you have to be innovative, and come up with different methods of engaging your students. I mentioned some of the things that I did, and I learned to do a lot more after that.

And finally, define your priorities and your students' priorities. What is it that we need to do for them? The priorities are really important, because not everybody wants to get 100% out of the course, especially at the time of the pandemic. You have to see what is really important.

So here are those three key things that I got out of the experience of teaching online courses-- flexibility. Flexibility is really important, both in terms of format of the material and the tasks. You need to educate-- make the education as personalized as possible, because people are in different situation, again, in case of pandemic, it becomes really important.

Clarity-- you're not there in the class to explain to them, so they have to make sure things are easy to understand. And finally, usability-- the navigation part. Students need to think about the content, not about your design. Or sorry-- the design of your website. There is a famous book on web design that says, don't make me think. That's the title of it, and that's really the thing. You don't want students to think about navigation.

Another important thing that I learned-- don't bore student with too much synchronous work. It's supposed to be self-paced. It's an online thing. Expectation is I can come and check things when I want to or when I can, so don't force people to sit down at a scheduled time doing things. And all of these three principles, the way they are implemented are mostly implemented in two important things, which are interactions and evaluation.

Particularly in time of pandemic, some special things that I can say, accommodation and

compassion are more important than academic goals. So back to that notion of prioritization, you have to lower the expectation not just for a student, but also for yourself. You are not planning to make an ideal course, and the students are not to be ideal students.

Don't assume that students are always available mentally and physically. So they may not be physically available to come online, or they may be physically available, but not mentally available. Don't forget that people-- students are people. And it's really easy to forget that, because they're not there. You don't see them. Make the course extra flexible during the pandemic, and for interactions, rely more on asynchronous work when you don't have to be there at the same time as a student.

And some things to avoid, really following up with that, is, again, especially during the pandemic, don't try to make an online copy of your offline course. Back to what I said-- rethink. Avoid synchronous thing, as I said. Setting fixed schedule is really a bad idea. Try to be flexible as much as possible. Don't think that videos replace interaction. Some people just record videos and think that's it. That's not it.

And interaction doesn't mean videoconferencing only. Interaction can mean other things. Again, don't rely too much on videoconferencing. I already mentioned expecting the students to be always available is a pitfall. You should avoid it. And last but not least, forgetting that students are people-- that's something that you have to avoid, because it's easy. You don't see them, and you forget that they are people. They are people. They still have social and emotional needs, and we need to be careful about those things.

For the rest of the presentation, I have some more details on these topics, but I stopped the video at this point, and I would encourage you to get access to the presentations or get in touch with me if you want to discuss them more. Thank you very much for your

Attention.