ANDREW SCHMIDT: Hello, my name is Andrew Schmidt, and I'm currently a contract instructor with the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. Like a lot of you, 2020 was my first foray into online teaching, and I really didn't know what to expect. By the end of the semester, I had a pretty good appreciation for the challenges faced by radio announcers and podcasters-- a lot of one-way flow of information.

I wasn't really getting a good sense of what my students were thinking, what they were doing, whether they were absorbing the material that I was presenting to them. I really didn't know if they were engaged, bored, frustrated, distracted. To be honest, I didn't really even know if they were there. All in all, 2020 was really kind of an isolating experience-- not just for the students, but for me as well-- and I wanted to make some changes in 2021 that would try to address some of the problems that I ran into in 2020.

But aside from the change from cuLearn to Brightspace, which everybody went through, there's a couple other changes that I tried to implement. First of all, in 2020, I had some individual papers that were assigned. In 2021, I decided to go with group projects, and I'll talk a little bit about that as to why I made that change. The other big change that I made was that, in 2020, I didn't really have any type of participation credit. But in 2021, I tried to formalize that and add some participation marks. So those are the major changes that I made between 2020 and 2021.

A little bit of context first. The course that we're dealing with is Airport Planning. It is a graduate level course, and generally there's between 30 and 50 students, so it's a fairly small class size. And what I've found is that it seems to be the first introduction for most students to the topic.

The other thing that I've noticed that it is predominantly international students taking this course, which means that there's a lot of cultural differences. There's language issues to deal with, and also the students are often coming in and they don't know other students. They haven't had that time to establish friendships and groups to work with, so that adds to that sense of isolation.

In regard to the group project, I allocated 20% of the students' final grade towards that assessment. I thought that was large enough percentage that the students would put serious effort into the project, but it's small enough that the final individual grade that's assigned to the student wouldn't be overly influenced by the work of others.

I often describe my course as being similar to a runway. It's about 3 to 4 kilometers long, and it's about a half a meter deep. Airport planning is a really broad field, and we cover a wide swath of material in 12 weeks. The group project provides students with the opportunity to delve much deeper into a specific topic. One thing I insisted on is that each project had to be unique. It had to be centered around a central theme, and this year's theme was future trends and technologies that will shape the future of airport planning.

So why did I switch from individual papers to group projects? Well, first of all, I wanted to reduce that sense of isolation that I noticed from 2020 when the students were working completely on their own. I'm sure some students grouped together to study and work on assignments, but that really sets up an uneven playing field for those who don't have the opportunity-- or the social demeanor for that matter-- to go and find and join a group.

Second of all, I wanted to foster collaboration amongst the students. Hopefully, that's going to produce a better end product. In the setup to the group projects, I put a lot of emphasis on original thought and creativity. Those are the kind of activities that are better achieved by bouncing ideas off of others and engaging in lively discussions to build a collective consensus.

Finally, I wanted students to understand that in the field of transportation engineering, we rarely work in isolation. Airport planners are continuously working with other professionals like architects, and planners, and interior designers, and a whole host of other stakeholders. Developing skills that enhance your ability to work in a group are essential to succeed in this field.

So having decided to go down the path of group projects, this workshop will focus on my experience with making it work in an online environment using Brightspace. What worked and what didn't, and what are some of the lessons I learned.

I would also love to hear any suggestions you may have on how to improve the student experience. Specifically, I had plans to go through the group setup and how to set it up in Brightspace, and what are some of the things that you want to watch for. In terms of the discussion groups, I set some up for the students, but I found that they really tended to prefer using their own social media platforms. So it was an opportunity that I've added for them, but I wouldn't say that it was really well used by the students.

In terms of the communications, there are some mechanisms within Brightspace that really help you interact with the students as a group, and that was really important for helping me to work together and work through certain issues with specific groups. So I'll talk a little bit about the communications. In terms of managing the online deliverables, that's, again, a very important aspect of this because you need to have those deliverables coming in from each of the groups. It's pretty standard for what was provided within Brightspace, but we'll talk a little bit about the online deliverables.

For presentations, I had each of the groups report their findings online in the final class. Overall, I think it went rather well, but there are some changes I would make next time. But it's another thing that we'll be talking about within the workshop.

The peer assessment is a particular online experience that really didn't go well for me. I had two components of that. One was the peer assessment of the students evaluating the presentations that were made by the other groups, and then there was the evaluation of the students evaluating other members within their own group. So those are the two parts of peer evaluation that I put into there, but I'll discuss some of the problems that I had with that and how it might be better to get around those issues.

In terms of the grading, Brightspace has a fairly easy setup in grades book, and that makes the assignment of the grades quite straightforward. I had virtually no pushback on the grades, so I take that as a good sign. So that's about the gist of what we'll be talking about in terms of managing group projects online.

For class participation, I decided to allocate 10% of the final grade towards encouraging students to engage more actively both online and offline. But following the words of Mick Jagger, anything worth doing is worth overdoing. I kind of created too many mechanisms for the participation, including breakout sessions, polls, readings, and what I called the instructor's prerogative.

In order for me to actually assign a grade for the breakout sessions, I had to introduce much more structure to the sessions. My problem in 2020 was that the breakout sessions were far too undisciplined, like really badly run meetings. In 2021, I imposed structure to the sessions by assigning a chairperson who was responsible for chairing the meeting and getting feedback from the other members, taking notes for the session, dialoguing with me one on one after the breakout session, and then submitting the notes through Brightspace generally within 24 hours of the lecture. Now I could put a rubric around those actions and assign it towards the participation mark. Of course, I had to publish a chairperson's schedule well in advance so that students knew when they were expected to contribute.

All in all, I think it worked quite well, and all of the students had the opportunity to chair at least one session. It also gave me the opportunity to have those one on one interactions with each student.

The second participation method was through the use of polls. Here, simply responding to the polls with sufficient participation marks. If the student responded to, say, 90% to 100% of the polls, they got full marks. But as their participation in the polls went down, so did their mark for this component. My inexperience with the mechanism of running polls was a bit problematic, but I got most of that sorted out by the end of the course.

For the readings, I'd have to say that I had mixed results. Not all of the students participated, and the majority of those that did really didn't provide a critical analysis of the papers I uploaded. Instead, they just provided summaries. The internet has become the primary source of information for so many students these days, and so much of that published information is weak. It's incomplete, misleading, or it's just plain wrong. The skill set to sort the wheat from the chaff is very, very important, and I really don't think I achieved my goals through the readings participation. I'd really love to get your thoughts on this.

The final participation mechanism that I used was called the instructor's prerogative. It was kind of a generic metric that allowed me to recognize active participation, either online or in the Brightspace discussion forums. There are always a few students that stand out and contribute in their own experiences, ask great questions, jump in to help fellow students, or make other types of valuable contributions. The instructor's prerogative gave me the opportunity to recognize that participation.

So how did I assign the final grade for participation? Each student was assigned a mark out of 3 for each of the four mechanisms, but the maximum was 10. So a perfect score of 3 on all four mechanisms, even though it adds up to 12, it would still score the maximum of 10. If a student didn't participate at all in one particular category-- say, readings, or one of the other ones-- then they could only score a maximum of 9.

I think overall the class participation really worked reasonably well. I think I probably made it a little too complex, and I might simplify that in future courses, but I think I would be intending to keep that up as a particular part of the assessment process. So that's what we're going to be talking about in the Welcome to my Online Classroom session, Thursday, April 7, from 10:00 to 11:30 AM. If you'd like to join the discussion, please register through the Teaching and Learning Services. I hope to see you there. Bye bye for now.