

VIRGINIA

My name is Virginia Taylor, and welcome to my online classroom. I'm an instructor with the Sprott School of Business. And I'll be talking stay a little bit about my experiences in online teaching.

TAYLOR:

Well, I can definitely say, I've been there, at that point where you feel like you're climbing a big mountain. I first started teaching online in 2003, when I think the tools were not quite as complex, or as I might say sturdy as they are now. Certainly there's been a lot of advancement in the technology to support online learning. And so I hope to be able to, in this session, draw on some of that experience and some of the ways in which I found my way up and over the mountain. So let's hope it's not so steep and slippery for you.

So a little bit about what I teach online. I'm with the Sprott School of Business. I teach in the Bachelor of International Business program for the students who are spending their third and/or fourth year abroad on exchange. So my course runs actually for a complete academic year, from September until April, with students who can be in any one of many countries at a time. Usually there's somewhere between 35 to 50 students in this course with students in Japan, China, France, Spain, et cetera. Even within those countries, students are studying at different host universities in different cities.

So there are a lot of variables that I'm presented with when I start to teach the course. I have to think about where the students will be. It also means, because they're at different universities, they have different start dates and different end dates. So I may have students who are ready to start the course at the beginning of September, or students who are not actually arriving on exchange until the beginning or the end of October, and then of course, students in their exchange sometime in April, others staying on for May and June.

So I'm balancing a lot of variables as to how to rule out the different modules, where students may be, and how to capture that learning experience while they're abroad, all of which I have to look at the different times. I've also got, of course, different time zones to look at, and then the individual students and what the individual students' needs might be. My course might be unique, but I think we're all

dealing with different variables. And I think when you start to sort of look at the online environment, one has to take into account the many different variables that you can have throughout the year or throughout the semester.

So what have I been working with to make this a success? When I first started teaching, I actually worked with WebCT. The university moved on to having CuLearn. And so CuLearn became my primary platform. And during the session, I'll talk quite a bit about what I've learned about CuLearn and how I've really made it work for myself and for the students, some of the tools that I have found helpful. I've really played with it. I've looked at groups and databases and forums and assignments and files and folders. And so a chance to sort of showcase some of what I've worked with and how I've used it.

About three, maybe four years ago, I started using CuPortfolio, and I found it to be a really wonderful tool to be able to showcase the students and their learning. And so I integrated CuPortfolio with CuLearn, and I used the two of them together. And it's been really beneficial for the course. I've really liked what I've seen and what's been available to CuPortfolio. And I'll talk a little bit about it in the session, both in terms of how I've used it for the students to be able to present their own learning and the content we're exploring in the course, but also what they have been able to do to showcase themselves, their experience, and ways in which they've learned a little bit about technology. So that'll be an interesting part of our session upcoming.

So now the big question, what have I learned? When I sat back to reflect on what might be important and what have I learned over the years, I think there were three key words that stood out for me. And I'll sort of reference them as the three C's of what I've learned. And they are community, consistency, and connectivity. And I'll talk about each one for just a minute here, and then more, of course, in the session.

So community. In the session, we'll talk about the importance of creating a community of learners in an online learning environment and how I've been able to do that from day one and some of the tools that I've used to really bring the students into the classroom. I've also tried to address the social needs of the learners. And we'll talk about the importance of having the students interact with one another and meet with one another.

I'll also talk about how some of the tools helped me to learn about the students so that I can try to tailor the course to the student needs, how I can continuously hear about what they're doing so that I can make sure that the material is relevant to their particular program. And finally, community really is important for me because I have found that at times, teaching in an online learning environment is-- there's a lot to be done, both setting it up, the technical, the layout, the format, and then just staying on top of what's happening. And so by creating a community within a community, I have really found that I've found my way to make it manageable, to make it enjoyable, and to make it a very positive teaching experience.

So second C is consistency. At this part of the session, we'll talk a little bit about how it's important to minimize the confusion and create clarity for our students. In the absence of face-to-face communication, students in an online environment must rely upon what is being said or what has been written down alone to extract meaning. And if we're not clear in our presentation, then the students can easily become confused and perhaps misinterpret what we're hoping that they might be able to work on or explore. And so we'll talk about ways to think about the layout and the format and how to be consistent with that. We'll also talk about schedules and how important it is to be consistent with our expectations of when things might be due or when I might actually communicate with the students and when I might release a particular module.

So the final C is connectivity. And during this session, I'll talk about the importance of using the tools. You don't have to have that many-- one or two tools that can really allow for positive student-student interaction, sometimes monitored, sometimes not, as well as faculty-student interaction, announcements, forums, discussions, that can really help to stay connected with the students throughout the course. I think that that's been very important for me as I deliver my online classroom.

So we'll also provide a bit of time during the session to talk about challenges, the challenges of online learning. And there are some, yes, definitely. As you can see in the picture, I spend time in northern Tanzania doing international development work. And I've had to find a way to balance my online learning with my other work.

And I think from the very beginning, that is something that's always been in the

back of my mind is how do I balance online teaching, which can be at times onerous. It can be both technically demanding as well as from a time perspective. And for me, in this particular circumstance, as you can see from the photo, I don't have a lot of internet bandwidth necessarily to be able to stay connected with students. And so how have I met those challenges? And how do we try to make the tools work for us and make it a very manageable experience? So look forward to hearing what some of your questions might be and for my experience answering some of those.

And finally, let me talk a little bit about what I have found to be the best tools in CuLearn. And this is really from my own very personal experience. So I want to talk a little bit, and in a session, we'll talk more about groups and how I've used groups on in two ways.

So as I started earlier in the presentation, I talked about my students being really in study abroad experiences all around the world. And so I've used groups to allow for the students to connect with one another. I've had to make up the groups, because I want that diversity in the groups. I want a student from Austria to be able to connect with a student in France as well as a student in China. And so I've done-- I've created my own groups and use that.

But I've also had group self-selection. And I've found that to be a very useful tool as students explore different topics. Perhaps it's a student group that they opted to select some kind of support where they could work with one another to work through some problems. I haven't always monitored some of the groups activities. And I'll share that in some in the session and ways that I've allowed them to work without being monitored and other ways where I've been sort of a participant of that group.

So finally, the best part is CuPortfolio. And I'll talk a lot about CuPortfolio in the session and how I've used it. But I really feel that it is an excellent tool to be able-- for the students to be able to showcase their learning. But what I like about CuPortfolio is its flexibility. And I've used it both as an individual, whereas students have been able to create their own individual CuPortfolio. So with the permission of Trevor, this is just a sample of his homepage where he was able to sort of create and showcase his experience as he launched his study abroad experience.

But I've also used it for groups to work on a group project. And it's been very effective to have three or four students working together on one CuPortfolio. So during the session, I'll talk a little bit about what have been some of the ways in which the students have used it, what they have learned while using it, and as I said, its great flexibility. So hopefully, you'll be able to take away after participating in a session some of the ways in which you might be able to use CuPortfolio as you launch your online learning experience.

So I very much looking forward to talking to you in the session. And thank you for listening.