

AMRITA HARI: Hello and welcome to my online classroom. I want to start by thanking the Educational Development Centre and especially Dr. Morgan Rooney for giving me this opportunity to talk about my experience of teaching online and for helping me prepare.

My name is Amrita Hari. And I'm an associate professor in the Institute of Women's and Gender Studies. As was mentioned in the advertising blurb, in 2017, I won an EDC online course development fund to design a fully-online course for upper year undergraduate and incoming MA students in women and gender studies. This summer, I designed a new course and adapted a course I last taught in fall 2013 to be taught online.

In this workshop, I'm hoping to discuss my experience in these two vastly different contexts in term of time, resources, and support to evaluate what it felt like, what worked, and finally, what is manageable amidst the pandemic and how to prepare for it.

As I mentioned already, the first course I delivered online was WGST 4003/5003A-- Transitions in Women's and Gender Studies. This course was developed to be fully online and asynchronous. I taught this course in summer 2018 delivered over only six weeks. Although this meant a severe time crunch, I prepared all the materials in advance beginning in September 2017 and worked all the way through till the launch of the course.

Additionally, I had the undivided attention and support of the fabulous Daphne Uras, my instructional designer and partner in everything. Daphne and I from the very beginning worked through every detail of the content, the process, the assessments, and delivery. I was also lucky to bring in another colleague, Dr. Katie Bush, for additional support in preparing and recording lectures.

I also had the incredible help from Allie Davidson, who assisted me in developing the primary assessment tool for the course using C portfolio in addition to all of the help from Ed Tech, as well as all of the help in the cool transition slides and all of the transcripts and recording my videos.

Despite the support, time, advance preparation, and only 12 students, I learned a lot about what works, what is possible, and what is manageable. This was a very different context from what I found myself in this summer. I had been on sabbatical until July and then had to jump right into preparing two online courses with excellent but limited help from my fantastic instructional designer, Kim, who had at least 20 other courses on her plate already.

Neither of our attention was undivided in any sense. I knew that I would not have the time to build the entire course and materials in advance and was doing double the work in less than 25% of the time. I could draw on some of the lessons learned from summer 2018, but I had to rethink my whole approach to teaching online to prepare for this academic year.

So based on these vastly different experiences, here is what I took away and would want to share with you. Being trained as a geographer, I'm still a bit embarrassed to draw on a quote from a real estate tycoon. But Harold Samuel did say, quote, "There are three things that matter in property-- location, location, location." I say there are three things that about teaching online-- communicate, communicate, communicate.

Without being too reductionist or silly, there are three things I learned and continue to understand anew every day. One, process is just as important as content. Students do better in the course when they know the purpose of the course and its elements. I try to connect all the aspects of the course, including the learning outcomes and assessment tools, and explain this to the students.

For example, I develop learning objectives for each assignment and explain how it relates to the broader course objectives and materials. For both courses, I explain my choice of the synchronous format to demonstrate that there is a method to my madness.

Second, feedback is paramount. This goes both ways. I'm careful to communicate my expectations to students and TAs but also take opportunities to read the room and check in. For example, at the start of the course, students participated in an icebreaker exercise 3, 2, 1-- expectations and trepidation.

Students were asked to talk about three things they are worried about, two things they expect from the course, and one topic or module that they're most excited about. I then reported back on this activity to let the students know that I understood where they were at.

Third, be empathetic. PowerPoint in its infinite wisdom and design idea suggested the heart emoji for this point. This is not an easy time for anybody, and most of us are struggling in one way or another. My assumption is that students and TAs who are also students are feeling the same way and are often more vulnerable.

It is important to understand and demonstrate that faculty also share their feelings. I reiterate this understanding in all of our communication and that we're all trying to make the best of a bad and if not worsening situation.

Finally, I was asked to reflect on what is my favorite tool or feature on cuLearn. I would say make friends with forums. They are a versatile tool. And despite their limitations-- they cannot replace face-to-face interactions and can often be cumbersome-- they can be useful to create a sense of learning community and encourage peer learning. Thank you all, and I look forward to talking to you about all of this and more.