ARHU Faculty Designing Online Courses: Lessons Learned

In January 2011, ten faculty members in the College of Arts & Humanities participated in a workshop for faculty designing online courses. Subsequently, they all taught fully online classes. They report the following lessons learned.

Talk to colleagues who have already taught online. Instructors grapple with similar issues and can share creative solutions with each other. Have an open discussion about the pedagogical constraints and benefits of online learning to help put the digital tools and teaching challenges in context. Participants in the workshop include: Sheri Parks (AMST), Audra Buck Coleman (ART), Trevor Parry-Giles (COMM), Leah Waks (COMM), Meina Liu (COMM), Kim Coles (ENGL), Sangeeta Ray (ENGL), Bernard Cooperman (HIST), Mike Hewitt (MUSC), and Mathias Frisch (PHIL).

Let prospective students know whether the class will be synchronous, asynchronous, or a combination. Students need to know before they register, so they can plan other obligations around their course responsibilities. Emphasize specific time commitments in the Testudo course description.

Reshape your content for online delivery. Instructors use different methods of delivery to capture students’ attention online. Instead of recording lectures word for word, consider breaking up content to make lectures succinct. Use screencasting software to add visuals examples and clarify lecture points. Diversify content by interspersing readings, video clips, links to websites, discussion boards, and assignments. Design content to appeal to a variety of learning styles, but be chary of overwhelming the students with too much content.

Create a clear, consistent structure. The rules of interaction and engagement vary widely in different online environments. Standardize the look and feel of your online course space. The syllabus should link to or reference the locations where content resides and where students must take action. Organize materials and assignments carefully to prevent confusion. Put all content and
assignments into relevant modules or units. Make expectations and deadlines as straightforward as possible, and impose a strict time structure for both content “consumption” and assignment due dates.

**Be present and engaged.** Having an effective communication system and monitoring it closely are critical in online teaching. Create an announcements area, so students will know where to go to review the latest updates. Direct students to post their questions to a shared discussion board, and make your presence felt in the public online space, so students will become accustomed to asking you questions in public rather than sending you private email. Tell your students how long they might expect to wait for a response from you, and make sure you stay within your stated timeframe. Get feedback from your students after the first or second module is complete to gauge which teaching strategies you may need to revise, and give students multiple opportunities to provide feedback on how the course is going throughout the semester.

**Make sure students are present and engaged.** Student interaction with the instructor, each other, and course content correlate highly with improved learning outcomes. Design activities to ensure the students must work actively and collaboratively with the course materials. Have students discuss what they are studying, write continually, relate course content to things they have learned before, and apply their findings to create new work. Leverage the power of the network to invite experts into your course space and to interact with communities of practice outside the confines of your course. Have students post frequent, short writing and research assignments to public discussion boards, respond to and criticize the work of others, and journal or blog.

**Design rich, deep, intellectually engaging courses.** ARHU instructors want students to become critical users of information and constructors of meaning in a world of information overload. Design assignments to help students learn to find, sort, analyze, and connect information. Create a tidy, inviting online course space, where students will enjoy learning and be inspired to make meaning of their world.