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Teaching Tips:

Are you on-line yet? Trials and Tribulations of Getting an Adulthood and Aging Class Ready for On-line Instruction

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Chances are your chairperson, dean, and/or president has requested that you consider putting any or all of your classes on-line. On-line instruction has increased dramatically in just the past few years and more and more colleges and universities are putting as many of their courses on-line as possible. I have first-hand experience in this matter and would like to discuss some trials and tribulations of the process. Although on-line practices and requirements differ across colleges and universities, my discussions with other colleagues at other schools resulted in some very common ground regardless of where they are teaching. What follows are some observations on the process, recommendations and what works and what doesn't, and general guidelines that will make the process as smooth as possible. First some historical context to situate the reader.

In 1992, I was hired fresh off my postdoctoral fellowship at Washington University in St. Louis and started teaching, among other courses, Developmental Psychology at the University of North Dakota. I continue to teach this class and, initially, the Adulthood and Aging class (PSY 355 at UND, taught in the summer and fall semesters, average enrollment of 20-25 in the summer and 90-95 in fall) was taught by another faculty member (Rob Till) who has since left UND for Northern Arizona University. Prior to his departure Rob approached me and asked if I would like to take over the Adulthood and Aging class and I jumped at the chance to teach it. My teaching experience with Developmental Psychology (in which I currently devote 1/4 of the class to the aging process), coupled with my research on aging made wanting to teach Adulthood and Aging very appealing to me. Since Rob's departure, I have taught Adulthood and Aging in the summer and fall semesters in the more traditional classroom setting. About 10 years ago I was asked if I wanted to teach Adulthood and Aging through the correspondence department on campus (which I did). The correspondence department offers several of UND's undergraduate classes via snail-mail (paper) instruction and has done so for over 90 years. Students from literally all over the world sign up for classes, are mailed materials, take exams, and basically do what other students do in these classes but all from the comfort of their own homes, dorm-rooms, etc. About 3 years ago (2003-2004), and in response to the university's desire to attract more students overall, the correspondence department started asking faculty who were teaching the snail mail correspondence classes if they wanted to convert these to a paperless (and on-line)

format. As with the development of the snail mail correspondence classes, there was a monetary incentive to develop the course on-line (\$1500). However, this is where the similarities between developing a snail mail and an on-line course stop. I had revised my snail mail course in Adulthood and Aging every 5 years (this was a requirement of the correspondence department) and the next revision was to be conversion from snail mail to on-line. Now, for my recommendations. I have listed what I consider the most critical in the development phase of getting an on-line course up and running. I imagine (many) more will surface as this on-line class takes off and additional students enroll in it. As of the writing of this article, 6 students are currently enrolled.

First, don't expect that the conversion (or the development of a new on-line course) will occur overnight, over the weekend or even over the course of 1 or 2 months. From the time I agreed to revise my course for on-line presentation, approximately 30 months passed. Now, I did not meet with the on-line team for 30 straight months, but there were many delays and many issues related to how to present certain information cogently (and legally, in the case of copyright information) that took many, many meetings to resolve. All told, there were approximately 10 meetings I had with the on-line team. This team consisted of 4-5 members each with different on-line backgrounds (i.e., one person's sole job was to add music and color to my on-line course so as to make it appealing for the eyes as well as the ears).

Second, don't assume that what works in your regular class will work in an on-line format. I use PowerPoint and BlackBoard extensively in my non on-line Adulthood and Aging class (and all my others ones as well) and show a fair number of video clips, but getting all this translated into an acceptable (and eye and ear appealing) on-line format took a lot of work and effort on my part as well as attempting to integrate this within the guidelines of the on-line group members. The biggest issue in this light has been obtaining official copyright information for some of the videos I use in my classes. This issue has become more complicated and cumbersome with the addition of an on-line option, but it is certainly doable and can aid in making your class as good as or better than the non on-line version. With that said, one real draw-back (for me anyway) of the on-line class is that the student does not get to see me in person as I lecture. My lectures are educational but also fun-filled and I tend to be quite animated while I lecture. This aspect of my teaching is curtailed with an on-line type of class. So, if you consider yourself an entertaining teacher (as I do myself) then there may be some initial hesitance to teaching an on-line class.

Third, be patient with the on-line team (or on-line person, depending on your specific situation) that will be working with you as you develop and/or refine your class. The team I worked with consists of no less than 5-6 people, as mentioned previously. When the decision came down to get all paper correspondence courses on-line, some resistance was apparent from several of my faculty colleagues. Many did not want to convert their classes, many thought on-line was not the wave of the future, and many simply did not want to deal with the rapidly advancing technologies. I avoided much of this simply because I use PowerPoint and BlackBoard in all my classes (some of my colleagues do not) and this was quite helpful in dealing with the on-line team. Many on this team never

took an Aging class (although the more they found out about Aging, the more interested they have become) and few ever had Introductory Psychology. As we met more and more, the on-line team became more interested in the aging process, what they could do to reduce the impact of aging on themselves and their family members and some have continued to ask me questions about aging.

In summary, this is an exciting time technologically for those of us who teach. Adapting and working to get my Adulthood and Aging class was by no means easy and took much time away from my other projects. That said, I am very glad that I converted this class to an on-line format. It made me aware of other technologies that I am now considering using in my other classes, it made me think of different and interesting ways of presenting materials pertinent to the aging process (creativity helps here because one is not lecturing in the classroom), and it now makes my interest and passion for adulthood and aging available to many more individuals through the on-line process.