Moving Educational Content from Resident to Distance Settings (Without Doing 10X the Work?)

Season 5, Episode 1 – originally released 25 August 2020

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Like some of you, the sudden migration from in-person to remote operations was a bit jarring, but I got through and many of us have gotten through. There is a natural challenge we faced in trying to do the same tasks using a different modality. From a process standpoint, one recognizes that different modalities can mean doing things differently, and you may have to adapt when you're moving back and forth between in-person and remote operations. But what about the content, especially when we're talking about an educational situation? Moving back and forth is rather difficult and the content may not have to be adapted. And it sounds like a simple task, but it's not necessarily easy. So what are the challenges and how can we overcome them?

My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.

Naturally, the impetus behind this particular episode is the ongoing pandemic. A lot of us who are working in education, but also in matters of practice, have had to shift our modality fairly suddenly to two different way of doing business. Now, in the educational context, this was really a big challenge because you just naturally had to take whatever your ongoing plans were and adapt them to remote delivery. Now, of course, I'm recording this now as the summer of 2020 is tailing on.

And one of the things that I've had to wrestle with is the fact that a lot of teachers in professional schools have very specialized, tailored content, which is a combination of content that's drawn from from ordinary scholarly sources, mixed in with practical case studies, experiential learning and that sort of thing. Obviously, the in-person synchronous delivery of such materials, if that's been your primary modality, it's awfully difficult to necessarily translate because in this particular case, you know, you can still provide the same readings. But then when it comes to the actual content that is specialized, that is uniquely constructed based on the program that you're talking about. That's actually very, very difficult to do. Now, it turns out that I this past year, this past academic year, had already undertaken efforts to try to figure out how to take my in-person course and move it to a remote asynchronous distance learning experience.

This is because at my particular institution, which is a professional school, you know, we have a very, very robust in-person resident program. But we also have a very, very active -- and have had for a long time -- an active distance learning program because of the time and the energy involved in providing courses in both modalities. The tendency has been for them to be structurally independent. So you have one group of folks who are handling resident delivery and one group of

folks who are handling distance delivery. And the distance program will naturally take what is in the resident program and they'll adapt. They'll do the adaptation themselves. Works very well for, you know, what you would consider to be core material delivery. You know, if we have the general courses on leadership or management or policy or planning, well, you know, the adaptation from one modality or to another is really not hard to figure out. You're presenting a lot of the same materials. You're trying to achieve a lot of the same lesson outcomes. There's a lot of overlap.

And then the question comes in this in this particular instance where I'm talking about a course material in which I individually developed that uses a lot of specialty materials. What I found was that it actually was an extremely difficult migration. It was doable and I succeeded, but it was very, very difficult. And I think that a lot of us who are now faced with the probability that the migration or the moving back and forth between in-person and remote learning is going to be a bit more the norm, which means that the material, anything that we've developed, that is indeed very, very specialized and it is complex. It just takes a lot of time and a lot of planning to prepare materials for remote asynchronous delivery if you're trying to achieve the same outcomes.

So I want to tell you about a little bit about my experience and the challenges that I had with content and offer some lessons learned that might if you're in a similar boat and you have specialized content and you realize you've got to make it portable to other modalities. Maybe there's some things worth considering. On the one hand, I had already started planning. By the time that the pandemic hit, I had already completed the translation of what was a 10-lesson, three-hours per lesson course in ... leading and planning change. I had already developed a remote, synchronous version of it. This was straightforward for me because it turns out that the window in which our distance program had for delivering this course was five weeks.

And so the natural thing to do was to take what I had in the 10 lessons of my resident course, and I divided it, essentially deliver two lessons per week. So that part was fairly simple. If you don't have that clean break, then you end up with sort of doing that. Lowest common denominator thing, trying to figure out what fits the course material.

I combine regular, you know, seminar learning activities where we dive through readings. But also workshop activities and the workshop activities are usually done in the middle. So we get the you know, we make sure that the students have the grounding of the knowledge from the readings. And then we go ahead and say, "All right. Today's class. Now we're gonna take your problem that you're working on." And they had students choose the problem that will carry them through the course. "OK, today, let's come up with a clear and concise problem definition. Next lesson is let's apply some diagnostic tools and see what it takes to figure out, you know, what are the root causes of the problem, visioning strategy plan." You know, there's there's a whole series of workshops that they go through. So that's kind of the structure from the resident side.

And then I tried to replicate that where each week would then have the can measure it to lessons to cover the week plus associated activities. And then the reflection afterwards, because, you know, we conclude, you know, after the students do the workshop and the resident program, they have to come back and we discuss. "What did you learn? What does this tell you about the kind of questions that you want to do if you were to take this these ideas and put them out into practice?"

I also had the advantage of the fact that my spouse, my wife is taking an online asynchronous program and hers was constructed identically to what I was mirroring in her program. Each course is five weeks. There are weekly requirements, typically involving readings -- putting together a detailed, reflective post of say, you know, it ranges from one hundred and fifty to three hundred words and then to show engagement, involvement and collaboration. The students would then have to follow on at the end of the week and post a quality reply to at least two other students, which means that it has to be something substantive in the post. It's not just, you know, at a boy. So a lot of what I did when I developed this asynchronous course or version of the course is I mirrored that same structure that I would have. The students through the post have them do an activity and then reply to each others post with the lessons learned, the experience of actually delivering the on the asynchronous course, which was entirely during the pandemic after the resident course had to go to remote synchronous. Taught me some very, very interesting lessons and I wanted to share these with you.

The first one you would think that the issue would be, you know, remote versus distance. I found that the greater difference and the greater issue was synchronous versus asynchronous. What I discovered in terms of the asynchronous was that the same amount of material which was designed to occupy the students for a set number of hours between reading, doing the activities, whatever, took the students three times longer to accomplish. Now I want to discount the fact that some of my students, because of who you know, basically the institution that I work at, some of the students are on pandemic task forces and were really, really busy. That [did not contribute to the issues I saw, however].

I basically polled the students about halfway through the course and asked them, "OK, how much time you actually doing doing this? How much time you actually doing that?" And the biggest the biggest increase in the time was based on the fact that because I socially constrained the students -- you got to do the workshop activity in 20 minutes, and I'm effectively standing there with a stopwatch. Without that constraint, students were really getting into far, far more depth than intended. Or they were they were more likely to really, you know, question themselves. And I should mention that the workshops were designed to be [done by] individuals. So it wasn't like, you know, there were communication challenges of having the teams work together, whatever. It really was that the students were taking what was intended to be a 20 minute exercise, and it was taking them two to three hours.

Then on top of that, you add all of the dimensions of what it takes to actually go through and read through all of the student comments, deciding which ones you're going to reply to and all that sort of thing. Everything really, really took longer. It was with the same exact material, same exact lesson outcomes. So one of the first lessons that I found is that if we're going to be porting specialized content or very, very highly tailored content over to a different modality, then those sorts of timeframes have got to be allocated or addressed. You know, you have to account for the fact that. The students are going to go into far more depth than you intend. And you've got to constrain them in some way.

What I ultimately did which which was was done to great success -- when I did another distance asynchronous course just concluded -- I did redesign the activities so that there would be sort of an

intentional constraint built in. That said, in order to accomplish the lesson objectives, you just do these minimal bits. Don't go more than these minimal bits. But if you want to take this activity and do it in a full, real world setting, then here's what the whole thing looks like. And this was very successful in helping scope the students level of energy.

The second thing has to do with the tailoring of content, because one of the things that I found striking -- and I have learned that this is commonplace in-person class programs -- there's a tendency to rely on traditional style textbooks that are general purpose and you can buy it in a bookstore and you can apply it to any courses that sort of uses that same content.

The programs that are online seem to rely much, much more on very specifically tailored content. That is, your program goes five weeks. Then you offer textbooks that are designed precisely against the objectives of the class and its design [is] split up into five practically even parts. And you use the entire book. To me, that constitutes a very, very different way of thinking about coarse material. Because now what's what you're really thinking is that, you know, it is that more tailoring is better than less. But the thing is that if you're going to try to port content to multiple modalities, regardless of you know, because if it's specialized, you don't want it to be tailored to a specific program. You want it to be available for everything. This is a bit of a constraint. It really is.

So one of the things that I've done and I just recently uploaded a adjusted version of an activity book that I designed for for my change classes that I also offer to my institution for wider use, is that I include notes in the back as an appendix to say, "All right. Based on time constraints, based on different modalities, based on different ways of thinking about how the material could be delivered by for a particular course, particular program or whatever. Here's how you tailor it. This is what you can reduce. This is what you can reorder. This is what you prioritize." So that that way, for example, if you want to take the same course materials and you have to reduce it down to six lessons, then you have a roadmap in order to do that. And I think that that is a very, very helpful thing, because certainly in my particular case, I'm not going to continue to offering, you know, offering both modalities, you know, the same course in both modalities forever. And I've got to figure out how to have this specialized knowledge be transferable to others so that they can use it.

The practicality of this kind of knowledge is so important now, especially in remote operations, because you don't get that same --- I experience the same thing as a lot of people. I used a virtual world setting. It was a challenge getting accustomed to dealing with avatars, you know, video teleconferencing. It's tough to deal with the, you know, ... when you don't have that same level of body language or whatever? So one of the things that gets that does get a challenge in general is, you know, how do you really understand the extent to which students are learning when you're switching back and forth between in-person and remote modalities?

So overall, I mean, it's it's a very, very strong and positive experience. And I know that I this is the sort of thing that we need to be doing because distance Ed is here to stay. And those of us with specialized knowledge need to think about how do we plan to have our knowledge transferable across environments because we don't want to spend all of our time tailoring. We want to be able to spend all of our time teaching.

… And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.

All the Best!
Tom Galvin