

How CLT Helped JRMC Beat the Course Design Blues

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The old adage says that when you fail at something, try, try again. What it doesn't tell you is that you'd better equip yourself with new knowledge and skills before you try again.

And that sums up the often frustrating road - bumps and pitfalls galore - we at the Journalism and Mass Communication department (JRMC) have had to endure before achieving success in our bid to align our multi-sectional core courses.

For several years, a number of very accomplished faculty tried to unify the approach to teaching the Mass Media and Multimedia Writing courses. Each of these two courses had at least four sections and the students completing their curricula often possessed uneven learning, which would later manifest in varying capabilities to deal with 300 and 400 level courses.

The two courses were originally designed with limited learning outcomes, some of which may have become outdated. These courses were taught by dedicated faculty who had the perfect marriage of academic and industry expertise. But what they did lack was the acumen to revise and align the learning outcomes of these courses so that all students were getting the same educational regimen. What we sought was a uniformity of learning experience but not at the expense of teaching style and talent. Ideally, we were looking for a way faculty could draw on their own experiences and skills to teach these courses their way, but with a common vision, a common goal in mind.

Despite our best intentions, we were always at an impasse how to achieve this.

Enter the Center for Learning and Teaching (CLT).

We reached out to them in late May 2018 for help and they immediately obliged. Their presence was immediately felt at our first faculty meeting to discuss the learning outcomes. In the course of an hour, they were able to provide us templates, a map to chart our alignment progress, and even help us learn the scholastic language used in course development and revision.

They helped us conceptualize what it is we wanted to do.

They held the keys that unlocked faculty potential in this regard. Once we began to understand the root challenges, faculty began to innovate and suggest solutions using the tools CLT shared with us; these helped nudge us toward our common goal.

In four one-hour meetings attended by CLT expert staff throughout the summer, JRMC faculty were able to achieve far more than in nearly seven years of brainstorming around the core issues. During those meetings, faculty were both responsive and forward-thinking, motivated by the rapid success achieved after meeting with CLT staff.

One particularly illuminating point from this exercise was that we learned that re-aligning learning outcomes not only helps students but also helps faculty, the program under study, and the department. Re-aligning learning outcomes helps faculty with course design and self-assessment; for the program, there is clear coherence in its structure, and for the department the exercise strengthens the capacity needed for program accreditation. Working with CLT also helped us pinpoint what it is we were trying to achieve. We learned to avoid vague verbs in learning outcomes and instead be specific. This helped us question what was assessable and therefore a good learning outcome.

We approached the exercise by also understanding the difference between affective, behavioral and cognitive learning outcomes. These helped us to identify the necessary terminology - in this case, action verbs - in the construction of learning outcome statements. There is a scientific paradigm to this, even if it works in reverse order. For example, we started determining the desired outcomes for the course: What skills should students have (learn) when they conclude the course? Then we went in reverse and asked what assessment tools are there to determine the success of these outcomes: what kind of assignments, exams or projects help faculty determine whether these learning outcomes have been met. Finally, what instructional tools are we as faculty going to use to prepare students to achieve these outcomes.

By the end of the entire process, many of us had eureka! moments when the *backwards first* approach (called Backward Design) revealed how some of the activities and assignments we had been giving our students now made perfect sense.

With all faculty teaching the course chipping in, we were able to exchange ideas and constructive criticism to scaffold student learning and content mastery. This became an essential part of the entire exercise.

We rolled out our revised courses this September and have already called on CLT to help us with other multi-sectional courses throughout our three majors.

The experience this summer has taught me, and my colleagues, that AUC has a plethora of resources and skilled people who can help us with all aspects of our curricula. The only regret is that we didn't call on our new friends much sooner.