

**From Brick and Mortar to Virtual Classrooms
A Prototype of Online and Blended instructor Education at AUC**

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Many faculty who either want or need to teach online or blended courses have never been online or blended learners themselves and may not necessarily have grounding in the pedagogies proven effective in teaching in those modalities. While CLT offers a number of workshops and other programs focused on the *design* of online and blended courses, this course was created to focus on the critical differences in how online and blended courses are *taught*.

Fundamentals of Online Facilitation is a five-week, facilitated, fully online course designed to prepare AUC instructors to teach in online and blended delivery modes. The primary course goal is to make sure that instructors are prepared for the substantial differences between teaching online as opposed to in a brick and mortar classroom. A secondary benefit for instructors participating in the course is the experience of being an online student in a fully online, facilitated course.

The course was originally created specifically for part-time instructors teaching for the School of Continuing Education. Students and instructors participating in the school's newly launched blended initiative reported a number of challenges directly related to lack of experience with online and blended learning. Students were unsure of how to proceed and were dissatisfied with the blended format because the level of interaction with instructors did not meet their expectations; while instructors struggled to help their students acclimate to this new learning environment.

In the initial offering, Fundamentals of Online Facilitation was launched using the same blended learning format as the courses the instructors were teaching. The course began with a face-to-face kick off, then participants completed a series of online activities as part of an online module. This was followed by another face-to-face meeting about transitions and flow between online and face-to-face teaching and then nine days of online activities which led to a final face-to-face unit and the course wrap up.

Below is the schedule of the first iteration of the course which took place in summer 2019.

Schedule: Fundamentals of Online Facilitation, First Iteration

Module	Duration	Mode
Getting Started	Before 6/18	online
Before You Teach	6/18 (2 hours)	face-to-face
Create & Maintain Social Presence	6/19 - 6/31	online
Transitions & Flow	7/1 (2 hours)	face-to-face
Facilitating Interaction	7/2 - 7/5	online
Providing Feedback	7/6 - 7/9	online
Using Rubrics & Course Wrap up	7/10 (2 hours)	face-to-face

Data and Observations

The course designers used three methods for collecting feedback from the participants in the course.

1. A ten-question course evaluation survey gathering both quantitative and qualitative data at the end of the course.
2. Data and analytics from the Learning Management System (in this case, Moodle).
3. Direct feedback from the participants during a one-hour end-of-course discussion.

A critical observation supported by data collected during the first offering of the course was the participants' overreliance on the face-to-face sessions. The majority of instructors participated robustly in the classroom, but were not as fully engaged in the online activities and assessments. This tendency put pressure on the facilitators to review material, deliver content, and revisit activities from the online sessions (this mirrors observations made in blended courses taught by this same group of faculty where online engagement was low), making the face-to-face sessions longer and less engaging than planned.

While participants also noted, repeatedly, that the quality of the facilitation was a major positive, during the face-to-face course wrap up, a number of the instructors enrolled noted the lack of participation by their peers. One instructor, in their comments in the final evaluation survey stated "the students [instructors participating in the course] were awful!"

A second observation, reinforced by course data, was that restricting the course to a three-week time slot meant making a decision to not teach certain key skills and not address certain best practices. This gap in learning was noted by participants and the effect was noticeable in participant performance.

For example, creating welcome videos as a means of fostering instructor presence is new to most faculty with significant face-to-face teaching experience. Participants were asked to create scripts for welcome videos, but did not create actual videos; since this task would require instructors to learn software and procedures that would add 3-6 hours to the overall course length. While participants overwhelmingly felt the course was the correct length, they also felt the course lacked sufficient hands-on skill-building and application. Several people mentioned the lack of opportunity to create a video during the end-of-course discussion.

Students were overwhelmingly positive regarding the design of the course; with all respondents (100%) choosing "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to each of the five questions addressing the course design in terms of content, layout/flow, and activities.

Participants seemed to recognize that they needed to improve their technical knowledge, responding by a 5-1 margin that they would be interested in additional advanced training on the learning management system (Moodle).

Conclusions

Based on the feedback from all sources, course designers drew a number of conclusions. The most obvious conclusion was that the over-reliance on the face-to-face sessions had to be addressed because this behavior was an obvious extension of instructors' behavior in the blended courses they were currently teaching. A second conclusion was the need to increase the direct application of concepts taught as a means of both reinforcing skills and giving instructors confidence in the efficacy of these best practices. With course content, design, and facilitation seen as obvious strengths, the priority was addressing these two shortcomings.

While course designers were reluctant to add to the length of the course; expecting faculty to engage with the course activities more than 10 hours per week was deemed unrealistic, given all other factors.

Three critical changes have been made to the course design. First, the course delivery mode is being changed from blended to fully online in order to emphasize and reinforce the value and efficacy of online content delivery and interactions. Second, the course was increased in length from three weeks to five, allowing designers to add critical hands-on application projects to reinforce concepts taught without increasing the hours-per-week beyond instructors' ability to participate fully. Finally, more locally created content was added, in order to model how to create effective content for online and blended students.

In order to find the balance between having faculty learn as much as possible without overloading them, some materials were edited for length and redundancies were eliminated. For example, because the course was initially designed for instructors teaching in the blended format, the original design contained an emphasis on logical sequencing, transitions, and flow in blended courses. These materials were shortened and emphasis on them was reduced, and an assignment was eliminated.

Specific additional changes include restructuring course modules to provide more information on how the best practices in online and blended learning have been derived. The course contains more frequent online discussions, and a personal learning journal had been added in order to give faculty a place to reflect on what they have learned and how they might use this new knowledge in their teaching.

Instructors will now create a welcome video assignment, so they are able to see how the creation of instructor presence evolves from concept to script to final course content viewed by their students. Instructors will provide feedback to each other on these videos, adding essential peer learning and social presence to the course.

Looking forward, the plan is to offer the course two to three times per year, as needed, (Spring, Summer, and Fall) to assist faculty, both full and part-time, who either want or need to develop their online and/or blended facilitation skills. The designers will continue to collect data from participants and revise the course design, delivery, and activities to meet the needs of our faculty.