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Rethinking Lectures as Lessons

Earlier this year controversial education entrepreneur Sebastian Thrun, developer of the MOOC provider [Udacity](#), and Philipp Schmidt of [Peer 2 Peer](#) joined twelve other educators and produced “A Bill of Rights and Principles for Learning in the Digital Age.” Designed to spur conversation, the reaction to this document expresses much of the excitement and angst that continues to surround online education. From my vantage point as a tenured faculty member at a comprehensive public university teaching undergraduate religious studies courses exclusively online, it serves as a reminder that new ways of learning do not and should not completely displace more traditional models, but also that education changes and the online options cannot and should not simply replicate what we have been about in the face-to-face classroom setting. To be effective, we must embrace creatively what the evolving technology allows and adapt appropriately both in terms of our understanding of what the roles of instructor and learner mean, what constitutes teaching our disciplines, and how we develop appropriate goals and outcomes based on more formative, collaborative, and interactive exchanges. Moreover, we must also be about the business of transforming our institutional structures so that they do not stifle emerging modes of learning by insisting on making them fit into inappropriate paradigms.

For a faculty member, the challenge of excellence in online courses requires rethinking approaches, content, and outcomes as well as modifying regularly to new technologies and methods of access. I was a fairly early adopter at my university, if not so much in the digital education world. The move online for me dovetailed with relocating more than two hours away from campus, forfeiting my office, and traveling back about once a month for departmental meetings. Most semesters I teach nine hours, with the majority on the lower-level and designated for general education credit. I also teach the same courses in a five-week summer format. With these details in mind, I offer these simple strategies to assist in creating a successful course.

Universities frequently identify general education courses as high demand and require them to take on a significant number of students. As a result, they often rely on a lecture format. Administrators with little insight about online education believe these courses represent a cost-saving opportunity, given the ease of videotaping and streaming a lecture. MOOC alternatives also like the thought of providing “leading” scholars to a world of waiting students. This kind of passive learning, however, harkens back to a time when the classroom served primarily as a location for imparting information. Online, it typically fails to engage the majority of students and can result in substantial attrition.

Forty-five minute or more lectures, no matter how enthralling the lecturer, often go unwatched. By contrast, as demonstrated by the [Khan Academy](#), short videos (2–7 minutes) focused on a single core concept, figure, or issue with opportunities for practice or feedback or to consolidate learning get improved results. Think [vlog](#)

[ging](#) — high energy, tight frameworks, good visuals, jump cuts, and incorporation of other media. For instance, a clip might analyze the components of Muslim prayer while watching both individuals and groups at various locations. I also like to use videos that I make at various religious sites in order to take students with me to the sites. Broken down in short, edited segments, one recent walk traveled around the Western Wall and through the rabbinical tunnels, then up around the Haram al-Sharif and both inside and out of the Golden Gate. While the video progresses, I voice-over what I want to cover about the history, stories, belief systems, conflicts, and changes in these sites over time.

Currently, I weave a series of videos into a “lesson.” After each viewing of a “short,” the student must answer a question correctly to advance to the next step. They also have the opportunity to branch off and explore an idea in more depth or view related information. I might, for example, be sharing the story of Siddhartha Guatama. If a student wants more, I can connect into clips that dramatize it, as with *Little Buddha*, or link to a resource such as a timeline. This format requires careful planning to make sure the order of presentation moves logically and the focus becomes more than transmission of information. You have the opportunity to expand into problem solving (Why is the story, for example, told this way? How does it reflect other kinds of stories about key religious figures? How does this story come together and who makes the determinations?), application (How does it respond to some of the reasons religious traditions exist? What needs does it serve?), and specific areas of interest.

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