Modality Matters: Building Course Experiences with Care and Confidence

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Contents

Introduction

Over the last three years, faculty and administrators across the landscape of higher education had to rethink, rejigger, and, in some cases, reinvent the work of the University to meet the challenges of the pandemic. The complexity of this work was perhaps nowhere more complicated and critical than at the intersection of class design and delivery. Almost overnight, we had to transform course modalities, often with little or no support or past experience to draw upon.

In my own work, partnering with instructors throughout this time, I've come to believe that we need to rethink our relationship to online teaching, and, in particular, our approach to preparing to teach in different modalities. What if instead of focusing on "best practices" for each kind of course format we might encounter (face-to-face, online, blended, hybrid, hyflex, etc.), we instead developed a deeper understanding of and confidence with pedagogy across a continuum of modalities, allowing us to design courses that make use of any of these, at different times, as the circumstances warrant and our students need.

Note: *Throughout this eBook, you will see me refer to "formats" and "modalities." Different schools may use one or the other label (I've also seen some schools use "modes.") It is*

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Pre-Activity: Starting with Assumptions

Read the prompts and fill in the blanks with the first thing that comes to mind. Try not to censor yourself.

Online classrooms are more _____ than face-to-face classrooms.

Online classrooms are less_____ than face-to-face classrooms.

For students, online classrooms are _____ and face-to-face classrooms are _____.

For instructors, online classrooms are _____ and face-to-face classrooms are _____

Reflection

Holding Space for Tensions: Face-to-Face vs. Online

Perhaps because of the binary nature of "online vs face-to-face," conventional wisdom about teaching in these different modalities tends to feel binary as well. We fall into the trap of believing that if one thing is true in one format than the opposite must be true in the other:

- face-to-face interaction is inherently "personal" while online interaction is inherently "impersonal"

- face-to-face classes can be more flexible while online classes should be clearly structured and not deviate from that structure

- you can be spontaneous in a face-to-face course, but in an online course you must have everything planned out from the beginning

- instructor "presence" is built into face-to-face classes; online classes have no instructor "presence"

- in face-to-face classes instructors focus on "delivering knowledge'; in online classes they focus on "facilitating learning

- in face-to-face classes, instructors are there to keep students on track; in online classes students must be disciplined and motivated in order to succeed

Another set of tensions we often encounter is the different ways our schools approach preparation for teaching in a face-to-face versus online modality. Most university and college faculty have received little or no formal training in pedagogy before they teach their first course. Teaching Centers (like the one I work at), may exist on our campuses to offer faculty development, but it's rare that a school requires new faculty to engage in some type of pedagogical training. Meanwhile, when faculty are interested in or tasked with teaching an online course, our schools often take the opposite approach—requiring extensive training and certification before online teaching can begin. This tension belies a kind of prejudice against online teaching that we should all question. Why do we think that faculty are equipped to handle face-to-face teaching with no preparation but require extension intervention before teaching an online course?

The truth that lies in these tensions is always somewhere in between. As with most things in life, there are no hard and fast rules or practices for how people should learn or teach. Our job is to find the middle space in each of the tensions mentioned above. As we do so, we will develop a more nuanced understanding of our role in all classrooms, across all modalities.

Discussion Activity: Challenge a Tension

Choose a tension listed above (either one of the ones about f2f vs online learning or one about faculty preparation in different modalities) OR choose a tension you've observed at your own school with regard to understanding different course formats. Individually or with a group of colleagues, consider the following questions:

1.   What do you think is the "origin story" of this tension? How did it come about and why do people continue to believe it?

2.   How have you seen this tension play out at your own school or in your own teaching? Have you noticed or been a part of situations that contradict one or the other side of the tension?

3.   What might be the "middle ground" between the two sides of the tension? How would it feel to explore this middle ground in your own pedagogy or your own teaching preparation?

Reflection

What kind of assumptions or biases do you observe in your responses above? How do you think these affect your instruction for, design of, and experience in online vs face-to-face spaces?

Write a new statement about the topic that helps resolve the tension and makes space for a more honest pedagogy:

_____

_____

_____

_____

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_____

Building Our Understanding of Opportunities across Course Modalities

Often, when we begin to really unpack what teaching and learning looks like in different course modalities, we describe positives and negatives. I encourage us to reframe our approach a bit, focusing instead on "opportunities." Instead

of thinking about pros and cons, what if we try to understand each format in terms of what it makes possible, focusing on how we can harness the possibility to create unique learning opportunities for our students?

For example, one of the tensions I mentioned above was about the idea of whether or not face-to-face classes were more "personal" than online classes. We often hear the truism that in an online class, it's harder (or even impossible) to make personal connections. For many of us, our experiences over the last three years have challenged this assumption. Making a personal connection in an online class may be different but it is not impossible. I would even go so far as to say it isn't necessarily harder. Instead, it may require us to rethink the ways in which personal connection can manifest in different course modalities. For example, instead of believing that face-to-face interaction, which allows for the nuances of body language and facial expression in addition to the actual words spoken in conversation, is inherently better, what if we instead identify the nuances of interaction online that don't manifest face-to-face. For example, online communication, which often takes place in text formats, allows us to embellish our words in ways we can't do face-to-face. We can add images, emojis, animated gifs. Through tools like this, we can create a kind of subtext that can be just as valuable (albeit different) than the subtext of bodies and faces.

Activity: Identifying and Naming Opportunities

For this exercise, we want to think beyond the binary assumptions that tend to frame our thinking about online vs F2F. In fact we want to push past our thinking about modalities as being binary, as well. In the table below, on the left, I've listed a range of possible modalities we would like to explore. On the right, I've listed the kinds of considerations we need to make when we think about teaching in any context. Feel free to add to either list, if you feel I've missed something.

Modalities	Considerations
• Face-to-Face	• engagement
• Online Asynchronous	• facilitation
• Online Synchronous	• structure
• Blended: some classes f2f, some online (aysnc or synch)	• support
	• assessment
• Hybrid: students can attend synch f2f or online	• content
• Hyflex: students can attend synch f2f, synch online, or asynch online	• sharing

Now, choose a consideration and up to three modalities and diagram what you think that consideration looks like in each modality. Identify commonalities where the circles overlap. Feel free to do more of these on another piece of paper.

Modality   Modality
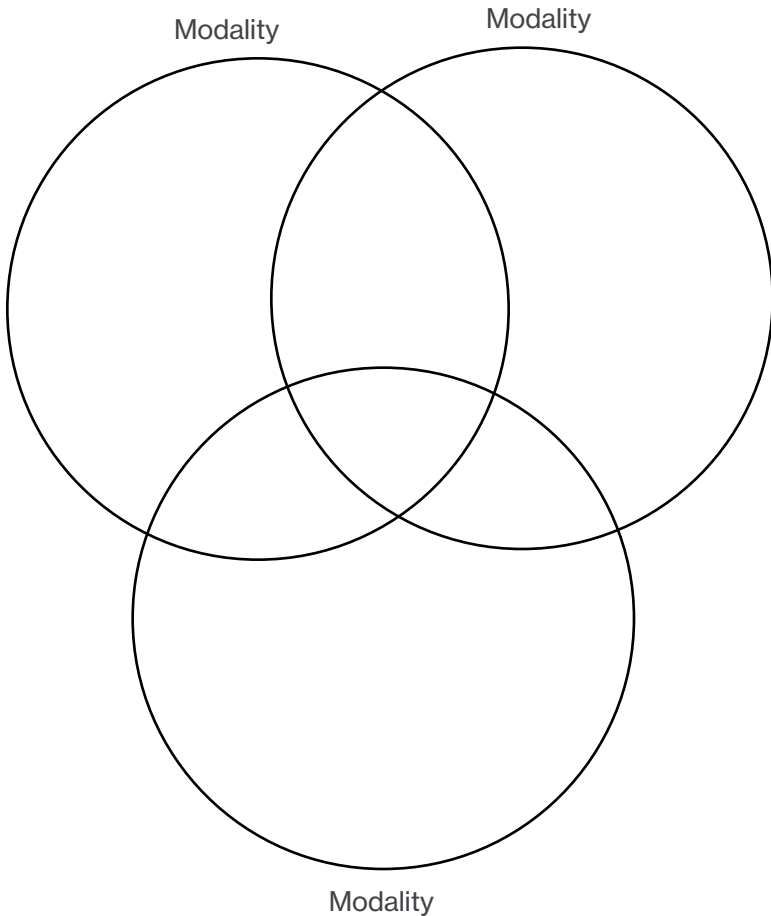
Modality

Care, Trust, and Community

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of how we often talk about teaching in any modality other than fully face-to-face is the tendency to approach the work in a more formulaic and dehumanizing way. When we fall into the trap of believing that the only way to support our students is through rigidly designed and expressed course structures and expectations, we lose sight of the humans we are teaching, with all of their strengths, challenges, foibles, and dreams. To be clear, this attitude often infiltrates face-to-face classes (and every other modality). But we tend to be more forgiving and understanding when we believe we've made a personal connection, and if we believe personal connection is never or rarely possible in online contexts, we may be starting from a deficit right out of the gate when building online course experiences.

I'm a big believer that at the heart of most positive classroom learning experiences (whether the class is face-to-face, online, or somewhere in between) is community and I want to suggest that community is driven by care and trust. Community emerges among a group of people who have learned to trust one another. But trust doesn't "just happen" either—trust emerges when people care for each other. Start with care; work towards trust; watch (and tend) your community.

What do trust and care look like in our classes? Here are a few ideas to get you thinking:

- Introducing ourselves to our students in a way that is authentic and relatable

- Asking our students to share with us any particular challenges that they fear might impede their success in the class; working with them to address these challenges

- Adjusting assignments in ways that care for our students' lives and need

- Incorporating alternative assessment or ungrading techniques so that our students can focus on learning instead of grades

- Not asking our students to do things that they find personally traumatizing

- Trusting our students when they say there has been a death in the family or they are ill; making accommodations for these situations

- Valuing our students' happiness and health above our goals for our class

- Making time in class to talk about the importance of care, trust, community

- Letting go of our own anxieties about being the smartest or the authority in the classroom

• Giving students chances to demonstrate success even if they have struggled initially; understanding that learning doesn't always fit our timeline • Examining any unquestioned biases or expectations that we may bring to our teaching from our own past educational experiences or traumas	• Acknowledging that our students are not us; we cannot expect them to want the same things we wanted as students

Activity: Write a Statement of Care and Trust

You set the tone for care and trust in your classroom. You need to express care and trust through your actions and your words. Let's start with your words. Below, write a short statement (1 or 2 paragraphs) that you could include in your syllabus or share on the first day of class that expresses how you plan to build care and trust into your classroom community:

Activity: Bringing it All Together

Choose a single assignment from a class you teach and redesign it across at least two modalities. Consider the following questions:

- Avoid the trap of trying to make the activity exactly the same across different modalities. Focus on the experience you want your students to have or what you want them to take away.

- Think about the opportunities you identified above for different course formats. How can this assignment authentically engage with those opportunities and set the stage for students to have the experience you imagine?

- Consider where this activity intersects with your Statement of Care and Trust. What design choices can you make that will help reinforce care and trust in your classroom?

Additional Resources

Bayne, et, al., Manifesto for Teaching Online

Irvine, The Landscape of Merging Modalities

Bali and Meier, An affinity for asynchronous learning

Morris, Fostering Care and Community at a Distance

Stommel and Burtis, The Cult of Quality Matters

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