

[Upbeat Intro Music]

Rebecca: Look beyond learner engagement. Look at learner empowerment... It's giving them those tools to really take their education and use their education.

Dannon: Hello and welcome to The Online Classroom, a podcast mini-series from UNC's Instructional Design and Development team.

Chapter Two: Calibrating the Online Classroom, part one.

Meet Rebecca Saunders. [Rebecca: My name is Rebecca Saunders.] Instructional Designer with IDD. An instructional designer is essential to quality online course delivery and overall student experience. But, Rebecca, how would you describe it?

Rebecca: I think a good way of describing it is I'm a learning experience designer. I partner with faculty to help them as they develop out their courses and design their courses to ensure that the end user experience is positive. And also, that end user is not just the students, but it's also the instructors. We want the instructors to feel comfortable moving around their course as much as we want students to feel comfortable and successful taking the course.

Dannon: One faculty member has extensively worked with Rebecca over several years. Meet Dr. Heidi Muller. [Heidi: My name is Heidi Muller.] Associate professor in the Communication Studies department.

In this first part of "Chapter Two, Calibrating the Online Classroom," we hear from Rebecca and Heidi about the importance of curiosity, the fine tuning of the small things, as well as the willingness to try new and bigger things.

Rebecca: You know, the big thing we did was some icons. [Yeah.]

So Heidi is really big on learner agency. She wants to give students an opportunity to try different things and to apply what they're learning to their career goals or to their interests. And so we used a lot of iconography to keep students organized as they moved through a course.

So they understood kind of where they were. We call them signposts, and so we had little graphics just floating in the upper right hand corner...

Floating as in the HTML code. [Right.] [Laughter]

Not actually floating. [Too bad.]

[Rebecca whispers] That would be awesome. [more laughter]

Heidi: That would be very cool. Get your VR glasses on.

Rebecca: But we would have those signposts, and so the learner - and the instructor [Yeah.] - you know - you get your bearings right away of, "okay, I'm in chapter one," or "I'm in module one..."

Heidi: And you're doing this kind of assignment. Is it a group assignment? Is an individual assignment? Is it a discussion board assignment? Is it a home writing assignment?

So we kind of had a mixture of icons for both highlighting - reminding you of what module you were in, because we didn't have that timeline across the top - you just had to click through the modules. And there wasn't that, so you clicked through the module.

So you always knew you were in module one, it was always up there. And then we had like, I do portfolios in a lot of my classes, so there was a portfolio icon, there was a discussion icon, there was a quiz icon...

Rebecca: I was trying to remember; I remember the portfolio, I remember - what was the one with the tree?

Heidi: That was we had an intercultural project. And actually, we tried to use one other image that we couldn't because it had copyrights. [Laughter] [Rebecca: Oh, that's right.] We ended up with the tree. [I had forgotten that.]

So again, trying to kind of capture somewhat of what the project was - like we had a thinker for the reflection paper with a little thinker guy, you know that the statute - and then that morphed into a balloon you know, a head with a balloon... [Dannon: Oh, like a thought bubble?] Yeah.

And so again, trying to sort of capture some of that like what you would have in class when you're like, "Okay, we're working on this kind of assignment."

And so when you look at the page, you would see, "oh, I'm talking to my colleagues with the little thought bubbles or the little discourse bubbles." Or, "I'm doing self-thinking," or, "I'm doing writing," or "I'm making my little briefcase for my portfolio." So a lot of that kind of thing to really try to help students follow it.

Because I'd never have a class that's like: read, do a discussion, take a test. I never have any classes that have that straight line of a format; there's always multiple kinds of - and again, because I can't get myself away from doing project-based outcomes - so there has to be something that you're putting together, cumulative that you have to carry with you outside of the class.

Dannon: Yeah, it's not so much linear, right? And you, in order to be dynamic, you need those signposts to know because the product is always going to be at the end, but like how you're getting there. And the way that you're navigating and with being online, it's like, each page - if it's a block of text. - then yes, what am I looking at? And it's almost just like that subconscious reminder to be like, okay, yeah, [Right.] it's a refocus issue.

Heidi: Yeah, framing and refocus. Yeah.

Rebecca: I was just gonna say as an instructional designer, it's so rewarding to work with an instructor who wants to do project-based learning and give the learners, those options and it's just it's really exciting and a very dynamic process to work with. And so when I think about the design, I think about, it's kind of like putting together pieces of a puzzle and making it all fit. But a really important piece of that design is to make sure that the learners don't feel like it's a puzzle.

Heidi: Exactly, how do they have a streamlined experience, even though they're working through a bunch of different puzzles that I typically think about in a more three-dimensional space than in a flat space... Or, like, here's the spine of the course, and here's all the pieces how all the pieces fit on the

course... And, again, I often have group-type projects, and so how do you fit those in? And sometimes they're not exactly tied to the specific content of a module. So you've got to have the group work in the module, even though it's sort of like for the project that comes later. And again, trying to try and build all those pieces. So if you click through linearly, or bounce around and just come up on page eight, because it's the assignment, how do you then figure out where you are in the module? Or what am I actually doing here? And what are my responsibilities as a student?

But it's definitely like, you got to keep at it and got to keep paying attention to what works, and luckily, for me, none of these classes do I teach only online, I also teach them face-to-face. So I can kind of play around with like, using either an online component that we've developed, actually using that in the my face-to-face class and seeing how students respond to it. Or I just can get a sense of like, "Wow, that was overwhelming for students, I probably need to make that even smaller online" kind of thing.

Rebecca: One of my favorite things actually about that, is while we have tried to solve that piece of it, we've recognized, gosh - this is a really great problem! [Yeah.]

Like how can we get more instructors and more online courses, where we're trying to figure out how do we give learners that agency to navigate and to, you know, really, still meet all the learning [objectives] objectives and outcomes, but to really, you know, have that apply to their experience and their ultimate goals.

And so actually - I feel like Heidi has helped IDD in some ways push some innovation. You know, we're constantly looking for ways to be more efficient, but we're also looking for what are new ways, new technologies. And so one of the things we did with that particular course is Heidi got us thinking about badging. [Yeah] She got us thinking about pathways. She got - you know, we were thinking about those things -

Dannon: What's a pathway? Sorry.

Rebecca: Oh, a pathway is kind of how you get to a badge. It's, uh, you know, if you go here, then go there, then go there. If you think about it as like a menu, you pick your first course; you pick your second course. And at the end, you your pathway is...

Dannon: ...the badge is the receipt [Your check, yeah.] of what your entree and your dessert and drink? [Yeah, exactly.]

Rebecca: And these were things we were thinking about, you know. We try and stay really ahead of the trends. But having an instructor who had these needs it really, it was a beautiful, like, "Oh, here's where we might use that. Here's that thing we're learning about or reading about or seeing other LMSs using... Here's, a great practical way of using it..."

The idea of a branching scenario... it really did come out of working with Heidi... Okay? Well, if you do this, then what's your next, you know, you've got your choice. And then you've got a consequence of whatever that choice is, good or bad. And then you've got a new challenge and a new choice to make.

[Brief musical break]

Rebecca: One of the challenges about online learning, and I think there's a perception that if you're going into a Canvas course, or if you're going into any sort of online learning course, that you're kind of going at it alone. And it's a huge challenge to overcome that mentality, [both for instructors and students] [it's very much of a challenge].

And I, know you, you've experienced that where you've had students who are like, "Well, I didn't think there would be so much [yeah] engagement in this course!"

It's like, "But don't you want that?" [Right.]

Heidi: No. And as we were talking about COVID, I think that's one of the things that came out of COVID was even more experience doing things whenever you want, at whatever timeline works for you. And to some extent, you know, depending on if we're coming out of high school, or wherever, how well were some of these classes designed that people were just throwing up online to get everybody through the system. [Just check the boxes.] Check the boxes, get things done.

And literally, and this is another this is another issue that kind of comes up like that... It's like they trust Google. [Laughter] You know, you can literally have an explanation for the entire definition of a term and all these things and they're like, they'll submit something and it's like, "where did this come from?" and they're like, "Well, I Googled it,"

It's like, no, read my page first. [Laughter] You know, [What do you know?] [Laughter]

You do have to get to overcome these biases, where I think the thought of online students or initial thought until you've done it sometimes like, well, this is easier. I get to move my own pace. I don't have to pay attention to what anybody else in the class is doing. Maybe I need to give a reply to somebody at some point in time. So it's not like everybody embraces the interactivity, of it right away. And as a teacher - me at least - I have to be committed to that and be like, "I know this works, I know, you're gonna get something more out of this. And even if it takes, you know, if you feel like you're pulling your teeth at some point in time, that's, that's, that's part of the process."

And we'll get there but and then I really do try to have a couple of weeks each semester where it's just you just hang out and do things on your own time.

Dannon: Yeah, I want to follow up on the idea of feedback. And when like when it comes to student feedback. So Rebecca, you have to work exclusively with the faculty. But then what about feedback, as an instructional designer from the students' perspective, because you can only kind of hear it through the game of telephone through the faculty, right?

Rebecca: That is one of the bigger challenges. And I - yeah, there's something we're working on right now that, you know, we had our first iteration of it, and based off of the feedback Heidi got, we're going to - one of those storyline interactives - we're going to adjust a little bit.

In a perfect world, we would beta test it on students, and you would run some usability tests on it before it goes live. And of course, I don't know if that's something we can try...

Heidi: Well, and in my, what I've had to come to terms with and doing this is like, it might not really work the first time I'm doing it, [laughter] you know, and so I need to be prepared for that.

And then I need to be like, you know, I know I have enough... to me, I have enough baseline information that generic Student A could go in, and they have what they need to learn the material. And so all of this stuff is like how do I learn it better? How do I learn it more? More appropriately? How do I learn it more appropriately to me as an individual moving forward in my life?

It does sort of feel like we do have to live beta test things. And that's a little bit of frustration. And it's a little bit scary. But it's also like, well, that's what we're doing. It's a process. And I do think by doing that, once you start to get a sense of how much - I can't go for all learning. I can't think about all learning styles and all misconceptions. - but I can go for a sense of, what's the load? How much energy is taking? How much time is this taking? How is it feeling like you're being able to move through this in a way that you're putting things together and you're not just shutting down? And as you kind of do that you can kind of get a feel for how much online works and when it becomes overload.

[Music for Conclusion]

Dannon: In part two of Calibrating the Online Classroom,

Heidi: I still feel like my online teaching and in-classroom teaching are different beasts. And they do different things and they work differently, but trying to figure out what can I do to feel like I'm giving it a shot... I'm giving it a shot to make it as much of a class like I want to teach as possible.

Dannon: Thanks for listening. The online classroom is a production from the Instructional Design and Development team at the University of Northern Colorado. This podcast was hosted and edited by Dannon Cox. Music was created by A.A. Alto; song, "Balloons Rising," and Poddington Bear; song, "Kitty in the Window." [Music fades]