[Upbeat Intro Music]

Heidi: I still feel like 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: 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 Two.

In Part One of Calibrating the Online Classroom, Rebecca and Heidi reflected on their approaches to improve the student experience.

Rebecca: 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. [Exactly] [Right]

Dannon: Now, we discuss the idea of student engagement, recommendations on course design, and how the online classroom can be a powerful tool for both instructors and students. Let's start with student engagement. Heidi and Rebecca, what is student engagement to you?

Heidi: Student engagement to me is, I guess, doing the work. I mean, not just - again - doing work that for me as an instructor, I can see what the work is that you're doing. So that I can be engaged with you. It's doing things that allows me to teach you in ways that fit you as a student.

Because I - again - as a Comm person or as I have an education background, too, and a psych background, but it's sort of like to me, you know, you need to be telling me what I need to be teaching you to some extent. I mean, I can I put stuff out there for you to learn. But in terms of you getting the most out of it, you have to help me know what else you need from me or what clarifications you need from me. And to me, that's what student engagement is about.

Student engagement is about you taking on the material and giving me feedback so that I can give you feedback, but also so that you can - also student engagement has to do with applying it in ways that are relevant to you, and making the material yours, both in learning but also in practice.

As a Comm person, I take a very practical approach to everything. You need to understand it; you need to be able to do something from it. And so if I don't have engagement - if you're going to do something, there has to be engagement - it can't just be a cognitive learning. It has to be what can you now do? Or what can you talk about being able to do now?

And so an engagement to me, I guess has those three different pieces. One is giving me the feedback to help me guide you as a learner. Making the learning your own, and the applications your own to your experience in your life. And then that third part, which is from a Comm perspective, or from a practical theory, communication perspective, not only what are you learning, but what can you now do, that you didn't used to be able to do.

And if there's no engagement, I don't feel like we get the feedback, the individualization, the ownership, or the kind of practical doing aspect out of it.

Dannon: Yeah. I'm hearing a two-way street. And then it's also applied to someone with purpose. [Yeah.] Yeah.

Rebecca: You know, I read, I think it was in *The Innovator's Mindset*, I was sitting here trying to remember the name of the book. But it basically very much what Heidi was saying, it basically said, "Look beyond learner engagement, look at learner empowerment." [Huh.] [Yeah.]

And it's that idea of not only are they excited by what they're learning, but what are they doing with it? How are they - how are they changing the world with it? How are they changing their lives, or their communities or, or even like, just their sense of self? And so I really do like thinking about that.

And again, you know, anytime we have the opportunity to have students have learner agency, have them construct their knowledge, where they're not sitting and getting and regurgitating into a discussion board or to a paper, I think it's giving them those tools to really take their education and use their education. [Goes back to apply.]

Yeah, it's not just, "Okay, you've completed this course. Good job. Now, your next graduation requirement is this..." It's, you know, "You're going to be a practitioner in this someday. And how are you going to use that?"

Heidi: Yeah, and I think for me, that really fits because communication is such a practitioner-oriented - it's not a technical skill - you're not building like, using certain computer systems or something like that. But it's a very practitioner-oriented thing, like I need to be able to go out and write a press release; I need to be able to go out and to listen, as a therapist; I need to be able to go out and do these things... [Give a survey.] Yeah, give a survey, right , do a good interview, you know, get you know, get my mind in the back so I can be an ethnographer. All these kinds of things.

And so I think that notion of - and again, if you're going to do those well, you have to be doing them, and you have to know how you're going to do them - so I really liked that idea of empowerment as opposed to just what you're trying to get students to do. To feel that I know what I'm doing. I know what I'm doing when I leave this class, literally, I know what I'm doing [laughter] when I leave this class.

Rebecca: I mean, that's, I think, in some ways, that's kind of a social justice thing. Like, you know, if when you think about in terms of students who are taking classes, and they may be performing well, they may be performing average, you know, it doesn't matter if they don't take what they're learning and feeling like, "okay, I can go and do something. I can go and make a difference with this knowledge I have." then that course isn't serving them.

And, you know, I realize that's very utopic, idealistic, but I do think that, you know, it really does get at the heart of the, you know, if we want to be a Institution - we talked about - of servingness... recently. [Gina Garcia?] When Gina Garcia talked about being an institution focusing on servingness. I think that's part of servingness is making sure we're connecting with the students at that level. [Yeah.]

[Brief musical break]

Dannon: What sort of recommendations do you have for other practitioners in the field?

Heidi: Well, part of it, I mean, part of it is that you have to be willing to give things a shot, I literally think that's my number one thing for myself. It's like, you need to be willing to say, "Okay, I'm going to try to

do an interactive or I'm going to try to build something. I'm going to try to do something that's gonna get feedback that I can do in a way that's interesting to me as a teacher and makes me feel like I'm teaching."

Because I still feel like 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. And so that part of it is just kind of a mindset kind of issue and an orientation to things.

But then it really is just attending to it. And, keeping it - like the Canvas shell is a living document. And that you do need to go back to try things. And again, if it's, you know, have a baseline, and then once you have that baseline, build on that, and don't try to do too much at one time as well, either.

I mean, that's a huge thing. Don't change everything you have at one time, it's like have a baseline, and then morph that here and there, and don't just sort of be like, Oh, I'm gonna go back and redo all of my lectures this year, you know. Just don't try to do too much. It's a tweaking process. And it's a feeling comfortable with it process.

And it's getting it to a point where, you know, you're like, -and this is a problem I have - like, "Well, man, next semester, I'm going to try X, Y & Z."

It's like, "Nope, you're going to try X. You're only going to try X next semester. You're not gonna try X, Y, Z and K. Right; you're gonna try X."

You're going to add that in and see how that works, kind of in a scientific learning approach. How did that change the class - paying attention to the feedback that you get from students? - And to me the feedback from students is on their final papers on their final exams or final projects. What are they looking like? What is the project? How is it living up to your expectations?

And again - it's just making small adjustments and being like, you know, I'm doing as best I can with this online design. And I'm seeing what works and what doesn't work and kind of taking small steps that way.

Dannon: I wrote down, "calibrating your teaching."

Heidi: Yeah, I like that. [cross talk] Yeah.

Dannon: That's great. Rebecca, do you have any recommendations when it comes to calibration from a instructional design standpoint?

Rebecca: Well, it's funny, you know, thinking back to when we did transition from Blackboard to Canvas because Canvas is a really robust system. There's a lot going on, which is awesome, but it's a lot.

And so I remember the advice I used to give instructors when we would do the introduction to Canvas is: Pick one thing to get comfortable with. Pick one thing to get good at. Once you've got that, then go ahead and pick another, but - you know - it's "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time." You know, pick one thing, and so similar to what Heidi said is I'm gonna I'm going to choose this thing to focus on this term to really fine tune.

Dannon: This year is X next year's Y. [Yeah.]

Rebecca: And Y is going to be so much easier if you can just focus on Y. And because X is old hat by then, you know, it's easy by then.

Heidi: And I do think that's hard online because a startup is so much work, getting the basic setup and again to me giving myself freedom to be like, "well that worked okay." You know I gave it a shot. I did as much as I could this semester. I got it I got it to point A. Now I need to get to point Z, but you know, students want online courses that works for students, especially now.

And one of the things I was telling Rebecca, we've been kind of talking about this is I'm trying to take what I call, like a resilient approach to classes. And that's the way they're meshed like that. Because even without COVID, students work, they have family issues, they have all these things. And so trying to build courses that the more engagement they can have, the better it's going to be. But with like a minimal level engagement, they get a quality that I'm willing to accept, and trying to build that so that there's just different access points for students who honestly can. - Some students have more to give to a class than other students do - and not making the students who give a lot suffer from the students who aren't giving.

But you know, if some students really can just do some basics, have some thought and some ways that, you know, the basics are going to get them to a place I'm happy with. And they feel like they can come out of the course to like, oh, I learned this in the course, and not killing myself to be like, I really need you to be engaging with everything. Because it's just not going to happen for some students, especially now coming out of COVID still, but even moving forward from that. Their lives are complicated, and trying to keep that notion in your course design in your course development to be like, what do you have for the really engaged students? And then what do you have for the baseline students?

[Brief musical break]

Heidi: One of the really good things about, as I said earlier, I was not someone who jumped on board with online learning because to me, the classroom is so important, and trying to find ways to make online learning, not a face-to-face classroom, but make it something that I feel like I want to be a part of.

And I think that when I started working with IDD that really made me feel like I had partners and trying to make that happen. And I had partners, I could talk through things with who could do some things I just didn't know how to do - and I have a decent computer background. So I know how to do a variety of things. But it is like it's just being able to talk with people; being able to brainstorm with people; having them share ideas, and being able to give your feedback to somebody and having them say, "No," or, "Yeah," you know, it's it really is a partnership process. And that, to me has been so important with in terms of building these online classes that are interesting and engaging the students; they are not things I could have done on my own.

Rebecca: And I think it's really important to, you know, acknowledge the fact that online learning and face to face learning are different. [I agree.]

And I think one of the errors that we make in thinking about online learning is thinking, how are we going to make it the same? What are all the things we can do to make it the same, and we're never going to make it the same. But another common error is to say that one's better than the other. Because

while that can be true, they're different. They're just different. They're different experiences, they can both be valuable. With proper design and proper consideration. They can both be valuable experiences.

Heidi: And I do think that's important figuring out for me, especially what are the goals I can accomplish online that I want to accomplish online? And what is the experience I want to create? And again, I think the experiences are happening in design spaces. And I do think that's an important thing, too, because these kids spend so much time online, and they have all these scrolling skills and finding what they're interested in that part of what I think my job as a teacher is to design or structure, their online space.

When they come into Canvas, when they come into the course it's like, this is not your feed; this is not something else. And you're going to have to learn some ways to navigate here. And I need myself, with IDD's help, to structure that in a way that you're moving through this space and the way that this space is built. And I think that that's important, because they really do -they have their habits and they are online.

But sometimes you'll talk to students and they're like, you know, I don't want to do an online class, because online is my fun time. But it's like, that was an interesting thing I heard one students say but it's like, but again, it's all about structuring that space. So no, this is not online. This is instructional space is a learning space. And that's different than a Facebook space or a TikTok space or whatever feed you're using, or whatever searches you're doing... And helping them understand that it's purposeful, and having it look purposeful and having some of those pieces are really really helpful to help them realize, oh, this is a space that's unique. That's it's like coming into a classroom. And I think having the template in some of those things is really helpful for that idea that, "oh, I'm moving into an instructional space."

Rebecca: Our director, Kathy, has been very clear about calling it - calling Canvas- an "online classroom," calling the template an "online classroom" for that exact reason... This is your space. These are your tools. This is just like when you walk into a classroom, you have certain tools and things available to you. When you virtually walk into Canvas, that is your learning space...

[Music for Conclusion]

Dannon: Next time on the online classroom,

Student Speaker: Technology has increased and improved so much, and it's only going to continue and so having these online classes definitely helped get accustomed to that. But I do have to know, please still go outside. [Laughter] Get fresh air! It really helps - like get sunlight - it's great. [That's science.] Don't forget to do that.

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."